Summary

At the end of the Fifth Blight, the Hero of Ferelden sacrificed herself to destroy the archdemon. Some thought both souls had been destroyed, but a soul is energy and cannot be destroyed. Rather, they were sent to the Abyss/Void. After ten years in a literal Hell, she hears a soul screaming in the Fade. A tranquil mage (Trevelyan) had found herself in the Fade and her psyche cracked. Andraste stepped in and exchanged the two heroes, taking the Tranquil mage with her and restoring Lady Elisabeta Cousland to life. Not only must she deal with having a strange mark on her hand, but having a mage's powers and the repercussions of her death and resurrection (including having spent ten years in the Void/Abyss).

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Andraste's Grace

Oppressing darkness came from all sides, surrounding her. It was her world now. It was true darkness, for there was no sign of light everywhere, the very flames of hope had been doused. Everything was a black void, an Abyss ever fed by despair. It should have consumed her soul years before.

Yet a soul was energy, it could be transformed; but not destroyed. That is what the Grey Wardens hadn’t understood. A soul could be forced from the body and kept from taking a new host, such as an archdemon could do, but it wasn’t destroyed. Yet, she had shared in the archdemon’s fate when she killed it and had not returned to the Maker’s side, but traveled with the nightmarish creature to a bleak plain of reality. The creature had traveled off to Maker knew where long before.

She, however, railed against her fate. She refused to give in to the brutality of her reality. There was no light from without, all she could do was reach for the spark of light within her. She had lost all sense of time in the blackness of her existence. She had no idea how long she had held on to the memories of her life to enable her to remember who she was. She could remember the feeling of being held in her mother’s arms, a mother she had lost too soon. She remembered her father carrying her on his strong shoulders as she boldly commanded his men and looked over his Teyrny. She remembered playing on the shores of the Waking Sea with her brother. She remembered the first time she’d held her infant nephew in her arms and the first time she kissed a man. She also remembered the one time she’d fallen in love, those memories were the brightest of all. The feelings of euphoria and joy, she was content to just be in his presence. Then there were the more tender moments, being safely in his arms and the ardor of his kisses. The excitement and devotion when they made love. Their souls had united and been as one. Alas, that hadn’t kept her at his side, though when she’d plunged a sword into the archdemon to save her people. It had to be him or her, they had run out of choices, but she rarely thought about that. It was the happy memories that were the light that kept the waiting darkness from consuming her.

She was startled when she heard the crying, she wasn’t sure where it had come from, but followed it. There was a flare of magic and a strange green light. Light. She reached out for the light. She could see a being now, it was no longer crying but screaming. In an eternity of darkness, there had not even been sound. The screaming hurt. She saw a familiar looking symbol that was pulsing. Whoever it was needed help. What is wrong? She realized she’d thought it at the other woman, it had been so long since she’d used her voice.

I can’t, I can’t. I killed them all. They made me Tranquil, I couldn’t control my magic in my anger and I killed them! Don’t make me feel that all again.

Tranquil, wasn’t that a mage whose emotions had been stripped? This creature was not emotionless.

“Maker!” She could now hear the other woman’s voice. “Don’t make me feel this I’ll do anything, I’ll…”

There was another light, this one blue. A woman took the screaming not-tranquil mage’s hand and then reached out her other hand, it seemed to be held out to her. “I will take care of you, Desdemona Trevelyan. You will not have to deal with what was done in my name alone.”

Who were they? She wondered.

“Take my hand,” the woman in the blue light still held her hand out to her. “Elisabeta Cousland, for
too long have you suffered in the Abyss for sins not your own long enough. I need you in the world of the living once more. Don’t worry, I will take care of this one,” she put an arm around the person she’d called Desdemona. Her fate and powers are now yours. Reclaim the life that was taken from you, return to the land of the living, and save our people once more.” The other women disappeared and she found herself in a land of green, at least there was light.

“Hurry!” There was someone else in there with her, an older lady dressed in the restrictive robes of the Chantry. “We must get out of here! Quick, they’re behind you!”

Sure enough, spiders were chasing her. She ran. There was a portal of some sort in front of them. The elderly sister grabbed her and threw her out, letting the spiders grab onto her instead.

Elisabeta Cousland, the Hero of Ferelden, breathed air once again and then collapsed.
Chapter Summary

Elisabeta has more memory-dreams and wakes up in the basement of the Chantry.

The prisoner lay on the cold hard floor, her light red and golden blonde curls flared out around her. She was unaware of the feeling, of even being able to feel again, as she slumbered; remembering events of more than a decade before, another life almost.

In the dream of her past life, Elisabeta Cousland snuggled in the arms of the man she loved; she was safe and she was loved. It was hard to believe the darkness that threatened their world was real when they lay together like this, but they were. “Alistair,” she stirred.

“Hehmm, what is it, my love?” He murmured.

“What if Morrigan was right? What if we could have ensured that no Grey Warden had to die to kill the archdemon?” She sat up and looked down at him. She couldn’t help tracing a finger along his face, as if memorizing his features. “I… I don’t want to lose you tomorrow and I don’t want to die.”

“Neither of us is going to die,” he assured her. “Riordan has already said that he is going to take the killing blow. He will, too, you’ll see. He is a Senior Warden and knows what he is doing. I’m sure he knows better than I do. Besides, there was no way I was going to be unfaithful to you, especially with that swamp witch.”

“Witch of the Wilds,” she corrected. Morrigan’s desertion when Alistair refused to lay with her still stung. Even if she had failed to convince Alistair to go through with Morrigan’s dark ritual, she had thought they were friends. Yet her friend had turned into a dog and run off. “She may have been using us all along to have this child with the soul of an old god, but I would be a lot less worried right now if you had done the ritual.”

“Beta,” he was the only one who called her that. Most called her Lissa or Elisabeta. He lifted her left hand and kissed her palm and then her engagement ring. It was blue and silver, made out of the metal of a Grey Warden’s armor recovered from Ostagar. He’d had the silversmith in Soldier’s Peak melt the armor and make her ring and a circlet from it. She remembered him kneeling before her as he slipped it on her hand. She had given him her father’s ring in exchange. She’d found it on the body of the hated Rendon Howe who must have stolen it from her father when he killed him. Well, she’d killed Howe and avenged her family. “Don’t worry, love. All will be well. We’ll defeat the archdemon tomorrow and then we’ll marry. The only thing we will have to worry about is having to rule Ferelden together. I know I couldn’t do that without you.”

She smiled down at him. Eamon had wanted him to marry Anora, Cailan’s widow and Loghain’s daughter. The woman was a shrew and a hag and, in Elisabeta’s opinion, a horrible ruler. Elves had been sold into slavery and a civil war had broken out under her watch. “Just promise me that if I die, if I’m the one who makes the killing blow tomorrow, you won’t marry Anora.”

He made a face and then kissed her nose. “Why would I ever go and do that? The woman is
almost as bad as Morrigan. OK, Beta, I promise not to marry Anora.”

“Thank you,” she kissed him, sealing the promise.

When they parted, he still held her close. “I’ll do one better, I promise that you’ll be the only woman I’ll ever marry. My heart is yours and I pledge it to you, it will always be yours; now and when we dwell at the Maker’s Side.”

She rested her head against his chest. Morrigan had revealed to her that the soul of the Grey Warden who slew an archdemon didn’t go to the Maker’s Side, as Riordan had led her and Alistair to believe, it was destroyed with the soul of the Old God. If anything happened to Riordan during the battle they were preparing for, they wouldn’t spend their eternity together. One of them would never make it to the Maker’s Side. She didn’t even want to contemplate it. “And I pledge my heart to you,” she looked up into his whiskey hued eyes. “It is yours and yours alone.”

His hands moved to frame her face, holding it in place as his mouth descended on hers again. He gently laid her down beside him, before rolling gently on top of her. Her fears were driven away by his tender touch and passionate kisses. She closed her eyes as they merged together, their bodies conveying their love and devotion for each other.

The dream shifted to another memory, it was the battle they had dreaded. Elisabeta carved a path through the darkspawn that had invaded Denerim, Alistair at her side. Along with Wynne and Leliana, they had killed the archdemon’s generals. Now they needed to get to the archdemon itself.

Elisabeta could see the tainted old god that appeared as a dragon above her. There was someone on his back, Riordan. So the Senior Warden had made it to the monster. She felt a band around her heart loosen. He would be the one to kill the archdemon and she and Alistair would be okay. It was not to be, she watched in horror as the demon bucked and Riordan slid off; he plummeted to the pavement below. She ran to his body, he was dead. She looked over at Alistair, unaware of the tears already pooling in her sea green eyes. He just shook his head. They had to destroy the creature, this was no time to contemplate the consequences.

She just nodded and looked to the archdemon. It was veering in the sky, injured. She noticed it circling Fort Drakon. She fought her way into the fort and to the top. She could not let the archdemon escape, this was their opportunity to end the Blight. It had already taken enough from the people of Ferelden.

As she engaged the archdemon, she was joined by the Ferelden mages and Eamon’s troops. Wynne joined her comrades as they flanked the creature, not letting it take flight again. She smiled when she saw an arrow rip through one of its wings, she recognized Leliana’s skill and fletching. Her own dual swords flashed as she cut the creature again and again. Starfang and the Sword of Cousland seemed to sing as she dodged under the dark tainted acid the creature spewed and sliced under its neck. As she came out on the other side, she saw Alistair fighting three hurlocks. He easily disposed of the creatures and then took on two shrieks who were trying to sneak up on Eamon. She knew how fond he was of his pseudo uncle.

Turning back to the archdemon, Elisabeta saw it falter. She whipped her swords out, scoring its neck and back. It fell to the ground. This was it. There was no time to hesitate. She sheathed her long swords and grabbed the large claymore that lay beside one of Eamon’s fallen soldiers.
“No!” The sound tore through the air, it was desperate and frantic. She turned to see Alistair running towards her. “No!” His voice was broken and it cracked her own heart. She could see the future she wanted so badly shattering before her. She looked down at the ring on her finger. There would be no wedding for her, no happy marriage, no children with his bad jokes and her temper. There would be no lazy mornings twined in the arms of the man she loved, no placid summer days or walks in the crisp autumn nights. There would be no more sweet kisses and long nights of passion. There would be no more. But it was either him or her and she didn’t want to live in a world without him. “No, Beta, please, no!” He continued to run towards her.

“I’m sorry. I love you,” she drove the sword through the archdemon’s head. There was a flash of light and then nothing.

Elisabeta Cousland sat up on the floor of the chantry, screaming. She looked down. Her armor was different. She now wore a merchant’s coat in a style she didn’t recognize. Plus, her wrists were shackled. The ring on her finger was gone and there was a strange mark on her left hand. As she stared at it, it glowed green and pain shot through her.
Meetings Made Possible by the Maker's Miracles

Chapter Summary

Cassandra and Leliana discover their prisoner is not whom they suspected she was. Leliana has trouble accepting the truth before her eyes.

The prisoner crying out from pain and shock brought no help, but caused two the guards to run to their superiors. Four more drew their swords on her. She’d been dead for years, or so she supposed as there had been no way to judge the passing of time, and she was already a prisoner to people wearing armor with a symbol that reminded her too much of the chantry.

When the doors did finally open, a dark haired woman marched in, glaring at Elisabeta. Elisabeta ignored her, though, and gazed at the woman behind her. The dark haired woman began circling her like a shark. She stopped behind Elisabeta and leaned over near her ear. “Tell me why we shouldn’t just kill you now.” Dang, she was loud.

“I’ve been in the Abyss for…” She stopped. “OK, I don’t know how long, but not so loud. I’m not used to noise anymore.” She turned to the woman in front of her and her jaw dropped. Sweet Blessed Maker, the woman before her was a sight for sore eyes. Why was she in restraints, though, if her best friend was here? Didn’t she know who she was? “Leliana, could you tell your friend to keep it down. I don’t know how long I’ve been floating around in the nothingness of the Void, but she seems awfully loud.”

“You were in the Fade, not the Abyss,” Cassandra insisted.

“I followed a voice into the Fade from… that hell,” she really didn’t want to think about it; the nothingness, clinging to who she was so she wasn’t lost to madness. Her friend, at least the woman who had once been her friend, was just staring at her. “Leliana, could you please have your friend stop shouting at me. I feel like I drank Oghren’s brew at some point and just can’t remember when.”

“How do you know Sister Nightingale’s name?” The dark-haired bean sidhe didn’t lower her voice. She grabbed Elisabeta’s collar and hauled her up so they were face to face. It was a good thing she wasn’t short.

“Cassandra, we need her alive,” Leliana reminded the other woman, she still couldn’t believe how much the prisoner resembled a dear friend she’d lost years before. Now she was even calling her by name in that voice.

“She killed the Divine!” Cassandra threw Elisabeta on the floor, but the other woman flipped so she landed back on her feet and faced Cassandra defiantly.

“Beatrix is old, really old, she probably died of old age,” Elisabeta declared. “She wouldn’t need any help.”

“Beatrix died in 9:34 Dragon,” Leliana studied the prisoner, her eyes were telling her a story she couldn’t believe. “Who are you?”
“What year is it?” How long had she been dead? Elisabeta studied Leliana’s face, her friend recognized her; she could see it in her eyes. Why was she acting like she didn’t? Didn’t she have a vision sent by the Maker once, was the Maker bringing someone back from the dead that much of a stretch for her?

“The conclave has been destroyed!” Cassandra was now shouting. “Only you survived.”

“I wasn’t at a conclave,” Elisabeta protested. “What conclave are you even talking about?”

“I had her belongings searched,” Cassandra revealed. “She is Desdemona Trevelyan, a Tranquil mage from Ostwick. I asked around about her, she was too powerful and couldn’t control her own magic so she was given the Brand… after killing two other mages and a dozen Templars.”

“She doesn’t have a Chantry Brand,” Leliana waved a hand at Elisabeta. “And she looks just like… but she died ten years ago, so it can’t be her.”

“She’s Trevelyan,” Cassandra was sure. She pushed Elisabeta who pushed back. A fireball flew from her hands and hit the nearby wall. “See!”

“Andraste’s Rabid Mabari!” Elisabeta’s mouth dropped open. “What do you mean ten years and I was never a mage!”

Leliana didn’t know how this mage had been born a near doppelganger to her departed friend, but Cassandra was obviously right. That didn’t change the matter at hand. “We need her, Cassandra. Besides, a Tranquil wouldn’t kill the Divine.”

“I was never a Tranquil!” Elisabeta objected. “I am not Desdemona Trevelyan, either. I am Elisabeta Cousland and I’m from Highever! And apparently I’ve been dead for ten years. What year is it?”

“It’s 9:41 Dragon,” Cassandra answered. “And you aren’t fooling anyone. People don’t come back from the dead.”

“I obviously did, although the fireball thing is new,” Elisabeta conceded. “Leliana, you know me.”

“No,” Leliana shook her head in denial. She had just lost someone whom she loved dearly. Now before her was a woman claiming to be the sister of her heart she’d lost a decade before. She certainly looked like Lissa. She hadn’t aged since the last time Leliana saw her… when Alistair had held the torch that set her funeral pyre aflame.

“Was I so forgettable?” Elisabeta sighed. “After I helped you avenge yourself on your ex-girlfriend? I’m sure you remember Marjolaine.”

“Who is Marjolaine?” Cassandra had a feeling she was losing control of the conversation.

“Her ex,” Elisabeta confided. “She was a snotty Orlesian who tried to claim Ferelden smelled of wet dog. She deserved what she got.”

“Because she insulted Ferelden?” Cassandra realized that was as much of an offense as whatever the Orlesian woman had done to Leliana. Perhaps it was the dog part, Fereldens did love their dogs.

“Then there was the time that Zevran tried to spy on me while I was bathing in a pond near camp,” Elisabeta ignored Cassandra’s question, the answer was obvious after all. “You blended into
shadows and knocked him out. Then we stole his clothes and threw them in the pond. When he came to, we claimed a Hurlock had done it.”

“Boy, Alistair was so angry about that,” Leliana recalled the event. “He wasn’t upset about us throwing Zevran’s clothes in the pond, but about Zevran spying on you. He didn’t like your privacy being invaded and was the only one who got to see you naked.”

“Although, you would ask about our… private time frequently,” Elisabeta added.

“Hey, I wanted to make sure he was good enough for you,” Leliana smiled. Maker, this was her Lissa.

“At least you were better than Wynne,” Elisabeta conceded. “She came to Alistair and I separately and tried to get us to break up.”

“She could be such a busybody sometimes,” Leliana agreed. “Yet she was still flustered when Zevran wanted to lay his head on her bosoms. He kept coming onto her.”

“I think they might have had a one night stand,” Elisabeta confided.

“You know about that?” Leliana’s hand flew to her mouth and she blinked back tears. She’d thought she and Zevran were the only living people who knew that.

“I… might have seen more than I…” She was cut off as Leliana, ignoring Cassandra and the guards grabbed Elisabeta and pulled her into her arms.

“Leliana!” Cassandra objected. “She has the strange mark and she survived the Conclave.”

“I have no idea what the mark does,” Elisabeta protested. “I don’t even know what it is or how it got on my hand. Except… she said that our destinies were switched. The woman, the one who was screaming in the Fade went to the Maker’s side and I would get her pow…” She stopped and stared at the spot on the wall where the fireball had hit the wall. “It’s all fuzzy. I remember women and then there was another woman, older. She helped me get out of the Fade.”

“A woman?” Cassandra repeated.

“There were several women,” Elisabeta agreed. “I… I… remember one screaming, I followed her voice.”

“Where have you been for the last ten years?” Leliana still had her arms around her.

A flashback of nothingness shot through Elisabeta’s mind and she shuttered. “I… it was… I’m pretty sure it was the Abyss. I was dragged there with the archdemon.”

“You died on that rooftop,” Leliana confirmed, clutching her friend closer. “We… burned your pyre… you were… dead.”

“Don’t remind me,” Elisabeta really didn’t want to dwell more on… that.

“Leliana, could you please unhand the prisoner,” Cassandra demanded. “As you said, we need her.”

“I’ll take her to the forward camp,” Leliana declared. “You can meet us there.”

“You need to be the one at the camp,” Cassandra dissented. “The scouts answer to you and the army to Cullen. I’ll make sure the prisoner gets there safely.”
“Her name is Elisabella, Lissa to her friends,” Leliana released her. Sweet Maker, it really was her. “She’s… well, let’s take care of that Breach. Then I’ll tell you who she is. The Maker is with us.”

“Breach, what breach?” Elisabella had no idea what was happening. She watched her friend leave and turned to the loud, unpleasant brunette.

“It will be easier to show you,” Cassandra led her out.
Though I Walk Through the Valley of Death...

Chapter Summary

Cassandra takes Elisabeta to her friends waiting in the valley.

Cassandra led Elisabeta out of the chantry and into Haven. Elisabeta moved to shield her eyes from the light for a moment. Light, she blinked and looked up, the day was overcast; but the rays of the sun still managed to filter through, giving light to Thedas.

She didn’t know she’d shed tears until Cassandra glowered at her. “What is wrong? Feeling guilty for your sins?”

“It’s light, natural light,” She continued to look up at the clouds. Even they were beautiful. “You don’t know how wonderful even a muted ray of the sun is after an immensely long night.” Then she noticed the Breach, a green tear in the sky. “Whoa what’s that?”

“It’s a massive rift into the world of demons that grows larger with each passing hour,” Cassandra looked up at the massive green tear. “It’s not the only such rift,” she turned to Elisabeta. “It’s just the largest. All were caused by the explosion at the Conclave.”

“An explosion can do that?” She’d never heard of such a thing.

“This one did,” Cassandra insisted. “Unless we act, the Breach may grow until it swallows the world.”

The Breach expanded as they watched and Elisabeta’s left hand flared. She grit her teeth and let out a little sound of pain. She closed her fists and eyes, trying to will herself to get pass it.

“Every time the Breach expands, so does the Mark on your hand and it is killing you,” Cassandra explained. “It may be the key to stopping this, but there isn’t much time.”

“We might as well try,” Elisabeta flexed her left hand. “I died saving this world, you’d think you guys could keep it in order for at least a few generations, not a decade.”

Cassandra opened her mouth and then closed it, wondering how the prisoner didn’t know about the reason for the Conclave… unless her claims about coming back from the dead were true. Leliana certainly believe her. “Let’s go.” She led Elisabeta through the town.

Elisabeta stopped, looking around. She studied the lake, the location of the chantry, the far path leading away from Haven and the temple. “This is Haven.”

“Yes, the Conclave was at the Temple of Sacred Ashes,” Cassandra was taken aback by Elisabeta’s expression as she recognized the place.

“What about all the cultists who used to live here?” She looked towards the main bulk of the town. She remembered the bloody altar she’d found in one of those houses. “I more than decimated them, but some still remained.”

“Cultists?” Cassandra cocked her head. “A mage from Ostwick would have no reason to know that
Haven used to be occupied by cultists. The Chantry dealt with them when they learned the Urn of Sacred Ashes was here. Some put up a token fight, but the Templars easily dealt with them. A few escaped their blades, the rest were sent to the Maker for judgement.”

“You killed them all?” Elisabeta didn’t like that idea. “The dragon they worshiped as Andraste was dead, I know I killed her, but that is no reason for genocide. Knights of Redcliffe were slaughtered, Brother Genitive was tortured, and the Chantry did nothing. Then when the real danger is passed they march in like they own the place and just slaughtered the survivors? That sounds like them all right.”

“You are in no position to judge the Most Holy after what you did,” Cassandra growled. “You…” She trailed off. “You said you slain their dragon? That was… Let’s just go.” She continued through the town.

At first, the people were just glaring at her then they were jeering, demanding the prisoner’s head. “I think I preferred the cultists.”

“They are mourning Divine Justinia,” Cassandra excused their actions, despite the fact that one woman was holding a rope and another had a torch. “The Conclave was hers. It was a chance for peace between mages and Templars. She brought their leaders together. Now they are dead.” The gates were opened, letting them through. “We lash out at the sky, but we must think beyond ourselves, as she did, until the Breach is sealed.”

“The last time I did that, I ended up in the Abyss,” Elisabeta pointed out. “I would like to avoid that fate this time, thank you all the same.”

“There will be a trial,” Cassandra promised as she removed Elisabetta’s restraints. “I can promise no more. Come, it is not far.”

“Where are you taking me?” Elisabeta wondered. “There is a faster path to the temple. I’ve been there before.”

“Your mark must be tested on something smaller than the Breach,” Cassandra explained. “Open the gates,” she order the guards. “We are heading into the valley.”

They entered into a large, open area, covered by snow.

“Maker, it’s the end of the world!” A random soldier declared as they passed them.

The Breach expanded yet again, causing pain to flare across Elisabetta’s hand. “Andraste’s knicker weasels!” She cursed.

“The pulses are coming faster now,” Cassandra looked at the Breach. “We must get you to the temple.”

“How did I end up back in Haven?” Elisabeta wondered.

“You stepped out of the Breach and fell unconscious,” Cassandra explained. “They say a woman was in the rift behind you.”

“That was at the temple wasn’t it?” Elisabeta looked towards the structure in question. “Did you throw me over someone’s shoulder, carry me to the chantry, throw me on the floor, and put me in restraints?”

“Well… yes,” Cassandra admitted. “We did.”
“Figures,” Elisabeta nodded. She continued to walk in silence, until there was a rupture and the bridge she was on collapsed beneath her feet. She slowly climbed back to her feet as the Breach spat green balls out. The balls bubbled until one of them became a shade.

“Stay behind me,” Cassandra ordered, her sword drawn and shield before her. She charged.

On the very spot she’d been standing, the ice began to crack and green light began shooting out of it. Another shade popped up, like a daisy from the grass. Elisabeta tried using the magic she now possessed. She managed to form a fireball and threw it at the shade, it fizzled mid throw. Great, she had unwanted powers and couldn’t command them. She stepped back and noticed a sword lying across barrels and carts that seemed to have fallen from a supply wagon. She dove for the long sword and spied another one about five feet from it. With one sword in hand, she tried to blend into the shadows to grab the second. Then she easily flanked the shade and swept the swords, cutting it in two.

Cassandra was still fighting her own shade, so Elisabeta moved up to help, but Cassandra had finally made a killing blow. She turned on Elisabeta, menacing with her sword. “Drop your weapons. Now!”

“I don’t think so,” Elisabeta didn’t even lower the two longswords. “I know I can protect me with these. You were having fun dancing with only one shade. Am I supposed to just stand there and fight them off with my bare hands? I tried using magic, I really don’t know what I’m doing with it. These are what I was trained to use.”

Cassandra let out a long suffering sigh. “You’re right, I can not protect you and I can not expect you to be defenseless. Reminding me that you are also a mage who can apparently not even use their own powers is not comforting, though.”

Elisabeta looked for the sheaths to the swords. “You’re not comfortable with it? It’s my first day being a mage. No, I’m not a mage. I’m a rogue who suddenly has magical powers. I’m a roge or a rage, no not rage that doesn’t work. I’m a mogue.”

They continued on. After about a hundred feet, Cassandra turned back. I should remember that you did not attempt to run.

“Do you think I’m the type to run?” Elisabeta shook her head. “You really don’t know who I am, do you? You still believe I’m this Desdemona Trevelyan and I’m delusional.”

“I’m not sure what to believe at the moment,” Cassandra conceded.

They continued on for a quarter mile before they encountered more demons. Cassandra let out a disgusted noise and charged at her foe. Elisabeta unsheathed her duel long swords and slashed at one of the demons. She was a bit out of practice and needed to regain some muscle memory, but her skill remained true. She cut the legs out from a wraith and then lashed out, cutting both the wraith and a rage demon at the same time. She then easily impaled the rage demon. She noticed Cassandra had stopped to watch her.

“There is no way a mage from Ostwick is that good with a pair of swords. I don’t even know anyone who can wield two long swords at the same time, a pair of daggers, yes, but not long swords,” Cassandra conceded. “Who are you?”

“I am Elisabeta Cousland,” she curtsied. “I am of the House of Cousland who sat at the seat of the Teyrny of Highever. That was until Rendon Howe and an archdemon managed to wipe us out.”
“You’re…” Cassandra tried to keep a stern expression, but a bit of awe seeped through.
“You’re the Hero of Ferelden.”

“Hero of Ferelden?” Elisabeta had never heard that expression. “I am a Ferelden noble who was conscripted by the Grey Wardens and died when she killed the archdemon. It was either me or Alistair, I made a choice.”

“I’m sure your king and queen are grateful for that,” Cassandra smiled. She had heard the story of how the Hero had sacrificed herself for her people many times, it was one of her favorite stories; second to that of the Champion of Kirkwall.

“Queen…” Elisabeta’s voice had dropped to almost a whisper. She had been dead for over ten years, she couldn’t expect Alistair to still be single. She followed Cassandra in silence, wondering who the woman he had chosen to stand in the place she once thought to be hers was. Whoever she was, she couldn’t be worthy of him, no one could. She hoped he was happy, though. She told herself that again and again, as part of her screamed at the universe for taking away the one thing that she’d wanted most.

As they climbed up the ice covered, steep steps that once led to one of the cultists who’d dwelt in Haven’s worshipping spots, Cassandra spoke again. “We’re getting close to the rift, you can hear the fighting.”

“Who’s fighting?” Elisabeta hadn’t seen any soldiers since they walked through the gates of Haven.

“You’ll see soon,” Cassandra assured her. “We must help them.”

“Oh, I was going to watch and give them pointers,” sarcasm dripped from Elisabeta’s voice. As she stepped into the ruins, she did indeed see a rift and a small group fighting shades. She unsheathed her swords and stepped into the fight. She used a whirlwind pattern, to kill two of the creatures; frowning at form. Her body didn’t seem to remember fighting the way it used to. She’d have to see to that as soon as she figured out how to get away from the Chantry Zealots who wanted her dead. As she beheaded a third shade, she briefly wondered if Alistair and his new wife would be willing to protect her. She rejected the idea as she flanked another demon. She might want him happy, but she didn’t want to be there watching him be happy with someone else. Howe was dead, perhaps she could sue the crown for the Teyrn of Highever. The chantry was a little more circumspect with nobles. She briefly wondered who now sat in the place of her inheritance.

She watched as a dwarf with a crossbow put a bolt through the last remaining demon. Then a bald elf grabbed her wrist. “Quickly,” he insisted. “More are coming through!” He thrust her hand up and a green light shot out of it. The light poured into the rift.

When she managed to pulled her hand back, the rift shut. She turned towards the elf. “What did you do?”

“I did nothing,” the bald, pointy eared man’s voice was a bit condescending. “The credit is yours.”

Elisabeta lifted her hand up and moved it slowly. “At least the funky mark on my hand is good for something.”
“Whatever magic opened the Breach in the sky placed that mark on your hand,” the elf insisted. “I theorized that the Mark might be able to close the rifts that have opened in the Breach’s wake… and it seems I was correct.”

Cassandra slowly approached them. “Meaning it could also close the Breach itself.”

“Possibly,” the elf agreed. He turned back to Elisabeta. “It seems you hold the key to our salvation.”

“Is that why Andraste sent me back?” She wondered. She should have known that the Bride of the Maker wasn’t merely being merciful. Mercy would have been to take her to the Maker’s side, instead she was sent back to the world that was falling apart yet again. One where the man she loved was now married to someone else and there were also demons running rampant.

“Good to know,” the dwarf spoke up. “Here I thought we’d be ass deep in demons forever.” He sauntered to the trio. “Varric Tethras: rogue, storyteller, and occasionally unwelcome tagalong.” He winked at Cassandra who gave him a disgusted look in exchange.

“How did you get mixed up with the Chantry?” Elisabeta was shocked. “I know there was a dwarven priest in Orzammar, but I didn’t think such things would become common in a mere ten years’ time.”

The elf chuckled. “Was that a serious question?”

“Technically, I’m a prisoner, just like you,” Varric fixed his gloves.

“I brought you here to tell your story to the Divine,” Cassandra’s visage was one of impatience. “Clearly that is no longer necessary.”

“Yet, here I am,” Varric pointed out. “Lucky for you, considering current events.”

“That is a nice crossbow,” Elisabeta admired it. She’d never seen the like before. It was faster than any crossbow she’d encountered and somehow more elegant.”

“Bianca and I have been through a lot,” Varric smiled.

“You named your crossbow Bianca?” Elisabeta liked him already.

“What? You don’t name your swords?” He lifted his eyebrows.

“Of course I do,” she admitted. “Before I… I used to have one called Starfang and another called Asturian’s Might. That isn’t to mention the Sword of Cousland, which I sometimes used instead of Asturian’s Might. The pieces of scrap I have tied to my shoulders now don’t compare to them.” Her voice grew softer. “I wonder what happened to them.”

“They were probably lost in the explosion, sorry,” Varric shrugged.

“Starfang would have survived,” she assured him. “Don’t worry about it. Someday I might tell you the story of how I even got that sword. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Varric.”

“You may reconsider that stance, in time,” the rude, bald, pointy eared, elf asserted.

“Aww,” Varric put a hand to his chest as if wounded. “I’m sure we’ll become great friends in the valley, Chuckles.”

“Absolutely not!” Cassandra butted in. “Your help is appreciated, Varric, but…”
“Have you been in the valley, Seeker?” Varric questioned. “Your soldiers aren’t exactly in control anymore. You need me.”

Cassandra made a disgusted noise and walked off a few paces.

“My name is Solas, if there are to be introductions,” the rude, magical, bald, pointed ear, elf. “I am pleased to see you still live.”

He means ‘I kept that mark from killing you while you slept,’ Varric did a Solas impersonation by dropping all feeling and tone from his voice.

“I guess thanks are in order,” Elisabeta supposed she hadn’t wanted to die as soon as she’d found life again. That was despite Alistair being married and Leliana not even believing it was her at first… she supposed.

“It was my pleasure,” Solas’ voice was more condescending than grateful.

“Solas is an apostate,” Cassandra began to explain.

“Technically, we are all apostates now,” Solas reminded her. “Although my studies of the Fade have allowed me to learn more about the Fade than any Circle Mage could ever dream.”

The pride dripping thickly from his voice reminded Elisabeta of someone else. “I’m just going to call you Morrigan 2. Tell me now if you are going to turn into a dog and abandon me now, please.”

“I…” Solas trailed off and just blinked at her. Then he turned to Cassandra. “You should know that your prisoner is a mage, but even she doesn’t possess the power that would be needed to open the Breach.”

“She has no control over that magic and the fireball she did try in combat fizzed out,” Cassandra confirmed.

“Thanks for telling everyone about my performance difficulties,” she muttered. “And don’t call me a mage.”

“Indeed,” Solas narrowed. “Your magic is off. There is a spiritual… discrepancy in you. It is as if… I wouldn’t call it possession. There is only one spirit there, but the magic… the life force even… are not hers.”

“Leliana recognized her,” Cassandra informed Solas. “She says she is whom she claims to be.”

“Why would I lie?” Elisabeta wondered.

“And who are you?” Varric interrupted.

“Elisabet Cousland, the daughter of Bryce and Eleanor Cousland who were the Teyrn and Teyrna of Highever before we were betrayed by the Howes,” she informed him.

Varric’s eyes widened. “You’re the… but you’re dead.”

“Not anymore,” Elisabeta shrugged.

“Apparently not,” Varric agreed. “You have to tell me all about it some time.”
“I’d really rather not,” she leaned against one of the walls of the ruins. “I guess it might help to talk to someone, though, and Leliana wouldn’t even believe it was me at first. I need to find a mirror and see if I look different.”

“Were you trapped in the Fade?” Solas was anxious to hear how a Fade spirit had taken the place of someone from the waking world.

“I wish,” she let out a little shutter. “I’ve been trapped in the Fade by a Sloth demon, and that was a picnic compared to where I was.”

“You were trapped in the Fade,” Varric repeated. “I wish I had a quill and paper right now. Hawke was in the Fade once, it was about five minutes and he had to fight a few demons. Along with Isabella who was willing to betray him for a new ship. She likes big boats and cannot lie. Oh, and Fenris, who betrayed him for help destroying his old master.”

“Only a few,” she shook her head. “Wait, he got to have his friends in there with him? I was trapped in there for days, by myself, and I had to fight demons, darkspawn, golems, and Chantry Sisters with shivs. Those Chantry Sisters were the most homicidal of the groups. And I was turned into a mouse in there.”

“A mouse?” Varric repeated.


“Oh, please do,” Varric was grinning.

“We must get to the forward camp quickly,” Cassandra insisted.

“Tell me the story while we go,” Varric begged.

“It all started when I was trying to rescue the mages of Kinloch Hold,” she began as they followed Cassandra.
Elisabeta and her group make it to the base camp. They go through the Mountain Pass.

Wait, Nightingale knelt there, praying and cowering, as you fought off a bunch of skeletal demons that she had thought were a reverend mother and priestesses,” Varric would have now sold Solas in exchange for a quill and paper. He’d just have to write down the details of the story later, with a few embellishments.

“She did,” Elisabeta confirmed. “At least Wynne and Alistair helped.”

“Oh, you have to tell me what the King of Ferelden’s dream world was,” Varric insisted.

They came to another rift. “After we take care of this!” Elisabeta unsheathed her swords and struck down the two closest demons. “Then you can tell me about this friend of yours, Hawke.”

“You don’t know who Hawke is?” Varric was both shocked and excited. He hadn’t gotten to tell Hawke’s story to someone who hadn’t heard of him for many years. He shot a bolt through a demon. “We’re talking about Falcon Hawke.”

“I was dead for ten years,” she lifted her left hand and aimed it at the rift. Power shot into the rift, then she pulled back sealing it. “I missed a lot.”

“Open the gates,” Cassandra ordered.

They walked in to see a table set in the middle of a makeshift camp. A man in Chantry robes stood up strait. “Ah, here they come”

Leliana walked forward to greet them. “You made it.” She turned to the man in robes. “Chancellor Roderick, this is…”

“I know who she is,” Roderick insisted. “As Grand Chancellor of the Chantry, I hereby order you to take this criminal to Val Royeaux to face execution.”

“Order me,” Cassandra made a disgusted sound. “You are a glorified clerk, a bureaucrat.”

“And you are a thug,” Roderick yelled back at her. “But a thug who is supposedly serves the Chantry.”

“We serve the Most Holy, chancellor,” Leliana corrected. “As you well know.”

“Justinia is dead,” Roderick threw up his hands. “We must elect a replacement and obey her orders on the matter.”

“Obviously, you do not know who I am,” Elisabeta interrupted. “I am not merely some prisoner.”

“I’m sure you were very popular in whatever Maker forbidden Circle raised you, mage,”
Roderick looked down his nose at her. “But that won’t save you here.”

“Your accent is Orlesian,” Elisabeta observed. “You’re an Orlesian aren’t you?”

“I am from Val Royeaux,” he obviously thought that impressive.

“Figures,” she lifted her chin. “I will not lower myself to argue with an Orlesian Chantry puppet. What are you even doing in Ferelden? I know what country we are in.”


“Oh? Did Divine Justinia liberate the temple from a bunch of crazy cultists and kill the dragon that guarded it? Don’t answer that, because what I really want to know is did the Crown do nothing to stop a bunch of Orlesian Chantry Bootlickers from marching into our country? None of you should have been allowed across the border,” Elisabeta had a strong desire to march to Denerim and chew out Alistair and this bride of his. “I’m the highest ranking Ferelden here, the country you’re in. You aren’t giving me orders.”

“You shouldn’t even be here,” Roderick sputtered. “How dare you suggest the Conclave itself was wrong?” He turned to Cassandra. “Call a retreat, Seeker. Our position here is hopeless.”

“Great,” Elisabeta threw up her hands. “We have a Chantry clerk insisting on making military decisions. No wonder Andraste brought me back.”

“We can stop this before it’s too late,” Cassandra insisted.

“How?” Roderick wondered, not that he had any reason to know. He was, after all, just a glorified church clerk who had zero military experience or expertise. “You won’t even survive long enough to reach the Temple, even with all your soldiers.”

“We must get to the Temple,” Cassandra insisted. “It’s the quickest route.”

“But not the safest,” Leliana dissented. “Our forces can charge as a distraction as we go through the mountains.”

“We lost contact with an entire squad on that path,” Cassandra reminded her. “It’s too risky.”

“Listen,” Roderick insisted. “Abandon this now, before more lives are lost.”

The Breach grew again, as if mocking his words. The mark grew yet again, shooting pain through Elisabeta’s arm. She noticed that everyone had turned to look at her as light waves ran along her hand.

“How do you think we should proceed?” Cassandra questioned her.

“Oh, now you’re asking me what I think,” they hadn’t seemed to care before.

“You have the Mark,” Solas reminded her.

“And you are the one we must keep alive,” Cassandra added. “Since we can not agree on our own…”

Elisabeta was about to make a comment about being able to keep herself alive and then remembered that she’d died. “Use the mountain path. Work together, you all know what’s at stake.”
Cassandra turned towards the Left Hand of the Divine. “Leliana, bring everyone left in the valley, everyone.”

“Don’t worry,” Leliana flashed a soft, sad smile at Elisabeta. “I’ve already stood helplessly by and watched you die, despite my best efforts. I will not have that happen again. I’ll protect you this time.” She hurried away.

Cassandra began leading her group past the chancellor, but he insisted on speaking. “On your head be the consequences, Seeker.”

Cassandra made a disgusted noise. “It always is.”

As she passed him, Elisabeta’s right hand struck out. He reeled and landed on his butt. “Heathen!”

“Orlesian,” she insulted him right back.

Elisabeta found herself in the lead as they headed to the mines.

“Did you have to punch the Chancellor?” Solas shook his head. “It was rather brutish.”

“Yes, I had to,” Elisabeta insisted. “I may die again, but I refuse to be executed by Orlesian Cheese Crumb Munchers. Especially, Chantry ones. The only thing his kind will do to divert a disaster like this is send their thoughts and prayers.” They made it to ladders leading up to the mines. “I didn’t notice these mines the last time I was in Haven.”

“They were left here long ago,” Solas assured her.

“Really? Were you in Haven a long time ago?” She wondered if he were somehow connected to the cultists who once held the town.

“I have spent much time in the Fade, exploring Thedas,” he explained. “The Fade remembers.”

“Yes, I’ve seen memories come to life in places where the veil was thin,” she recalled.

“You’ve been in the Fade, as well,” Varric reminded her. “So what was the king’s little Fade world like?”

“He has this sister who is just awful,” Elisabeta revealed. “He thought he was living with her and her four children. He grew up alone and always wanted a family he could call his own.” She wondered if he had that now. She knew he’d married and wondered if he’d been able to produce an heir, perhaps a few more children as well. Did they have his sense of humor and sweetness? Did their mother sing them to sleep or did he?

“Wow, living with my brother would have been a nightmare world I’d have hoped to avoid,” Varric commented.

They stopped as a group of demons slowly approached them. Solas shot arcane energy at one, while Varric hit another with a bolt. Then Cassandra and Elisabeta moved in with swords flashing. As she implemented the move she liked to call Punisher, quickly slashing at her opponent
with both swords, Elisabeta didn’t move fast enough to avoid a second demon. It unleashed ice into her shoulder. She finished disposing of its companion and turned, favoring her now injured right shoulder. “I could use a little healing here,” she called to Solas.

“You have healing bottles on you,” he reminded her as he hit the same demon he’d been fighting the entire time with yet another energy bolt.

“What?” She impaled the wraith with her left sword and beheaded it, slower than she would have liked, with her right one. She then marched towards Solas, easily dispatching the shade he fought. She grabbed his tunic front. “Are you telling me that you possess no healing magic? You have just napped your life away and played in the Fade, learning no useful skills?”

“My magic is very useful,” he protested.

“Hah,” she let him go and swallowed the small bottle. Then she looked at it in disgust and threw it against a nearby wall. “It tastes like strait elfroot. Who made it?”

“I…Addon,” Cassandra admitted. “He’s the only healer the Inquisition has left.”

“It’s a simple healing potion, good only for simple injuries like mine!” Elisabeta declared stalking further up the path. “Andraste’s Bloodied Knickers, it won’t do us much good for a serious injury!” She stopped, her legs giving out from under her and tears undamming from her eyes. “I want Wynne! Where is she? Did she go to Tevinter with Shale like they’d planned? If she did, she should still be back. How am I supposed to fight demon after demon without a real healer and with a warrior who seems to be the Anti-Alistair when it comes to personality?” She sniffed. “At least she’s as good with a sword as he is.”

“Great, Chuckles, you broke her,” Varric pulled Elisabeta into his arms.

“We don’t have time for this,” Cassandra grabbed her arm, planning to pull her up.

“Don’t,” Varric’s voice held warning. “Don’t make me involve Bianca in this, Seeker. You are going to leave her be for a moment. She hasn’t told us what happened to her, but I gather it’s worse than returning from the Maker’s Side or even the Fade.”

“It was the Abyss,” Elisabeta whispered to him. “I was in the Abyss all that time.”

Cassandra took a step back. “I thought the Hero of Ferelden was a good woman.”

“Sheesh, Seeker, can you be more insensitive?” Varric continued to rock the sobbing hero.

Elisabeta laid her head against Varric’s impressive hirsute chest and then blinked at Cassandra for a moment. “The Grey Wardens have always kept it secret as to why they are the only ones who can kill an archdemon.”

“They’re braggarts who think themselves above the law,” Solas growled. “They are obsessed with the Blight.”

“You haven’t seen a horde of darkspawn or the destruction they leave behind, have you?” Elisabeta would have plenty of nightmares from the things she’d seen during the Fifth Blight without all of that time in the Void on top of it. She turned back to Cassandra. “The Wardens keep it secret, and with good reason. It’s hard to get recruits when the price they may have to one day pay is their soul. When an archdemon is killed without a Warden present, it’s spirit just jumps into the nearest tainted soul and it becomes an archdemon. If a Grey Warden is present, it can’t resist the closest one and jumps into them instead. Both souls are destroyed, or so I was told. In truth, a soul is energy
that is indestructible. The archdemon’s soul, and that of the Grey Warden, are sent into the Abyss where they are lost. Only… I refused to give into the oblivion so easily.”

“You…” Cassandra leaned against a nearby wall and crossed her arms. “How did you get out?”

“I saw a light and heard screaming,” Elisabeta recalled. “There were two women there… it’s fuzzy.”

“Two women?” Cassandra stood straighter.

“Plus, the other one,” Elisabeta recalled. “There were three total.”

“Maybe the Maker is a polygamist,” Varric suggested.

“Varric!” Cassandra was outraged by his Blaspheme, but Elisabeta chuckled.

“Come on, Tempest,” Varric urged. “There are missing scouts who might be in danger.”

“You’re right,” she climbed to her feet. “Let’s go back to doing the right thing.”

“So Hawke was going into the Fade to save an elf who was a dreamer?” Elisabeta was riveted by the tale of a man who willingly went into the Fade. She glanced back at Solas. “I bet he was still able to do some healing.”

“I don’t know,” Varric admitted. “I thought most Circle Mages, at least, were taught the basics. Hawke was raised as an apostate, though.”

They stopped as they emerged from the mines to be greeted by the sight of a dozen bodies lying on the steps.

“Well, it looks like we found those missing scouts,” Varric commented.

“That can’t be all of them,” Cassandra insisted.

“Let’s keep going,” Elisabeta surged ahead. A quarter of a mile down the path, she saw a rift. She grabbed both swords and ran forward, Varric at her heals.

Cassandra followed, glancing back at Solas. “You kept her alive with the Mark, but you really have no healing magic?”

“My skills… we’ll discuss this later, Seeker,” Solas didn’t want to explain his abilities to her.

Elisabeta and Varric had cleared out a section of the demons by the time they caught up and Elisabeta was holding her left hand up, so energy was shooting around the hilt of her sword and into the rift.

Cassandra nodded to the Inquisition lieutenant who had been fighting the demons as she joined the fray, bashing one of the creatures with her shield, as she impaled another with her sword. She then lunged at a third. By the fourth, the creatures were all dead.

“Lady Cassandra!” The head scout greeted her.

“Lieutenant, you’re alive,” Cassandra’s relief was palpable.
“Just barely!” She looked around wearily for any more demons.

Solas looked to where the rift had been. “Sealed, as before,” he looked to Elisabeta. “You are becoming quite proficient at this.”

“Let’s hope it works on the big one,” Varric agreed.

“Thank the Maker you finally arrived, Lady Cassandra,” the lieutenant was favoring her side. “I don’t think we could have lasted much longer.”

“Thank our prisoner,” Cassandra insisted. “She insisted we come this way.”

“The prisoner?” The lieutenant was surprised. “Then you…?”

“I could abandon you if there was still hope you were alive,” Elisabeta assured her.

“Then you have my sincere gratitude,” the lieutenant saluted her.

“The way into the valley behind us is clear for the moment,” Cassandra assured those they’d rescued. “Go while you still can.”

“At once,” the lieutenant nodded. “Quickly, let’s move,” her soldiers followed.

“The path ahead appears to be clear of demons as well,” Solas observed.

“Let’s hurry before that changes,” Cassandra insisted.
Pride Faileth

Chapter Summary

Elisabeta closes the Breach... or at least stops it from growing anymore.

“So he betrayed Hawke, and turned his sword on him, for the promise of revenge. Hawke really remained friends with this Fenris and trusted him at his back?” Elisabeta understood the need for revenge, better than many, but she didn’t understand easily forgiving a betrayal like that.

“I see your point, Tempest,” Varric conceded. “I’m sure Hawke regretted it when Fenris then joined Meredith and her crazier Templar in their attempt to wipe out the mages of Kirkwall.”

“What?” Elisabeta stopped in her tracks for a moment. “Did she succeed?”

“No, she didn’t,” Varric assured her. “Thanks to Hawke and his trusty dwarven companion.”

“A trusty dwarven companion is always a good thing to have at your side,” she agreed.

They arrived at the Temple of Sacred Ashes, what was left of it.

“This definitely looks different than the last time I was here,” she examined the crumpling walls. There were burnt bodies still standing where they’d been when the explosion had taken place. Their mouths were open in silent screams. They silently moved through what had once been halls and large rooms, careful not to disturb the morbid tableau of the dead.

They reached what had once been a balcony looking over a large hall. The Breach shifted and writhed in front of them. Varric gazed at it. “It sure is a long way up.”

Elisabeta followed his gaze. “Holy Maker,” she took in the thing. How was she supposed to close that? She’d have to find a way.

“You’re here!” Leliana ran to them. “Thank the Maker.”

Just the sight of her friend brought a smile to Elisabeta’s face. “We found your scouts and managed to save… some.”

“Of course you did,” Leliana never doubted her abilities.

“Leliana,” Cassandra ordered. “Have your men take up positions around the temple.” Leliana nodded and left.

“It would be better to have them form a perimeter around the Breach,” Elisabeta disagreed. “That’s where the demons are coming from. If you spread your forces across the temple, you will end up with soldiers who are just scratching their butts while their comrades are in danger.”

“My orders stand,” Cassandra insisted. “This way.” She led them down another hall.

“But this leads down, we need to go up,” Elisabeta protested.
“I know what I’m doing,” Cassandra kept going, ignoring her prisoners.

“I have to go with Tempest on this one,” Varric commented. “We need higher ground not lower.”

Cassandra made a disgusted noise, but continued on.

“So what happened between your friends, Fenris and Hawke?” Elisabeta asked Varric.

“I don’t know if I’d call Fenris my friend,” Varric clarified. “He wasn’t the most sociable person and he turned brooding into an art form. When Anders blew up the chantry in Kirkwall…”

“Someone blew up Kirkwall’s chantry?” Elisabeta wasn’t sure how she felt about that. She was no fan of the chantry. They hadn’t lifted a finger when her family was massacred or during the Blight, except to pray over the soldiers at Ostagar before they were slaughtered. They did manage to cause problems with the mages before the battle, though. When she’d first met Alistair he had been delivering a message to a mage from a reverend mother and the mage didn’t like an ex-Templar near him, which the reverend mother knew.

“He had issues and things in Kirkwall were really bad for mages,” Varric explained. “Sister Nightingale had even been sent in to investigate the situation. When the Left Hand of the Divine gets involved, there is trouble brewing.”

“Sister Nightingale?” Elisabeta hadn’t heard that name before.

“It was Leliana’s codename,” he explained. “The Divine…” He stopped and stared at the red rocks jutting from the ground nearby. “Seeker, you know what this is.”

“I know,” she confirmed. “It’s red lyrium.”

“But what is it doing here?” He demanded to know. “You know my experience with this stuff. It’s bad.”

“Red lyrium?” Elisabeta studied it for a moment. Something about it felt… wrong.” She suddenly had a flash of when the archdemon’s soul had shot into her and started the struggle that wound up with both of them in the Abyss. She didn’t know what it was about the red stuff that brought up the memory and she consciously suppressed it.

“It’s lyrium gone bad, real bad,” Varric assured her.

Her hand flared and flame appeared. “Whoa!” She stifled the urge to throw the flame, closing her fist. The threat extinguished.

“So you are a mage,” Solas nodded.

“Not exactly,” she shook her head. It was just that something in her literally rebelled against something in the lyrium. Another, more fuzzy, memory popped into her head, that of a blonde woman smiling gently as she reached out and touched her.

“You will need to learn to control those powers,” Cassandra’s voice was harsh.

“Really?” Elisabeta snarked. “I thought I’d just let them appear whenever they want and perhaps cause ice storms in my sleep. We’re staying in Haven, no one would even notice the ice storm.” She continued walking for a bit. “Great, now I’m hearing voices.”
“Bring forth the sacrifice,” the disembodied voice was deep.

“Someone help me!” The second voice was feminine.

“That was Divine Justinia!” Cassandra recognized it.

“Oh, you’re hearing them, too?” Elisabeta sighed. “Well, that’s something then.”

“What’s going on here?” The new voice was also that of a woman, but no one recognize that one.

“Help me!” It was Justinia again.

“I think the second woman is Desdemona Trevelyan,” Varric surmised. “The woman you claimed Tempest was.”

They reached a large area that was either the main hall of the temple or a courtyard. “The temple didn’t have a courtyard,” Elisabeta remembered that. “This must be where the explosion took place.”

Before them, the air shimmered and a shadowy scene appeared before them. One large figure was all shadow, the other was an elderly woman in the robes of the Chantry Divine. A third figure appeared. It was a mage with a brand on her forehead. Her hair was blonder than Elisabeta’s and her eyes bluer, but there was a definite resemblance. They easily could have been related, closely related, and Elisabeta momentarily wondered if her parents had had a third child she didn’t know about. No, she reasoned, that was impossible. Yet, she knew that one of her maternal aunts had married a bann in Ostwick. She had a feeling she was looking at a woman who was once her cousin. She also knew she’d seen this woman before. The voice, she would never forget that voice. It had been her salvation, even as she’d screamed in denial to what was happening to her. “What’s going on here?” Desdemona asked.

“Run while you can!” The vision of Justinia insisted. “Warn them!”

“We have an intruder,” the shadow’s voice was frigid. “Kill the mage.”

There was a bright flash and the vision disappeared.

“You were there!” Cassandra accused her. “Who attacked? And the Divine, is she…? Was the vision true? What are we seeing?”

“I wasn’t there,” Elisabeta insisted. “That wasn’t me. That was Desdemona Trevelyan, not me.”

“It wasn’t her, Seeker,” Varric’s voice was gentle. “I see the resemblance, but Hawke and Carver bear that much of a resemblance to each other.”


“It’s the same at Soldier’s Peak,” Elisabeta confirmed. “I saw the Grey Wardens turn on King Arland and their defeat. Arland was a tyrant, but he did command a large army full of extremely loyal men.”

“This rift is not sealed, but it is closed,” Solas declared. “Albeit temporarily. I believe that with the Mark, the rift can be opened and then sealed properly and safely. However, opening the rift will likely attract attention from the other side.”
Cassandra looked around to those assembled. “That means demons. Stand ready.” She waited until each of the archers had nodded to her that they were in position. Then she nodded to Elisabeta.

Elisabeta raised her hand and let the Mark’s power shoot into the Breach. She poured it in longer than any of the others had taken, wondering if she would be able to sustain the stream. The Breach opened and a pride demon shot out.

The creature hung in the air for several moments, roaring. Then it landed on its feet and let out a snarl before turning on those gathered. The archers released their arrows as the warriors unsheathed their swords. Elisabeta blocked an electric whip by crossing her swords. She wished for Starfang and Asturian’s Might back. Still, the inferior ones she had now worked. She moved silently to flank the creature and cut low, slicing into a tendon. As she retreated quickly back, she noticed Leliana on the field, arrows flying. “Here take one of my healing potions just in case,” she threw a bottle at her friend. “They aren’t very good and have no flavor to cover up the taste of elfroot.”

“Keep it, you might need it and you do not have many to spare,” Leliana insisted.

“What do you mean?” Elisabeta wondered. “I haven’t drunk any.”

Leliana gestured to Cassandra. As they watched, the seeker drained a bottle and threw it at the Pride demon. “That’s her fifth bottle.”

“Maker’s Melted Meatballs!” Elisabeta swore. “We only had eight to begin with!” She lifted her left hand and poured power into the Breach. Before she could get it closed, a shade appeared. She quickly disposed of it and lifted her hand again.

“Language Liss,” Leliana laughed. “I do miss being on the battlefield with you.”

“I missed you, too,” Elisabeta smiled over at her friend. “Although, I’m missing Wynne more at the moment. Do we have no healers here?”

“We’re a small group,” was all Leliana said in their defense.

Elisabeta lifted her hand again. “Let me get this thing closed before we realize just what having no healers in a battle means.”

Leliana was shooting at the pride demon again. “I miss my old bow,” she admitted. “Justinia insisted I give it up when I went to work for her. I could be identified by it alone… and it was an extravagance.”

“We must strip its defenses, wear it down,” Cassandra could be heard across the battle field. Then she opened another health bottle.

“Save some for the rest of us, Seeker!” Varric protested.

“Cassandra, put down the bottles until you really need it!” Elisabeta ran pass the pride demon, slashing it with both swords before she lifted the Mark to the Breach again. This time, she got enough energy into the Breach and sealed the rift. She noticed that the Breach was causing the head of a statue of Andraste to float. Then there was an explosion and she passed out.
Elisabeta dreams of the past again. Then the Inquisition forms

Elisabeta found herself dreaming of the past yet again. Wynne was running a hand along her shoulder. “That should make it feel better, but be careful of it tonight. I want to make sure it is completely healed in the morning. That means you don’t let Alistair ram it into your tent floor while you… wrestle.”

“I know you don’t approve of Alistair and I…” Elisabeta began.

“I… I may have been hasty when I tried to break the two of you up,” Wynne admitted. “I just want to spare both of you from heartache. I’ve… lost someone… due to duty and I still fear that duty may separate you two. I see now, however, that what I thought was just an infatuation is something more and I shouldn’t have tried to keep it from you two, even if it does, ultimately, end in heartache.”

“Um… thanks… I think,” Elisabeta moved away from her.

“Is she still trying to keep you and Alistair apart?” Leliana approached her.

She glanced back at the elderly mage. “I’m not sure.”

“How are you and Alistair?” Leliana giggled.

“He is still coming up with his own ideas and… playing well with others,” Elisabeta assured her. “Although, I’m the only other he better be playing well with.”

“I don’t think he realizes there are other women in the world,” Leliana assured her. “When you two are together, it’s just you and him. I’m not sure you two would even notice if an ogre lumbered into the vicinity.”

“It’s a shame, really,” Zevran joined them. “I would have liked for you to have given me a second look or two. Alas, I must play forgotten fiddle to the young, rugged, ex-Templar.”

“Now you guys are just teasing…” Elisabeta stopped as Alistair approached the group in what he likely thought was a subtle way. There wasn’t a subtle bone in his handsome body.

“Could I talk with you… alone,” Alistair took her hand and led her away from her friends, ignoring their suggestive laughs.

“We wouldn’t mind watching!” Zevran called to them.

“He is just hoping we invite him to join in,” Elisabeta was sure of it.

“I wanted to show you something,” he continued to lead her further and further from camp.

“Wynne did advise that we not… wrestle tonight,” Elisabeta informed him. She wants my
“Oh, you want me to lay there and just take it?” Alistair raised an eyebrow.

Elisabeta chewed her lip. There was an idea. It might be fun. “Well…”

“This is what I wanted to show you,” they passed several trees until they were at a pool of water. “The water is rather warm. I thought it might help your shoulder,” he explained.

“Oh,” the water did look inviting. “Thank you.” She began undressing. “You are joining me of course.”

“Of course,” he grinned. He stripped and helped her into the water. The heated water hitting her skin felt wonderful. “Come here,” he sat down on a ledge and pulled her onto his lap. Then he cuddled her against him.

She lay on his lap, curled up, just enjoying the feel of him against him. She felt so safe in his arms, he would never do anything to hurt her and would always fight at her side.

They sat contentedly, talking. Then in silence and watching the stars. Her head against his shoulder and his arms cradling her to him. The night birds sang and crickets chirped in the distance as the stars shone brightly above them.

Elisabeta jerked awake, sitting up. She was unable to stop the floodgate of tears that rushed out. She wondered if Alistair held his new wife as close and carefully as he’d once held her and had ever taken the mysterious other woman to a spring just to cuddle. She needed to stop thinking about him, but it was hard when she’d clung to memories of him for so long, using them to keep her sanity. Now she was dreaming of him. Well, she would just have to, she couldn’t waist the gifts the Maker had given her; like a new life.

The door opened and an elf stepped in. “You’re awake!” He threw the towels he’d been carrying down and knelt on the floor in front of her.

“Please, get up,” she wiped her eyes and stood. “I’m a Cousland, not a Kendell.”

The elf scrambled to his feet. “Sorry, m’lady. It’s just… you’re her. I’ve heard of what you’ve done. You’re Andraste’s Chosen One. Oh, and Lady Cassandra said that when you were awake, you were to meet her in the chantry at once. At once she said.” The elf hurried away.

Elisabeta sat on the bed, stunned for a moment. When had Cassandra become the boss of her? She supposed she must still be a prisoner. Did Leliana no longer trust her? She looked around the room. There was not much there. The bed was small and there was a candle set on the small table beside it. In the corner was a chest.

She went to the chest and opened it. There was armor and weapons inside. A smile slowly slid over her face. The armor design reminded her of dragons, which brought Wade to memory. This was definitely not his work, but it wasn’t bad. She liked the orange tones of the sash and scarf as well as the artistic bent. There was also a long sword with a hilt that was made to resemble a dragon and two long daggers. She sniffed at the daggers in disdain, but couldn’t seem to find a second long sword. She looked for the ones that she had recovered in the valley between Haven and the Temple of Sacred Ashes, but could not see either one. Fine, the dagger would do for now, but
she was going to find a second long sword; even if she had to kill someone and take theirs. The
town’s folk were hostile enough to her that she should have more than one challenging her to a duel.

As she stepped out of the door of the little cottage she’d woken up in, she noticed those
hostile villagers were lined up in front of it. Well, she wasn’t one to back down, she had already
more than decimated the village of Haven once, she could do it again if need be. She held her head
high, but was ready to grab her sword at any moment, as she walked forward. That was when they
began cheering her.

What in the name of Andraste’s Mabari was going on? They had gone from wanting to
lynch her to cheering as she walked by. She wasn’t sure which one was more unnerving, but she
walked faster. It was the first time she had hurried to a chantry.

She walked in to blessed silence. She stopped and looked around. This had definitely been
renovated since she was here last. It had been more... phallic.... Shaped and had secret rooms.
There was still a long hall, but it now had room on either end. There was also a large room at the
end. As she approached the room, she heard voices arguing, it was Cassandra and the annoying
Orlesian Cleric. It sounded like they were fighting over her.

Elisabeta opened the door and walked into a large room with a massive table in the middle.
Leliana stood on the other side of the table wearing the same purple and chainmaille outfit she’d seen
her in before. Cassandra and the cleric were also dressed identically. Was there a shortage of
fashion in Haven? The cultists had had changes of clothes in their closets. She was sure of it, she’d
searched some of their homes.

“Seize the prisoner!” Roderick ordered the guards. “I want her taken back to Val Royeaux
to face charges.”

“Stand down,” Cassandra ordered. The guards hadn’t even moved.

“What! I demand that she be taken to Val Royeaux to answer for the Divine’s death,”
Roderick bristled. “You are a thug, but a thug in the service of the Chantry.”

“I served the Most Holy, not you,” Cassandra faced him down.

Elisabeta leaned against the table and glanced at Leliana. She noticed her friend’s hand was
dangerously close to a hidden dagger in her robes. “What happened to the last person who tried to
imprison me against my wishes, Leliana?”

“That would be Ser Cauthrine,” Leliana recalled. “You killed her. You killed all of her
men. You killed her boss. You killed her boss’ best friend. You were going to kill her boss’
daughter, but Alistair stopped you. And you laughed merrily while you did it and made bad jokes
with your boyfriend. Maybe you should try it, I haven’t heard you laugh in over ten years.”

“That just proves you are capable of killing the Divine,” Roderick declared.

“I saw what happened at the Temple of Sacred Ashes,” Cassandra reminded him. “She
wasn’t even there.”

“She also didn’t close the Breach,” Roderick countered.

“Neither did you?” Elisabeta snapped back. “Maybe you killed the Divine!”

“I am not a suspect,” Roderick lifted his nose.
“You are,” Cassandra assured him. “You and everyone else who was in a position to gain any power from this disaster.”

“Me?” He guffawed. “But not the prisoner?”

“Do you see this?” Leliana produced a large book. “It is a writ from the Most Holy declaring an Inquisition if peace was not made at the Conclave. This gives us the power to form such an Inquisition and to oversee the investigation into the Divine’s death. And if you lay one hand on Lissa I will beat you with it.”

“You’re all thugs!” Roderick marched from the room.

“Orlesians,” Elisabeta shook her head. She turned to Leliana. “What is this about an Inquisition?”

“We’re starting an Inquisition, like the one of old,” Leliana declared. “I’d like you to help me with it. We need you to close rifts and help restore order. There is no one else left alive I trust more either. Will you help me?”

“Of course,” Elisabeta hugged her friend. “This must be why Andraste sent me back. She did send me to you, it seems. I appeared where you were, not Denerim. I have no idea where any of my other friends besides you and Alistair are.”

“We’ll talk about that later,” Leliana promised.
Elisabeta welcomed the constant work that building the Inquisition required. Messages went out to the rulers of Thedas and a declaration was nailed to the chantry door.

She spent two weeks absorbed in the Inquisition’s business. She watched amazed as people flocked to the new organization’s banner. She had spent so much time enforcing treaties when she fought the Fifth Blight that the idea that people would come together voluntarily pleasantly shocked and delighted her. The work helped keep the memory dreams away; although, there were a few nights that she woke up screaming after dreaming of darkness. They decreased, at least.

Cassandra pulled her into meeting after meeting. She, finally, saw the new Commander of the Inquisition’s forces, who had come with Cassandra from Kirkwall. Something looked familiar about him. She couldn’t put her finger on what, though. She swore she’d seen him before, but he looked different now. She had only seen the new ambassador for about five minutes a few days before, she was definitely a stranger.

“Does it trouble you?” Cassandra asked out of the blue as they walked through the chantry halls that now glowed with candlelight.

“The dreams? If I stay busy, they aren’t so bad,” Elisabeta assured her.

“What dreams?” Cassandra wondered. “I meant the Mark. What is this about dreams?”

“Don’t worry about them,” Elisabeta was sure there was nothing Cassandra could do about them. She had to suffer through those nightmares alone, when she dreamt of the Void, she just lit a candle in her room to assure herself that there was light again in her world. No one had asked how she went through so many candles, at least they hadn’t yet. “I wish I knew what this Mark is and how I got it. I don’t know if it has something to do with my resurrection or if I came by it some other way. I think Andraste wanted me to have it, but I don’t know why.”

“We’ll find out,” Cassandra assured her. “What’s important is that your Mark is now stable, as is the Breach. You’ve given us some time to figure this out now and Solas thinks a second attempt might succeed, provided the Mark has more power. The same level of power used to open the Breach in the first place to be exact. That is not easy to come by.”

“Then I guess we just need to find a way to get more power,” Elisabeta reasoned. “Can we figure out how to form a few treaties to oblige other groups to help us? I won a way against a horde of darkspawn and an archdemon doing that.”

Cassandra gave a small laugh. “I like the way you think.” She led Elisabeta into the room where Leliana had shown her the writ from the Divine. Leliana was already there, as were the commander and ambassador. “May I present Commander Cullen, Leader of the Inquisition Forces.”

“Such as they are,” his deep, rich voice held self-deprecating humor. “We lost many soldiers
in the valley and I fear many more before this is through.”

“Cullen…” Now Elisabeta was positive that she knew him. He’d been younger, but she swore he looked more vibrant now; although his hair was less curly. “Were you at Kinloch…” She remembered the condition he was in and what had happened to him. She hadn’t talked to anyone about what she’d gone through before Andraste’s Delivery. She doubted he wanted to talk about what he’d gone through, especially in mixed company.

“Yes, you two have met before,” Leliana’s voice was hasty. She, too, realized that the question was best left unasked.

“Yes, that’s where we met Wynne as well,” Elisabeta now looked at Leliana who nodded in response.

“And this is our ambassador, Josephine Montilyet,” Cassandra continued.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you at last,” Josephine nodded to her. “And of course you know Sister Leliana.”

“I do?” Elisabeta raised an eyebrow. “Oh, yes, didn’t we fight a Blight together or something?” That earned a little chuckle from Cullen.

“My official position here requires a degree of…” Leliana began, she and Elisabeta hadn’t discussed her exact position in the Inquisition.

“She is our spy master,” Cassandra cut her off.

“Tactfully put, Cassandra,” Leliana grimaced.

“We are going to get spies this time,” Elisabeta liked the sound of that. “That could have been useful on our last big adventure, Lel. Think about it. We could have learned the full truth of that Dalish Keeper, Zathrian, and the Werewolves’ curse before killing so many of them.”

“That would have been nice,” Leliana agreed. “We would have still needed someone like Josephine to convince the wolves to talk to us, though.”

“Talking wolves,” Josephine looked from Leliana to Elisabeta and back. “I think I’m missing something here.”

“Well, they were talking werewolves,” Leliana clarified.

“You’ll have to tell me about it later,” Josephine insisted.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Elisabeta’s politely nodded, but not even a smile cracked her lips. She wondered how Josephine and Leliana knew each other. Leliana had never mentioned the ambassador to her.

“I mentioned that your mark needed more power to close the Breach for good,” Cassandra was ready to get down to business.

“Which means we must approach the rebel mages for help,” Leliana asserted.

“And I still disagree,” Cullen’s hands rested comfortably on the top of his sword’s hilt. “The Templars could serve just as well.”

Cassandra let out a long, heavy sigh. “We need power, Commander, enough power poured
“Might destroy us all,” Cullen cut her off. “Templars could suppress the Breach, weaken it so…”

“Pure speculation,” Leliana interrupted him.

“I was a Templar,” he reminded her. “I know what they’re capable of.”

“It wasn’t helping to stop a Blight,” Elisabeta snarked. “No, it’s first ‘we must stop these evil blood mages’, then it’s ‘we must guard the mages you rescued for us, go talk to them’. I’m not sure Greagoir was capable of much.”

“Yes, well… he had a lot on his plate,” Cullen didn’t want to talk about what had happened in that tower, but he was willing to stand up for his old Knight Commander. The man was more stable than Meredith that was for sure.

“Unfortunately, neither group will even speak to us yet,” Josephine pointed out. “The Chantry has denounced the Inquisition. And you specifically,” the last part was aimed at Elisabeta.

“That didn’t take long,” Elisabeta wasn’t surprised. “What if I denounce them first?”

“I don’t think you can do that,” Josephine seemed certain.

“Shouldn’t they be busy arguing over who should be Divine,” Cullen obviously didn’t like that news either.

“Some people are calling you the Herald of Andraste and that frightens the Chantry,” Josephine explained. “The clerics and sisters have declared this blaspheme and we heretics for harboring you.”

“I was in the Void and she delivered me out of that hell,” Elisabeta nodded. “I don’t know if I’m her Herald, but she sent me here instead of throwing me back into that place, leaving me in the Fade, or taking me to the Maker’s Side. She must have had her reasons. I’m not going to argue with Her. It isn’t blasphemy, it’s what happened. Were you not supposed to harbor me? Were you supposed to let the crazy cleric take me or throw me out of Haven?”

“Chancellor Roderick’s doing no doubt,” Cassandra was sure of it.

“It limits our options,” that was Josephine’s concern. “Approaching the mages or Templars for help is currently out of the question.”

“How do they explain my return from the dead if it was not the workings and will of the Maker and His Bride?” Elisabeta wondered.

“Most believe you are indeed the Herald of Andraste, a view we are encouraging,” Leliana confirmed. “The fact that you’ve already saved Thedas from a Blight reconfirms that belief. Everyone is now talking about you.”

“That’s quite the title, isn’t it,” Cullen smiled at her. “How do you feel about that?”

“I don’t know,” she rubbed her forehead. “I’m not comfortable with the label of Hero of Ferelden, either. I hear that there are people who have been calling me that for years. Part of me would like to just go back to being Lady Cousland, but I can’t throw away the gift that was given me. I was returned to this world for a reason.”
“Good,” Leliana came around the table and threw an arm around Elisabeta’s shoulders. “The people are desperate for a symbol of hope and for many you are that symbol.”

“For others you represent everything that’s gone wrong,” Josephine declared.

“Oh, so I’m the problem?” She rested her head against Leliana’s shoulder for a moment, closing her eyes. “If I could just leave, I would. But I don’t think that’s what Andraste intended when she returned me. If it was, I wouldn’t have this Mark.”

“No, it isn’t an option,” Cassandra agreed.

“They would have censured us anyway,” Cullen assured her.

“There is something you can do,” Leliana gave her a little smile. She frowned when Elisabeta didn’t return it. “A Chantry Cleric, by the name of Mother Gisselle, has asked to speak to you. She’s not far and knows those involved far better than I. Her assistance could be invaluable.”

“Are you sure she isn’t part of some elaborate Chantry trap?” Elisabeta was suspicious.

“If she is, I have no doubt that you could take out her and all of her friends,” Leliana assured her. “You will find her tending to wounded in the Hinterlands near Redcliffe.”

“Look for other opportunities to expand the Inquisition’s influence while there,” Cullen urged.

“Don’t worry,” Elisabeta cocked an eyebrow at him. “I’ve raised an army before. I think I know what I’m doing.”

“In the meantime, let’s think of other options,” Cassandra urged the Inquisition’s leaders. “I won’t leave this all to the Herald.”

“I’ll make preparations to leave,” Elisabeta started making a mental list of what she would need. “I’ll take Cassandra and Varric with me.”

“We’re taking Solas as well,” Cassandra insisted.

“Why? Is he going point out the best napping places for us?” Elisabeta snarked. “It’s not like he’s going to make a decent healing potion or heal our wounds if we get into trouble.”

“In case you start throwing fireballs again,” Cassandra grumbled. “You must learn to control that magic. He says you’ve only come to one lesson.”

“He wanted to teach me in the Fade, while we were asleep,” Elisabeta still thought that sounded ridiculous. “Besides, I’ve been trying to retrain my body to fight.”

“You will train your body to control the magic it now possesses,” Cassandra insisted.

“Yes, mom,” Elisabeta muttered.

“I am not your mother,” Cassandra ignored Leliana’s giggle.

“That’s true,” Elisabeta agreed. “You have yet to remind me to be a proper lady or bugged me about providing you with more grandchildren. Nor are you an expert archer who has a secret past as a pirate who targeted Orlesian merchants.”

“What?” Cassandra looked back at her. “That’s so roman… I mean… I thought your
parents were nobles.”

“They were,” Elisabeta confirmed. “Ferelden nobles, not the squishy kind.”
Chapter Summary

Elisabeta tries to get a new sword. Leliana tells of what happened with her funeral and the events afterward.

Elisabeta could hear the pounding of hammers against anvils as she approached the covered area where the Inquisition’s head blacksmith worked. “I was hoping to meet you soon!” He beamed at her. “How is your armor?”

“You made my armor?” She hadn’t realized he’d been there for so long. “It fits well and is warm. Haven is even colder than I remembered.”

“Good, what else can I do to help aid you, my lady?” He hesitated and then spoke. “It isn’t just that you are Andraste’s chosen. I was in Redcliffe when the undead attacked. You came and fought them for us, probably saved half the town. You could have left and come back after everyone was dead.”

“No, I couldn’t have,” she shook her head. “I hope to never be the type who could.”

He grinned at her. “I suppose that’s one of the reasons Andraste picked you.”

“You said you made my armor, did you also make my sword and the daggers that were left?”

“I did,” he confirmed.

“Can you make me another long sword?” She hoped he could. “I prefer to have two long swords rather than a dagger when I go into a fight.”

“You can swing two long swords at once?” His eyes widened. “I would be happy to make you another. I can make anything with the proper materials and schematics. Bring those to me and I’ll make you what you need.”

“How about another long sword before I go into the Hinterlands?” She had heard the fighting was bad there.

“For you, I’ll dip into my personal supplies,” he assured her. “I imagine Threnn, the head Requisition Officer, would like to talk to you before you leave. Why don’t you go and see her while I work on your sword.”

“Thank you,” she nodded and headed into the center of the city. She found the Requisition Officers tent, but as she walked to it, Threnn turned and hurried away. Elisabeta just shrugged and headed over to Leliana’s tent.

Leliana was talking about a scout who had apparently killed one of her other people. “I’m going to have to kill him; did he think I wouldn’t find out?”

“You’re back to just killing people?” Elisabeta was surprised. “You felt so guilty after killing Marjolaine and she deserved it more than whoever the traitor is.”
“He killed one of my men,” Leliana pointed out.

“But why? Do they secretly work for whoever killed the Divine or are they just a Chantry shill? We should question them first and find out,” Elisabeta insisted.

“I…” Leliana hesitated. “I guess you’re right, we should at least find out why before I do.”

Elisabeta studied Leliana for a moment, she’d grown cold and even harder in the last decade. “I’ve heard you called the Left Hand of the Divine. How did that happen?”

“Sister Dorothea became the Divine and asked me to be her Left Hand,” Leliana explained. “So I did. I owed her so much. She’s the one who got me out of Orlais after… Marjolaine’s betrayal.”

“What did you do for her?” Elisabeta had a feeling she wouldn’t have liked Divine Justinia after what she had done to Leliana.

“What does your Left Hand do?” She shrugged. “She sent me out where she couldn’t go. I was her eyes and her ears.”

“And her assassin,” Elisabeta deduced. “Many hold their sword in their right hand and a dagger in their left. While they are watching the sword, you strike with the dagger.”

“Well… yes,” Leliana admitted. “Is Justinia the only reason you came to see me?”

“What? I can’t just want to talk?” Elisabeta shrugged. “We used to talk all of the time. I was wondering why your quartermaster was trying to avoid me.”

“Threnn is trying to avoid you?” Leliana glanced in the direction the head of requisition’s tent was. “I wonder why. She’s from Denerim and holds some… unpopular opinions, but I don’t know why she wouldn’t want to talk to you.”

“There is something else as well,” Elisabeta sat on the edge of Leliana’s work table. “I miss my old swords. What did happen to my things when I… died?”

“I’m not sure,” Leliana admitted. “Alistair saw to everything. He was so broken on that roof top. You collapsed and he ran to you, gathered you into his arms. He wouldn’t let anyone take your bod… take you from him. I don’t know how long we were up there. Everyone else in Denerim was celebrating and his world had just ended. I… well; I didn’t handle things much better. We’d been victorious, the Maker had smiled on us, and then… tragedy. He enacted a heavy payment for His mercy and aid. It was some time after the sun set that Alistair carried your body to the palace. He saw to your funeral. I’m not sure what he did with the items you were carrying or that were in your pack. I don’t even know where your clothes went. You weren’t wearing them when he lit your pyre.”

“What was it like?” Elisabeta found herself wanting to know.

“It…” Leliana shook her head. “It isn’t a pleasant memory.”

“It isn’t a pleasant thought for me that it even had to have happened,” Elisabeta pointed out.

“Alistair wanted to keep everything private,” Leliana recalled. He just wanted it to be your companions, those who’d fought at your side throughout the Blight. Eamon convinced him that he had to let the rest of the people also mourn you. They didn’t even know you!” She hadn’t realized that she was still angry. “They just wanted to continue their celebrations and make you into... into
some symbol. They wanted to celebrate their hero, as they were celebrating the destruction of the archdemon and its horde. You were dead and they were partying.”

Elisabeta found she didn’t like that thought, either. Yes, they had been saved, but at a terrible price. It wasn’t just her, there were thousands dead from Ostagar, the destruction, the civil war, all of it.

“Alistair listened to Eamon, though. He does that too often,” her disapproval dripped from Leliana’s voice.

“Eamon has always wanted to be the power behind the thrown, I guess I gave him that opening when I got rid of Loghain,” Elisabeta mused.

Leliana nodded. “Things might have been better if you were there to block the Guerrins, but… you weren’t. Wynne tried her best for a few months. She did convince Alistair to arrange for a private wake just before the masses descended on us. When he had you set on the pyre, you were wearing a lace and satin white dress. He’d placed a red rose on your chest and a gold circlet on your head, as if you had been coronated as his queen. Everyone spoke, even Oghren and Sten. Calenhad howled and barked some. I guess it was a eulogy.”

“Where is Calenhad now?” Elisabeta referred to her dog, the only part of her family that had been left. “Did Alistair keep him?”

“I don’t believe so,” Leliana admitted. “I have an idea of where he likely is. I’ll send out some letters.”

“Thank you,” Elisabeta nodded.

“We had less than half an hour before the masses realized your body was on display and interrupted,” Leliana continued her narration. “Alistair let them pass, but no one was allowed to touch your body. He gave a grand speech about how you’d saved everyone. Then… he took a torch and lit the pyre. Your ashes were scattered in the waking sea off of the cliffs of Highever.”

“So I was eventually taken home, that’s good,” Elisabeta supposed she did like that. She’d wanted to return there since Duncan had dragged her away the night Rendon Howe and his army had destroyed the things she cared about most. “Thank you for telling me. I wonder if Alistair still has my sword then. I should write him, but I hear he has a wife and…” She shook her head. “I need to finish getting ready to go to the Hinterlands. She left.

Leliana watched after her friend. She realized that Zevran and Oghren likely did not know that Elisabeta was… back. She had no idea what had happened to Oghren. He had joined the Grey Wardens after the Blight and the Wardens were all missing. She had no idea where Sten or Shale were, either. Wynne was dead and Morrigan… Well, she knew where Morrigan was, unfortunately. That didn’t mean she had to communicate with her, though.

It struck her that she had not seen Elisabeta smile once since her return. Her friend had yelled and cried, she’d thrown herself into work, but she no longer smiled. She supposed that she didn’t laugh as much as she used to, either. Still, it bothered her. She would have to see what she could do to get her to laugh.
The Thoughts and Prayers People

Chapter Summary

Elisabeta goes to the Hinterlands to Meet Mother Gisselle

“Control, you must learn control!” Solas’ voice held frustration and long suffering.

“I haven’t accidentally thrown a fireball since my first day back from the dead,” Elisabeta pointed out.

“You haven’t used your magic at all since then, have you?” Solas challenged.

“No,” she admitted. “I think that means I’ve got control of it. I don’t want to use it.”

“It is a part of you now,” Solas reminded her. “If you don’t learn to channel it, you will either unleash it at an inopportune time or be as useless as the Tranquil.”

“He’s right,” Cassandra decided. “You have to learn to channel the power…”

“The Herald of Andraste!” An adorable dwarf beamed at Elisabeta. “I have looked forward to meeting you! Welcome to the Hinterlands! Things are a bit tense here. I’m Scout Harding by the way.”

“Tense?” Cassandra repeated.

“Most of the Free Mages are holed up in Redcliffe,” Harding explained. “The ones out here are the extremist who have gone crazy with their new found freedom. They are facing off against Templars who are the living examples of why the mages rebelled. They’re batshit crazy! The two groups are bent on destroying each other and they don’t care who gets in their way. The farmers and refugees have been continuously attacked and persecuted. They are in a desperate state.”

“Tell me they haven’t released a bunch of demons and abominations,” Elisabeta had a flash of the mess that had become of Kinloch Hold.

“No, the demons are coming from the rifts, not the mages,” Harding assured her. “That is all we would need.”

“No kidding,” Elisabeta agreed. “I’ll go find Mother Gisselle and then see what I can do about the crazy fanatics.”

“Good,” Harding smiled. “I’m glad you came. If I could bother you for one thing more… Master Dennet is the best horse master this side of the Frostback Mountains. Everyone has always said so. We need his horses for the Inquisition, but we can’t get to him.”

“This side of the Frostbacks?” Elisabeta repeated. “You aren’t suggesting any Orlesian horses would be better than our Ferelden ones?”

“Never!” Harding’s smile widened. “Your accent is Ferelden; I hadn’t realized the Herald of Andraste was Ferelden.”
“I am,” Elisabeta assured her. “I’m from Highever.”

“I grew up right here in Redcliffe,” Harding beamed. “Be careful out there.”

“Harding, huh?” Varric looked her up and down. “You haven’t been to Kirkwall’s Hightown, have you?”

“No,” she blinked in confusion at him.

“It’s just that you would be Harding in High…” He began.

“Let’s go,” Cassandra cut him off and made a disgusted sound.

Things went smoothly enough at the beginning of the trip to the crossroads. Cassandra had stumbled on an abandoned cabin; Elisabeta looted it and read a few notes. When they were within a hundred feet of the Crossroads, they were attacked by half a dozen mages.

“Cassandra, see how many you can mana drain while I flank them,” Elisabeta ordered. “Varric, I’ll go left to flank. You go right. Solas… Solas, what can you do? You have no healing and I haven’t seen much offensive magic. Just hit them with arcane bolts and hope for the best. Let’s go.” She moved, expecting her orders to be obeyed.

“What…” Cassandra trailed off. She hadn’t expected to be taking fighting orders from Andraste’s Herald, a religious symbol, but realized that Elisabeta did have experience fighting. She’d led an army against an archdemon and hordes of darkspawn. “You heard the woman, let’s move.”

After the mages came a wave of Templars, then a mix of both. “They really don’t care who they attack, do they, Seeker?” Varric muttered to Cassandra as he sent a strafe of bolts from Bianca.

“We are not your enemy!” Cassandra protested as she struck at a Templar.

“They are attacking us, so yes we are,” Elisabeta moved, unbalancing her opponent and moving back in for a deadly strike.

It took half an hour, but eventually the rush of attackers died and the guards that the Inquisition has set around the refugee’s encampment were enough to discourage stragglers. The refuse of Ferelden were huddled together and were sharing huts. There were Inquisition soldiers helping some, but no sign of Ferelden’s Crown.

“Why haven’t the Guerrins set something up for their people or the local banns?” Elisabeta wondered. “Where is Alistair’s aid? He isn’t helping with this.” Now she began to wonder just what sort of queen he had picked to sit beside him. A good one would have been finding a way to help her people as they were displaced by a conflict not of their making.

“King Alistair has other commitments,” Cassandra assured her. “Hopefully Arl Teagan is safe in Redcliffe.”

“Arl Teagan?” Elisabeta repeated. “Did something happen to Eamon? Did Isolde decide to poison her husband herself this time, so she could marry his brother?”
“What?” Cassandra made a disgusted noise. “No, Eamon moved to Denerim to be the king’s official adviser and left the arldom to his brother, as his son can not inherit.”

“Connor’s a mage,” Elisabeta nodded. “I remember.” She walked to a reverend mother who was comforting a wounded soldier.

“Hush, the healers will take care of you,” the reverend mother was assuring him. “There are mages here who can easily hear your wound. Lie still.”

“Don’t let those… don’t let them touch me, mother,” the soldier insisted. “They’re magic is…”

“Turned to noble purpose,” the elderly reverend mother interrupted. “Their magic is surely no more evil than your blade.”

“There are soldiers who harbor such prejudices against mages in the Inquisition?” Elisabeta glared at the soldier in question. “I was assured that the Inquisition was not part of the Chantry. I’m pretty sure the Inquisition’s were declared heretics for harboring me.”

“The Chantry did declare the Inquisition a heresy,” the reverend mother confirmed. “That is why I asked to speak with you.”

“Mother Gisselle?” Elisabeta questioned.

“I am,” she stood. “And you must be the Herald of Andraste.”

“Among other things,” Elisabeta confirmed.

Gisselle chuckled. “We seldom have choice in our fate, I’m sad to say.”

“You have no idea,” Elisabeta wasn’t sure if she was about to laugh or cry. “I am the Maker’s greatest example of that. Someday, I may tell you my full story.”

“I have a feeling it may be worth listening to,” Gisselle mused. “But I did not ask you here to listen to stories of adventure.”

“Too bad,” Elisabeta cocked an eyebrow. “I’ve had many. So why am I here?”

“I know of the Chantry’s denouncement and I know of those behind it,” Mother Gisselle revealed. I won’t lie to you. Some of them are grandstanding or hoping to increase their chances of becoming the new Divine. Some are simply terrified; so many good people were senselessly taken from us.”

“You are Orlesian and wearing Chantry robes,” Elisabeta pointed out. “Aren’t you part of the Chantry?”

“With no Divine, we are each left to our own conscience,” the reverend mother explained. “And mine tells me this… go to them; convince the remaining clerics that you are no demon to be feared. They have heard only frightful tales of you. Give them something else to believe.”

“You want me to appeal to them?” Elisabeta couldn’t believe the proposal.

“If I thought you were incapable, I wouldn’t suggest it,” Gisselle’s words stung.

“I’m not even sure why I need them,” she explained. “They no longer command the Templars or the mages. What good will they do me in closing the Breach? Are they going to send
me their thoughts and prayers? That’s all they did during the Fifth Blight. I don’t think it helped…
considering where I ended up.”

“You were involved in the Fifth Blight?” Gisselle’s surprise was plastered across her face.
“The Blight ended within a year, so obviously those fighting it had some type of divine help. I’m
sure the Chantry was part of that.”

Elisabeta just stared at the woman for a moment. She apparently didn’t know who Elisabeta
was, beyond being the Herald of Andraste. She wracked her brain for any time that the Chantry had
aided against the darkspawn. She could think of a couple of prayers, but that was it. “Yes, I was
involved in the fight against the archdemon in the last Blight. There was a former Houseguest of the
Chantry in the group who fought the Blight, but that was about it for any aid they gave. Well, I’m
sure their thoughts and prayers were with us, but that really isn’t enough when fighting an
archdemon.”

“Still, you need the Chantry now,” Gisselle insisted. “At the least, you can not afford to have
them as enemies. Go to them; cast some doubt in their numbers. That way you will at least receive
the time you need.”

She didn’t want to take on the Chantry now that was for sure. “I see your point. I’ll go.”

“I honestly don’t know if you’ve been touched by the Maker or sent by Fate in our time of
need, but I hope,” Gisselle declared. “Hope is what we need now. I will go to Haven and provide
Sister Leliana with the names of those who will be amenable to a gathering. The future sits with
you. You can build this Inquisition up into something that will save us or destroy us. Maker go with
you,” she walked away.

“No pressure,” Elisabeta muttered. She went to find Corporal Vale, who was in charge of
the local Inquisition forces. As she wandered through the town, the refugees and soldiers came to
her, asking her for small favors and help. It felt like old times.
Nightmares and Sorrows

Chapter Summary

Elisabeta and her party move around the Hinterlands

Darkness pressed from all around; there was no escape from the black nothingness. Elisabeta sat up screaming. Everything was dark. She put her hand down, feeling her bedroll. It wasn’t the Nothing, there was matter around her. Forcing herself to breath, she assessed her surroundings. She was in a tent. She and her companions were at one of the Inquisition camps in the Hinterlands, she could hear the waterfall nearby. She concentrated on the sound of the waterfall, listening to the water as she tried to synch her breaths. There was a skull on a pole nearby that she refused to touch and she had a friend and two acquaintances nearby. She was all right.

She wasn’t going to stay in the tent, though. She needed to get out of the lonely darkness, though. She breathed easier when she found herself under the stars. Those beautiful, bright stars. Gazing up, she found them calming, knowing the Maker was somehow watching over her. After everything that happened to her so far, she had no doubt that there was a higher power out there.

She wasn’t sure how long she’d been stargazing before Varric came and sat down beside her. He patted her hand and silently gazed with her for half an hour. Then he spoke. “Do you want to talk about it, Tempest?”

“I…” She was silent for several minutes.

“It’s all right, you don’t have to…” Varric didn’t want to press her.

“You know that I was trapped in the Abyss, don’t you?” She waited for his nod. “I… sometimes… too often… dream about it. It’s hard to be in the dark alone sometimes. So I came out to be under the light of the stars.”

“As long as you aren’t stressing about having to find that refugees son to get the potion for him or finding blankets for those who are cold in the Crossroads,” Varric mumbled. “Do you know Hawke had some rather ridiculous jobs in his day? He framed a Templar and hunted down a dwarf to return his favorite pair of pants to him.”

“I have wrangled nugs. Oh, and took care of hiding bodies for a crime syndicate in Denerim,” she recalled. “I dumped them into a well, not just any well, though. It was the chantry’s well, right in front of the sisters and Templars. None of them even noticed.”

“No!” Varric chuckled.

“You remembered trying to be stealthy with the first body, by the third she’d realized there was no danger of being caught. “I just threw them in. Sploosh! No one even batted an eye. The Chantry well in Denerim has at least three dead bodies in it and I don’t know if anyone ever noticed.”

“You should go just to find out if anyone has realized what is in there,” Varric suggested. “Perhaps get them to build a new well somewhere else.”
“I… I have thought of visiting there, to talk to Al… the king, but I don’t know if that would be a good idea,” she admitted. She looked to the north. “I want to go home, but my family were all killed and I don’t know who holds Highever now. It…” She sniffed when Varric patted her leg. “It should have been mine. No… it should have been Fergus’.”

“Who’s Fergus,” Varric’s voice was gentle.

“He is… was… my brother,” she started to stand up. “I’m sorry; I don’t want to bring on more rain, as the tempest you nicknamed me for.”

“Tell me,” he urged. “I promise that it won’t end up in one of my stories if you don’t want it to.”

She sat back down. “It was the beginning of the Fifth Blight. My father was going to travel to Ostagar with his… friend… Arl Rendon Howe, but the arl claimed his men had been delayed. My father sent Fergus ahead with our soldiers. First Fergus had to say goodbye to his wife and son…” Despite the years that had gone by, tears still flowed down her cheeks as she thought of her lost family. Varric listened quietly as she told him the story of their loss.

“So what were you two talking about so late at night?” Cassandra looked at her companions as they scoured the remains of Fort Connor after having killed the Rogue Templars who guarded it.

“It’s none of your business, Seeker,” Varric insisted. “What Tempest and I discuss under the stars is between her and I.”

Elisabeta closed her eyes in gratitude. She didn’t need, or want, to explain her most painful memories with Cassandra. She respected the woman, but they weren’t friends. They were both friends with Leliana, but that was the closest they had become. She turned and looked down at a note that had been left behind. “It seems that someone has summoned the Templars, this doesn’t say where. It does say where those that stayed are camping, though. I say we pay them a visit.”

“Bianca’s itching to clear the Templars out,” Varric agreed.

“It’s too dangerous,” Cassandra dissented. “We should wait for reinforcements.”

“From where?” Elisabeta challenged. “Should we wait for Cullen and his men? Those at the Crossroads can barely protect the refugees. Who knows why Ferelden’s army isn’t here to help. How many more will die while we sit and wait?”

“If you get yourself killed, we’ll lose our only means to closing the rifts,” Cassandra objected.

“Then watch my back,” Elisabeta marched out, heading for the West Road where the note said the Templars were hiding. “A healer would be useful.” She glanced at Varric. “Did your friend Hawke have the help of a healer?”

Varric nodded. “His name was Anders. I suppose you’d have heard of him.”

“The mage who kept escaping Kinloch Hold? Wynne mentioned him a time or two,” Elisabeta recalled. “She thought he was funny.”

“He used to be,” Varric sighed. “Before his issues and… demons… got to him.”
“Why don’t we have a healer on our team?” Elisabeta wondered for the hundredth time. She turned to Varric as they continued to the West Road. “What issues and demons. What happened to him?”

“You haven’t heard?” Varric was shocked.

“No,” she admitted. “I’m trying to play catchup with the last ten years.

“He… sort of had a hand in starting this mess,” Varric began his story.

“So then he destroyed Kirkwall’s Chantry,” Varric sent a bolt through a Templar who tried to defend the rogue base.

“Was the Chantry’s Templars really making mages who had passed their harrowing into Tranquils, Cassandra?” Elisabeta made a pinpoint strike that felled yet another Templar.

“It would seem so,” Cassandra admitted as she used her shield to block a Templar’s blade.

“And no one stopped them?” Elisabeta moved to another Templar, frowning as one of Solas’ arcane bolts shot past her. He had wonderful barriers, but that didn’t help injured party members. “No one even removed their commander?”

“No,” Cassandra lunged at one of the few remaining camp defenders. “The Divine did send Leliana to investigate the town. She was beginning to consider an Exalted March on Kirkwall.”

“What?” Elisabeta’s swords slashed out.

“This really isn’t the best time to talk about this?” Cassandra insisted.

“Why not?” Elisabeta moved to the last Templar.

“We’re in the middle of a battle, herald,” Solas reminded her.

“So?” Elisabeta beheaded the last Templar. “Why does that make a difference?” She began looting the camp.

“Well…” Cassandra shook her head. Elisabeta did seem capable of holding full conversations and fighting at the same time. “Some of us need to concentrate.”

“Fine,” she pocketed a small bag of gold and examined a pack with unused leather. “So the Divine was going to send an Exalted March on a group of people who were already suffering, instead of admitting there was something wrong with her army? What about the local grand cleric. Why didn’t she do anything?”

“Falcon, that’s Hawke, suspected that Meredith and Elthina were secretly lovers,” Varric confided. “I don’t know if it’s true, but it would explain a lot. Elthina refused to lift a hand against Meredith and gave her free reign, despite the fact that she was stopping anyone from becoming viscount and was openly persecuting the mages.” He examined a leather hat he found in one of the chests. “King Alistair of Ferelden even visited once and Meredith tried to go after him. He was hoping he could back Falcon as the next viscount. Plus, he was offering an open door to all Fereldens to return home. Hawke is Ferelden, like you, Tempest.”
“Alistair went?” Elisabeta’s lips twitched as if she was going to crack a smile, but then she frowned again.

“He was there with his sort-of uncle, Teagan,” Varric confirmed. “He’d left the queen in charge in his absence and Teagan didn’t seem to like that.”

“Really?” It made Elisabeta wonder at her identity again.

“The Rogue Templar camp is taken care of,” Solas observed. “Now we just need to take care of the Rebel Mages.”

It took half a day to cross the broken bridge near the Rogue Templar camp and then fight off the rabid wolves that prowled the farmlands near Master Dennet’s ranch. When they did arrive, it seemed that Dennet had decided that the Inquisition would do a few favors for him before he would send horses to them. He did provide Elisabeta and her friends with horses, though.

They then moved out and found a hidden chest that a hapless adventurer had left a note about. They also found the den of the wolves that had been plaguing the local farmers. A terror demon had made itself pack leader. Was the demon was gone, Solas was confident that the wolves would return to normal. He was a little too confident for Elisabeta’s state of mind. Cassandra and Varric were just happy they didn’t have to deal with unusually aggressive wolves anymore. The next day, they decided they preferred the possessed wolves to the local bears.

The day after, they had returned to the camp that set next to the river that ran through the Hinterland’s largest farms. The requisition’s officer ran up to her. “Herald, might I have a moment?”

“A moment?” Elisabeta snarled at her. “You fall under Threnn, don’t you? She hasn’t given me a moment of her time. Every time I come near, she goes running. So what do you want? If it is as ridiculous as finding a bunch of love letters or finding your lost acorn, I will tie you up and leave you in the wolves’ den.”

“Never mind,” the requisition officer gulped.

“Wow, Tempest,” Varric shook his head. “I never thought to threaten those ladies. What did she want?”

“I don’t know,” she shrugged. “The last one wanted Ferelden locks. Don’t ask me why she couldn’t just go get some on her own.”

“Did you make the requisition officer cry?” Cassandra came storming up to her.

“Did I?” Elisabeta pursed her lips. “It is possible. I did threaten her. If you have time to go find Ferelden locks feel free. I can’t even get the quartermaster to talk to me, but her requisition officers want to send me on silly little quests.”

“Threnn won’t talk to you?” Cassandra found that strange. “The Ferelden Crown sent her to us.”

“Really?” That was odd, Elisabeta wondered why. “I really need to talk to her.”
“I’ll arrange it,” Cassandra promised. “Meanwhile, please apologize to the requisition officer.”

Elisabeta crossed her arms. “Find out what she wanted first.”

Cassandra left and returned ten minutes later. “Never mind, I let her know that Andraste’s Herald is too busy to find bear fur and onyx.”

“If I find those, I’m taking them back to Harritt to make me a new outfit,” Elisabeta declared. “Some of his schematics looked neat.”

That night, Varric found himself restless. Cassandra had been in her tent with a book and he was determined to find out what she was reading and why she was trying to hide it. Solas had gone to his tent and fallen asleep right after dinner. He and Elisabeta had played a couple of rounds of Wicked Grace, but he didn’t remember seeing her go to bed. He’d woken, swearing Bartrand was calling to him. His brother had been crying about red lyrium and being doomed by the Ancestors.

He slowly meandered towards the river. That’s when he heard singing. The voice was smooth and sweet, but the song was sad.

Sunshine was yours and mine
As I lived safely in your arms
I knew you would keep me safe from harm
I’d thought I would be there for all time.

Then the storms moved in and we tried to hold on
But the lightning flashed all around
And the rain pelted down
And then you were gone

Now I stand here all alone
As you cradle someone new
I tried to hold on to you
But you let me go

“You aren’t alone, Tempest,” Varric decided to interrupt before her song broke his heart. He was already having flashes to hearing about Bianca’s wedding to what’s-his-face. “I’m here and so
are the Seeker and Chuckles. Even Rowan is here.”

Elisabeta laid her head against Rowan’s neck. “Thanks. It isn’t the same, though.”

“Were you having more nightmares?” Varric prompted. When she just nodded, he tried to get her to talk again. “Who is he, the one who has you heartbroken?”

“He…” She patted Rowan’s neck and shook her head. “He married someone else. I was dead, so our engagement was over and he fell in love with someone else. What else is there to know?”

“You were engaged when you died?” Varric had not known that. “Do you know how long he waited until he chose a new bride?”

“I don’t,” she admitted. “Part of me wants to know, but another part doesn’t even want to know who she is. I want to see him, but I don’t; not if we can’t be together.”

“Do you know where he is now?” Varric prompted.

“That I do,” she admitted. He let out a deep sigh. “He has to know I’m back, but hasn’t even tried to contact me.”

“Let’s take care of the mages and the cult in the hills, then we can go back to Haven and have Nightingale look into things,” he suggested.

“We need to get Cullen to build those towers for us. That is more important than Al…” She stopped herself. “Than the life I left behind. I do want to talk to her about finding out if Wynne is still alive. She was already old and… living on borrowed time.”

“Oh, I sense another story,” he grinned. “Why don’t you tell me?”

“Perhaps later,” she sighed. “I was hoping to ask Leliana to find out what happened to Wynne for me. I miss having a healer.”

“She likely knows already,” Varric assured her.

“I don’t suppose you know where Anders is?” She pursed her lips. “Perhaps he would join.”

“Did you miss the part about him blowing up the Chantry?” Varric raised an eyebrow.

“He had his reasons,” she shrugged. “He is a Ferelden Freedom Fighter who had had enough of oppression and you told me he is a Grey Warden.”

“Well… yes,” Varric agreed.

“So, what is a chantry or two in comparison to having a competent healer on your team? One who can sense darkspawn, because I don’t think I can anymore. My nightmares aren’t those of Grey Wardens.”

“Grey Wardens have nightmares?” Anders had never mentioned that to him.

“Especially during a Blight,” she confirmed. “They are mostly about darkspawn and archdemons. Wardens can almost hear the archdemon talking to his spawn.”

“Having a spirit turned demon in his head didn’t help, then,” Varric muttered. He wondered
if Justice might have been able to influence those nightmares to take a more firm control over Anders before the chantry explosion.

“He has a spirit possession?” Elisabetta’s eyes widened. “So did Wynne. If we can find them, Wynne might be able to help Anders. Although her spirit seems to be a lot less… aggressive.”

“I didn’t realize there was anyone else in Thedas who had merged with a spirit,” Varric admitted.

“I doubt they talk about it much,” Elisabetta reasoned. “After all, the Chantry would not take their ‘conditions’ lightly. They would kill them immediately if they knew.”

“You’re right,” Varric nodded. “Let’s not tell Cassandra about either of our friends.”

“Agreed,” Elisabetta nodded.

“Good, let’s go back to camp,” he suggested. “We could get in another hand of Wicked Grace. Then maybe we could prank the requisition officer… or better yet, Solas… if we still can’t sleep.” He led her back. “Why were you at the river anyway?”

“Rowan was thirsty,” she shrugged. “And I felt like singing.”

“Don’t leave camp to sing,” he urged. “I like your voice. Although, if you are going to sing such sad songs, I’m going to have someone to teach you to play the bagpipes. They’re miserable enough.”

“Varric, I’m from Highever,” she reminded him. “I already know how to play the bagpipes.”
Elisabeta returns to Haven. She gets some bad news. Leliana demonstrates what she thinks a good time is.

As soon as Elisabeta and her party returned from the Hinterlands, Leliana grabbed her and dragged her into the forest.

“Where are we going?” Elisabeta wanted to know. “I need to take care of my horse.”

“Did you not see the half dozen workers who rushed to take care of that mare for you?” Leliana continued to drag her along. “I want to show you something. Look.” She pointed to where a nug nursed her young. “Aren’t they adorable?”

“They’re very sweet,” Elisabeta sat down and drew her knees to her chest, watching the mother with her young children. It was indeed sweet, but it reminded her of her own dream to one day have a family of her own. Then Alistair had told her how difficult it was for two Grey Wardens to have a child together, still they were going to try. Then the disaster had happened. She supposed that someday she could try with someone else. Heck, she was pretty sure she was no longer a Warden. There was nothing stopping her.

“I thought you would like them,” Leliana looked at her intensely, as if expecting something. She must have been disappointed, because she sighed and went back to watching the young family.

The day after the return from the Hinterlands, Cassandra cornered Threnn and sent a messenger to fetch Elisabeta.

“Oh, there you are,” Elisabeta blinked innocently at Threnn. “You would be the Inquisition’s quartermaster?”

“Yes,” Threnn looked nervously at Cassandra who made a disgusted noise and walked away. “You would be the Herald of Andraste. You don’t appear to be a Tranquil Mage.”

“I’m not,” Elisabeta confirmed.

“Oh, I must have heard wrong,” Threnn seemed perplexed. “Well, I’m trying to supply this mess. If you find what I need, I’d appreciate you bring it in.”

“What do you even do here?” Elisabeta wondered why the requisition officers kept asking her for such silly items.

“I make sure the Inquisition troops have what they need,” Threnn explained. “Food in their belly and iron in their hands. Lots of people expect us to be heroes; well it turns out that heroes need to dig latrines just like everyone else.”
“And how did you end up here?” Elisabeta didn’t want to mention that she’d already heard that Threnn had been sent by the Ferelden Crown.

“I served Ferelden under Teyrn Loghain MacTir, best commanding officer this world has ever seen,” Threnn didn’t know how much danger that one statement put her in. “After they all turned on him at Denerim, though, there wasn’t much use for those who held that opinion. Queen Anora offered my aid to the Inquisition. It was a kindness. She knew I supported her father and got me away from the political garbage.”

“You served that vile traitor?” Elisabeta growled. Then the rest of the statement penetrated her brain. “Queen Anora?”

“Loghain wasn’t a traitor,” Threnn insisted. “Were you at Ostagar? Well I was…”

“Yes,” Elisabeta cut her off. “I was at Ostagar. I lit the beacon and it wasn’t too late, despite Loghain’s attempts and the darkspawn who had infested the Tower of Ishal.” She grabbed Threnn’s tunic. “Now tell me what you mean by Queen Anora?”

Threnn trembled, fearing the insanity that obviously gripped the Herald of Andraste. “She was the widow of King Cailan. King Alistair rightly married her after the Blight to keep his throne secure. After all, she was Loghain’s daughter and they had run the country.”

“There was a civil war while she was running things and the Blight was allowed to spread unchecked!” Elisabeta shouted into Threnn’s face. “Loghain’s line had no claim to the throne. His parents were farmers. Farmers! Why would he marry her? How could he have married her?”

“Anora and Loghain are the greatest people…” Threnn began, forgetting that she should fear the Herald’s grip. She remembered though when Elisabeta’s fist connected with her face. Threnn’s head snapped back and she slithered to the ground when Elisabeta released her tunic. She lay curled up for a moment. “What the…”

“What is going on here, Herald?” Solas was rushing towards them.

Elisabeta had to get out of there. He’d married her. The one person he’d promised not to. She needed to be alone. She needed… She wasn’t sure what she needed. She rushed out of the gates and passed the practicing soldiers. She thought she heard Cullen call out after her, but couldn’t be sure.

She didn’t even notice where she was running to; she just had to get away. She looked up to realize that she was running towards the Temple of Sacred Ashes. The Breach still reared above it. She wondered for a second if she had been trying to run back into the Fade, but then the thought of whether the gauntlet was still hidden behind it and if the guardian was still there reached her mind. It was the last place she’d seen her father, she was still unsure if it had been a trick or not; but she wanted to see him. She needed the safety and security he once provided. The thought caused her to pause; it was the she realized that she couldn’t breathe. The pressure of the news she’d received was too much. Her heart didn’t want to beat and her lungs were struggling to breathe in air. Her knees buckled.

It was a shock when she didn’t hit the ground. Instead, she was engulfed in softness and warmth. “I have you,” it was Cullen’s voice. “What’s wrong, Lissa?”

“He…” Her voice caught on a sob and the floodgates opened. “He promised and he lied!” She cried into his mantle, clutching he soft red cloak. “He broke his promise to me.”
He gently rocked her for several moments. “Who? Who hurt you? Who broke his promise to you?”

“Alistair,” it was Leliana’s voice. “Alistair married Anora. Threnn admitted what she had said right before Lissa planted her fist in her face.”

“You punched the quarter master?” Cullen ran a soothing hand down Elisabeta’s curls.

“She…” Elisabeta’s voice broke on another sob.

“Threnn is a fan of Loghain MacTir,” Leliana sat down beside the pair and began rubbing Elisabeta’s back. “I was wondering what the Ferelden Crown was thinking when they sent her.”

“Anora sent her,” Elisabeta mumbled into Cullen’s fur mantle. “It was a slap at me and Alistair didn’t stop her.”

“I don’t think he realizes that you are the Herald of Andraste,” Leliana assured her. “I didn’t include your name in the messages.”

Elisabeta’s tears continued to flow and it took several more moments before she could gather the breath to speak again. “He promised and he married her anyway.” She couldn’t get past the feelings of betrayal and despair.

“He promised what?” Leliana had a sneaking suspicion of what the promise was.

“That no matter what, he wouldn’t marry her!” Elisabeta wailed out the word her. She had wanted Alistair to be happy, she didn’t want him to hand the throne back to his brother’s verminous weasel of a widow.

“Eamon thought… well, he has always had a lot of influence over Alistair,” Leliana reminded her. “He did raise him.”

“He gave him to the Chantry when he was ten at Isolde’s insistence,” Elisabeta murmured

“You and Alistair…?” Cullen continued to cuddle her against him.

“They were engaged,” Leliana answered for her.

“Oh, Lissa,” Cullen’s arms tightened around her.

“Tempest…” Varric stood nearby with Cassandra, silently watching the trio. He slowly approached them. “I…” He looked at Cullen and Leliana, assessing whether to reveal information he’d kept secret even from Hawke. “I… know what it is like to the person you love marry someone else. I have not had to learn they married someone I hated, though.”

She looked up at him through watery eyes, drops still falling from her long lashes. “Perhaps you can tell me about it someday.”

“I take it that you were not a fan of Teyrn Loghain,” Cassandra’s voice was deadpan.

Elisabeta gave an unladylike snort and laid her head against Cullen’s chest.
When Elisabeta returned to the village of Haven, she was escorted by Leliana and Cullen on either side of her, Cassandra in front of her, and Varric behind.

“Herald,” Josephine met them at the gate, near Seggrit’s shop. “May I speak with you?”

“I don’t know anyone named Herold,” Elisabeta shrugged.

“Another time,” Cassandra’s voice was testy.

“I must insist…” Josephine began again.

“Not now,” Cassandra moved a step so she was more firmly in front of Elisabeta.

“This is no time to argue about who killed who, Josie,” Leliana moved up and put an arm around the ambassador.

“Threnn isn’t dead, thank the Maker,” Josephine closed her eyes. She does have a nasty bruise along her jaw, however. We can not have the Herald of Andraste going around punching people. What if we had King Alistair or Empress Celene here?”

“They would have been likely targets as well,” Leliana agreed. “If we had the heads of Orlais and Ferelden both here, Elisabeta punching quartermasters would have been the least of our troubles, though. You should come up with a contingency plan if they do both show up. Perhaps we should bring in a trained assassin to assess any possible dangers of something worse. That way we can prevent them now.” She led Josephine away.

“Why don’t you go lie down and get some rest,” Cullen suggested to Elisabeta as he watched his coworkers walk away.

“I don’t know if she should be alone right now, Curly,” Varric hesitated. “Why don’t you… no, that’s not a good idea, either. It would look bad. Perhaps if I…”

“I will go in and make sure you relax,” Cassandra put a surprisingly gentle arm around Elisabeta and steered her towards her cabin.

“Liss,” Leliana ran into Elisabeta’s cabin later that night and grabbed her. “You’re coming with me.”

“Leliana… what is wrong?” Cassandra stood, quickly hiding the latest copy of Hard in Hightown behind her back. She’d brought it to distract Elisabeta, who was now reading the first book in the series.

“Nothing,” She called over her shoulder. “I was just smoothing Josie’s feathers. She is planning to have a talk with Threnn about her pro-MacTir views. You aren’t the only one who has no love of Loghain’s memories, or even for Anora,” she informed Elisabeta as she dragged her along. “You may have the strongest feelings in that field, though.” She stopped and faced her closest friend, the sister of her heart. “If you want, I can have Anora killed for you. I know someone that would do it for free, even.”

Elisabeta was tempted to say yes, to allow her friend to do so. She realized that Leliana would indeed follow through on her offer. However, it would hurt the Inquisition’s reputation
irreparably if they killed the Queen of Ferelden, no matter how much the woman deserved it. “No, not until we can justify it to the rest of Thedas.”

“I heard ‘until’,” Leliana continued to drag her along.

“Where are we going?” Elisabeta saw the tavern looming closer. “I can’t drink. Cassandra has forbidden me to do so until I learn to control my new found magic.”

“And do you always do what Cassandra tells you to?” Leliana giggled.

“Not usually,” Elisabeta admitted. “She may have a point now.”

“Let’s relax,” Leliana walked in and ordered two whiskies and grabbed a table. “Stress is going to cause you to shoot off random fireballs before alcohol will.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Elisabeta sat down across from her. “Maker knows I need some down time. Do you know that I was about to write Alistair before Threnn opened her mouth? I was trying to figure out exactly how to phrase things.” She didn’t add that she wanted to go back to Highever. That would have to wait until after the Breach closed.

The two friends talked amicably for an hour, while also enjoying a couple of glasses of wine on top of the whisky and panunto con provatura fresca, a sweet and sour fried bread with mozzarella cheese that had been introduced to the Inquisition by a Raivani pirate who had joined up and been sent back onto the sea by Leliana as one of her spies. Then Leliana reached into her pack and pulled out a large ball of twine, several papers, and a packet of herbs. “OK, whose small clothes are going on the chantry board?” She’d been hoping for at least a giggle from Elisabeta, instead she got tears. Her heart despaired until her friend jumped down from her stool, skirted around the table, and embraced her.

“I thank the Maker every day that He had me brought to you,” Elisabeta confessed. “Does it have to be just one pair?”

“Oh, no,” Leliana grabbed the twine as Elisabeta scooped up the papers and herbs. The two women looked around conspiratorially as they snuck out.

Their first stop was the tent where Threnn worked.

“We’re mixing in some new requisition orders,” Leliana explained.

Elisabeta read some of the orders, and the names of real requisition officers and Inquisition leaders attached, as she slipped them in randomly with the real orders. “You do realize that one of them is going to try and get me to find this unicorn for them.”

“Just tell them to do it themselves,” Leliana suggested. “I hear that’s what you do when you aren’t threatening their lives.”

“I’ve done some ridiculous quests in my life, but some of the things they want me to procure for them are ludis…” She stopped and read another paper. “This one might work, ‘A sample of every type of cheese in Thedas to bribe the King of Ferelden with’.” Her lips cracked and a soft smile appeared as she recalled just how much that king loved cheese. Then the smile slipped as she recalled a rather sensuous experience when he’d nibbled cheese off of her in the privacy of their tent. Maker, she had to forget him.

Leliana cursed whatever memory had stopped that smile. She was using the twine to tie everything not nailed down in the tent up. She then placed a bomb under Threnn’s stool. When
Threnn sat down, glitter would explode everywhere.

“What will Cullen do if they actually find him a giant ball of glitter to launch from one of his trebuchets?” Elisabeta was reading another fake requisition request.

“Launch it at our enemies?” Leliana shrugged.

“Will that be before or after we send Celene a gilded plum floating in perfume inside a glass jar with a decorative lid in the shape of a lotus? Does Josephine really want a pair of frilly smalls?” Elisabeta read yet another request.

“Josie likes frills on everything. After she gets them, we can then steal them and pin them to the chanter’s board,” Leliana suggested then she smiled at the next sound she heard.

Elisabeta let out a little giggle. “Does Cassandra really need a copy of *Naughty Tales from Navarra* and a trio of large, oiled men to read them to her?”

“She may not realize she does, but she does,” Leliana insisted.

“Do you think they really can get deserts from every corner of Thedas as the best mulled wine created for Flissa?” Elisabeta wondered as she helped Leliana replace Threnn’s tea leaves. “Oh, and thank you for requisitioning a healer for me. Let’s see if she can get one.”

They moved into Aden’s workshop and used the twine to tie all of his bottles together.

“He did implement that rejuvenation potion recipe I found for him,” Elisabeta noted as she held bottles together for Leliana. “But he is making me mix my own.”

“You’re an expert poison maker, Lissa,” Leliana pointed out. “You know how to mix ingredients.”

“Shush, I haven’t told anyone about that,” Elisabeta admitted. “I just tell them they’re for my health. Varric is the only one who’s realized I coat my swords with them. They are for my health, weakening my enemies is good for it.”

“Yes, yes it is,” Leliana agreed as they moved on to the forge.

“No, not the forge,” Elisabeta shook her head. “Harritt’s working on a new sword for me, along with a battle coat. He’s using the supplies I brought back.”

They’re next stop was the soldier’s camp. There, they tied the men’s boots together. They also procured Cassandra’s smalls.

The last stop was Josephine’s office and rooms. Both respected Minaeve’s efforts with the Tranquils too much to mess with her things. They did add some interesting missives to Josephine’s pile of work, though.

“What if she does decide to help Gaspard get Celene and Brialia back together?” Elisabeta wondered.

“Then it may bring peace to Orlais,” Leliana revealed. “The two women really were lovers. They had been together for a long time, but parted ways about a year ago. I have reports that Celene actually cried about it, more than once. I also have reports that it was all Celene’s fault.”

“Is Prince Donatello really in love with his Cousin Merissa?” Elisabeta added more
messages to Josephine’s pile.


The next morning, both Cassandra and Josephine stared at the board outside of the chantry with red faces.

“How… by the Maker…” Cassandra looked around to see if anyone realized just whose smalls those were right above a notice that all of those who had come to serve in the army must report to Commander Cullen.

“Leliana,” Josephine whispered. Apparently, her friend had had a very good time the night before. She had other things to worry about. She’d just received a message from the Duchess of Jader that she was coming and would need accommodations for her half dozen cats that had to each have their own room and personal petter.
Elisabeta goes to Orlais to address the clerics.

Elisabeta was in better spirits as she made her way to the war room in the chantry to finish her preparations to go parlay with the Chantry Clerics, like she gave a giant rat’s ass about the Chantry and its clerics. She’d beaten a Blight without any help from the Chantry. Everyone else thought the Inquisition needed to get some of the clerics on their side, though.

She heard fighting as she approached the building.

“Your kind killed the Most Holy!” A man in a Templar’s uniform was shouting at a man in mage robes.

“Quit spouting lies! Your kind let her die!” The mage retorted.

“Tell that to my sword, mage!” The Templar began to draw his sword as the mage’s hand went to his staff.

“Enough!” Cullen stepped between the men and forcibly made them step back. “This infighting will help no one!”

“Good luck keeping peace around here,” Roderick sniggered. “I wonder how your Inquisition and Herald will restore order as you have promised.”

“Of course you are,” Cullen muttered. “Back to your duties, all of you,” he ordered the gathering crowd.

“Who let you back in Haven?” Elisabeta wrinkled her nose as if he smelled of Orlesian horse droppings. “Cullen, why is this… Orlesian… still here?”

“He’s harmless,” Cullen assured her. “He barks like a mabari, but he’s really just an Orlesian lap dog.”

“He knows he can’t touch me,” Roderick countered.

“He does yip like those tiny little dogs from Antiva, the ones that like to bite ankles,” Elisabeta decided. “I also suspect that he has something to do with the fighting.” She glanced at Roderick in disdain. “That was the Chantry’s influence, wasn’t it? They like to watch men in skirts abuse men in dresses. It’s how they amuse themselves.”

“I used to be one of those men in… it’s the uniform, OK?” Cullen tried to defend it.

“Yes, they are so fashionable,” Elisabeta commented. “I knew an ex-Templar who would sleep with his under his pillow. It brought back such fond memories. I’ll hopefully be back soon.” She smiled as Cullen stepped to her side and walked with her to the war room.

“I must admit that I threw my uniform into the Waking Sea,” he confessed. “I wanted
“How am I supposed to get to get twenty live partridges and two door mice for the Bann of Rainsfere?” Josephine was wailing as they walked in.

“You could just tell him no, Josie,” Leliana suggested. There was nothing in her voice that would have hinted that the Bann of Rainsfere had not sent that message.

Cassandra joined the group ten minutes after Elisabeta and Cullen and they got down to business.

“Having the Herald address the clerics is not a bad idea,” Josephine declared to start the meeting off.

“You can’t be serious,” Cullen’s hand went to the hilt of his sword.

“Mother Gisselle isn’t wrong,” Josephine insisted. “At the moment, the Chantry’s only strength is in their united opinion.

“And we should ignore the danger to Lissa?” Leliana challenged.

“Let’s ask her,” Josephine suggested.

“It’s a terrible idea!” Elisabeta declared. “The only worse person to send would be Morrigan! I have no idea where she is now or I would suggest you send her instead.”

“Well…” Leliana opened her mouth to speak. “Never mind.”

“Just because they hiss, it doesn’t mean they’re vipers,” Josephine assured him. “They won’t bite, as long as you don’t punch them. Please, don’t punch the clerics.”

“I will go with her,” Cassandra stepped forward. “Mother Gisselle said she could provide us names? Use them.”

“But why?” Leliana didn’t want to send her friend into that pit of vipers. “This is nothing but a…”

“What choice do we have, Leliana?” Cassandra challenged. “Right now we can’t approach anyone for help with the Breach. We must use what influence we have to call the clerics together. Once they are ready, we’ll see this through.”

“Cassandra and Elisabeta are both going,” Josephine set down her clipboard. “Now I’m sure a cleric is going to get punched, but we have no choice.”

It was only a couple weeks later that Elisabeta found herself strolling across a marble bridge lined with a plethora of marble statues. More could be seen in the river that guarded Val Royeaux’s southern border. The air was fragrant, cloyingly so. The scents that came from the city were like the perfumes of a wealthy trophy wife who attempted to raise herself up that the level of her husband’s
peers by shows of gaudy wealth and crimes against those who were now on a lower socio-economic rung than her. It was heady, overpowering, and unpleasant. She was also quick to note that the statues were those that depicted Chantry tales. There were no statues of past Orlesian royals or heroes, much less anyone out of their tales. For all the wealth displayed, it left her cold. Ringing across all of the stark marble was the sound of bells.

“The city still mourns,” Cassandra declared.

“I wonder if there were any observances to mourn King Cailan’s death or my father’s in Highever,” Elisabeta listened to the bells. “Loghain didn’t waste any time before he declared himself regent and the civil war started. Any mourning would have waited until we saved the city from the darkspawn. We gave him a proper Andrastian funeral, but that was all. My father may not even have gotten that. I don’t know who our teyrn was given to after the Blight. I killed Howe, but I don’t know if Alistair appointed anyone new. Anora probably gave it to one of Howe’s surviving children, Delilah or Nathaniel.” She had an urge to turn around, grab the men Cullen was training, and march on Highever to take it back for the Couslands right there and then, the Chantry be damned.

Two Orlesians passed them, a man and woman in matching outfits. The man looked at them and walked faster. The woman gasped and tried to scurry further towards the edge of the bridge.

Varric turned to Cassandra. “Just a guess, Seeker, but I think they all know who we are.”

“Your skills of observation never fail to impress me, Varric,” Cassandra’s voice was deadpan.

As they reached the end of the bridge, which led them to a tunnel of yet more Chantry statues, a scout ran up to them. “My Lady Herald,” the scout bowed.

“That’s Lady Cousland,” Elisabeta corrected.

“You’re one of Leliana’s people,” Cassandra stated the obvious, unless a spy had stolen and Inquisition Scout’s uniform. “What have you found?”

“The Chantry Mothers await you,” she reported. “But so do a great may Templars.”

“There are Templars here?” Cassandra was obviously surprised.

“People seem to think the Templars will protect them from…” The scout hesitated a moment before continuing. “From the Inquisition. They’re gathering on the other side of the Market. I think that’s where the Templars intend to meet you.”

“Only one thing to do, then,” Cassandra led the way. Elisabeta and Varric followed her with Solas bringing up the rear.

Elisabeta glanced at Varric. “I hope she means we’re going to destroy this over rated town.”

“I doubt it, Tempest,” Varric sighed. “She and Ruffles would probably both frown on that.”

Cassandra paused in the middle of the statue tunnel. “They wish to protect the people? From us?”

“We knew there would be resistance,” Elisabeta reminded her. “I’m the one who they’re afraid of.” She lifted her hands and shouted. “That’s right, Orlais, Andraste has sent the big bad Ferelden Herald to smite you. Fear and tremble!”
“Lissa,” Cassandra sighed.

“Don’t stop her, Seeker,” Varric advised. “She isn’t yelling or crying… well, she is yelling, but I’m entertained. Let her have her fun.”

“The people may be assuming what the Templars will do,” the scout soothed Cassandra. “I’ve heard no concrete plans.” She turned to Elisabeta. “I thought you were a Free Marcher, Herald.”

“Nope, I’m Ferelden,” Elisabeta assured her.

“Do you think the Order’s returned to the fold maybe?” Varric wondered as Elisabeta went to read the scribblings a vandal had added to the statue’s plaques. They told a much more interesting story than the one the plaques had.

“I know Lord Seeker Lucius,” Cassandra revealed. “I can’t imagine him coming to the Chantry’s defense, not after all that’s occurred. Return to Haven,” she instructed the Scout. “Someone will need to inform them if we are… delayed.”

“As you say, my lady,” the scout bowed and left.

Cassandra continued on, as Elisabeta took in the shops in Val Royeaux’s center. There was a large variety and rivaled Denerim’s market district. She wondered if it had as much crime.

“Stand firm, men,” she heard a guard captain tell two of his underlings. “The Templars will protect us from the Inquisition.”

Elisabeta snorted. “That’s right!” She called out to those passing by. “The Inquisition has sent Andraste’s Herald to you. Quake in fear, because like Andraste herself, she was born and bred in Ferelden! Mords Moi, Orlais!”

There were several gasps from those nearby and one woman dropped in a faint. Behind her, Solas turned even whiter, Cassandra made a strangled sound, and Varric tried to contain his laughter. “Perhaps my Orlesian is rusty, or the Herald’s is,” Solas had covered his eyes with one hand.

“Nope, Chuckles, you heard right,” Varric assured him. “Tempest just told Orlais to bite her.”

“The Templars will deal with this,” the guard captain stated again, as if trying to convince himself.

Elisabeta just strolled to where a reverend mother stood on a makeshift, wooden dais, giving a speech. There were two other women in Chantry robes behind her and a dark skinned Templar beside her. The older woman was holding her arms out to those gathered in front of her. “Good people of Val Royeaux, hear me!”

“We hear you, mother,” a man with a thick Orlesian accent called out.

“Together we mourn our Divine,” she continued. “Her naïve and beautiful heart silenced by treachery! You wonder what will become of her murderer? Well, wonder no more! Behold the so called Herald of Andraste! Claiming to rise where our beloved fell. We say this is a false prophet! The Maker would send no mage in our hour of need!”

“You’re wrong!” Elisabeta stepped forward.
“A Ferelden!” A man in the audience gasped. “Just listen to that accent.”

“I was sent by the Maker,” she ignored the cheese muncher. “I was not born a mage, the magic was something given by Andraste when she delivered me back to Thedas. I was not at the Temple of Sacred Ashes. I died on a roof top in Denerim, fighting and killing an archdemon, more than ten years ago!” The crowd gasped. “Andraste herself brought me back to save Thedas once again. Some of you may have heard of me. I am Elisabeta Cousland: Daughter of Bryce and Eleanor Cousland, Lady of Highever, Conscript of the Grey Wardens, and the Hero of Ferelden!”

She couldn’t believe she was using that ridiculous title, much less that she was doing it for the first time when in Orlais. “The fact that I stand before you, alive, is a testament to the power of the Maker and His Bride. They have not abandoned us. The Inquisition is Their will. We plan to close the Breach and bring order back to His people.”

“It’s true,” Cassandra spoke up. “Leliana, veteran of the Fifth Blight is part of the Inquisition. She recognized Lady Cousland immediately. Andraste delivered her back to us. The Inquisition seeks to end this madness before it’s too late and the Herald is here to help us do so!”

“It is already too late,” the reverend mother pointed and a group a dozen men in skirts strolled forward. Some wore the uniform of the Templars, others that of the Seekers. “The Templars have returned to the Chantry! They will face this ‘Inquisition’, and the people will be safe once more!”

The lead Seeker walked pass the reverend mother, but the Seeker behind him punched her, knocking her to the ground. The crowd cried out as she weaved on her feet and then face planted onto the wooden dais.

“Shit,” Varric cussed. “Now I owe Ruffles twenty silver pieces. Although it wasn’t you Seeker and Tempest who did the punching.”

The Seeker’s Leader, Lord Lucius, patted the shoulder of the Templar who had been standing by the reverend mother. “Still yourself, she is beneath us.”

“Why are you now punching out reverend mothers?” Elisabeta demanded. “And you Orlesians think we Fereldens are barbarians.”

“Her claim to ‘authority’ is an insult,” Lucius explained. “Much like your own.”

“Oh? Is the Maker resurrecting you?” Elisabeta challenged. “Have you led an army and killed an archdemon? So far I’ve only seen you hit weak women.”

“Lord Seeker Lucius,” Cassandra hurried to him. “It’s imperative I speak with…”

“You will not address me,” Lucius stepped down from the dais, not even deeming to look at Cassandra.

“Lord Seeker?” Cassandra was in a bit of a distress.

Lucius only glanced at her as he gathered his men again. “Creating a heretical movement, raising a puppet as Andraste’s prophet. You should be ashamed. You should all be ashamed!” He cried at Cassandra’s companions. “The Templars failed no one when they left the Chantry to purge the mages! You are the ones who have failed! You who’d leash our righteous swords with doubt and fear! If you came to appeal to the Chantry, you’re too late. The only destiny here that demands respect is mine.”

“The only destiny here that demands respect is mine?” Elisabeta repeated. “You practiced that in front of a mirror, didn’t you? Alistair’s very first speech as king was better than that. Really,
it’s up there with You will rue the day you messed with me, right before I kill you. Talk to me about
destiny when you have a deity bringing you back from the Abyss. Templars,” she addressed the
rest. “I saved several of your brethren from their doom at Kinloch Hold. My death is a known fact.
Yet here I stand before you, because Andraste herself delivered me from the Void. If that isn’t a sign
of the Maker’s will, I don’t know what is. Join us; it is obvious that the Maker is with us.”

“Blaspheme!” Lucius declared.

The Templar who’d stood by the reverend mother spoke up. “But Lord Seeker… what if she
really was was sent by the Maker. What if…?”

“You are called to a higher purpose,” one of the Seekers interrupted. “Do not question!”

“I will make the Templar Order a power that stands alone against the Void. We deserve
recognition. Independence!”

“Against the Void?” Elisabeta laughed bitterly. “You can do nothing against the Void. I
didn’t feel you resisting it while I was in it for a decade! You are powerless against it! The Old God
who’d become an archdemon couldn’t fight its pull and neither can you.”

“You have shown me nothing,” Lucius continued. “And the Inquisition is less than nothing.
Templars, Val Royeaux is unworthy of our protections! We march!” He led his men away.

“How did that bullying idiot become the head of the Seekers?” Elisabeta wanted to know.

“Charming fellow, isn’t he?” Varric agreed.

“Has Lord Seeker Lucius gone mad?” Cassandra wondered, watching after him.

“Obviously,” Elisabeta joined Cassandra’s vigilance. Solas walked by them. “Oh, are you
still here, too?” Instead of answering, Solas went to check on the reverend mother, although he just
tried to pat her shoulder. He had no healing to help. She turned back to Cassandra and Varric.
“Well, we’re not getting the Templars help.” That felt a bit familiar.

“I wouldn’t write them off so quickly,” Cassandra disagreed. “There must be those in the
order who’ve seen what he’s become. Either way, we should first return to Haven and inform the
others.”

“We should do some shopping first,” Elisabeta decided. “I’ve never been shopping in Val
Royeraux.”
Elisabeta does some shopping and then gets some bad news.

Val Royeaux Market was over rated. Some of the shops were elegant and there were luxuries to be had, but half of the items were not to the quality that their snooty purveyors seemed to think they were. Although, there were a few wonderful shops that Elisabeta would have liked to have had more of in Ferelden. Still, the silly banners that fluttered over the market, shading the sun in several spots wouldn’t have been needed in their neighboring country where nature was kind enough to cover the sun herself most of the time.

Elisabeta was glad she hadn’t given up her habit of looting those she killed, as she perused the shops. She found herself at a book seller who had some interesting accessories. She’d picked up books that covered the events of the past ten years. There was also one that claimed to cover the Fifth Blight. She was too curious not to get it. She’d also picked up a book on magic theory and practice. She hoped it would help her to continue to control the magic Andraste had decided to hoist upon her. She’d lost her Grey Warden and abilities and gotten magic instead. She wasn’t sure it was a good exchange.

She found herself gazing at an ancient rune stone that she’d picked up without thinking. It was almost insistent, Alistair loved them and she would always get him one when she came across it. “Is this real?”

“That was found in the Deep Roads, near Rialto, in Antiva, my lady,” the shopkeeper, who insisted on being called Jeanette, informed her. “They are most common in Ferelden, but there is a theory that it was dropped there by a Grey Warden during the Fourth Blight.”

Elisabeta found herself caressing the stone with her thumb. “I… used to… have a … friend who collected these.”

“Oh? Perhaps you should get it in their memory,” Jeanette urged.

“No,” Elisabeta set it down. “I need to forget them.” She moved to another display. “I do know someone who might get a kick out of this quill.” The feather was unique, red and orange, and the tip gold. There was a gold ink pot beside it.

“The feather is rumored to come from a firebird that lives in the mountains near Nevarra,” Jeanette reported. “I don’t know if that’s true, but it is pretty, isn’t it?”

“That it is,” Elisabeta agreed. “I’ll take it, along with a stack of parchment. I would also like a scroll.” She wondered if Leliana had a quill. She hadn’t seen her write since her return from the dead. She’d just have to convince her favorite bard to start writing new songs again. She picked up another quill, this one with a phoenix feather, for her friend. She also picked up air dried quills, something the shop was trying. They barely had any feathers and seemed to be more of moderately lengthened, sharpened shafts.

As she walked out of the shop, she glanced back at the rune. No, she had to forget him. Besides, if
Alistair still liked to collect runes, it would be Anora who now bought them for her king.

When she left the shop, Elisabeta had an arrow land near her feet. It instructed her to find red items. She felt silly doing it, but the note promised a meeting with Red Jenny. She’d wondered about the bandit’s identity since she’d delivered a painted box to a strange house in Denerim long ago.

As she was looking for the items, she was stopped by a messenger with a strange invitation. “Why would I go to a salon at an Orlesian duke’s estate, especially when he isn’t giving it?”

“The note says it’s to meet the head of the Loyal Mages,” Cassandra pointed out. “They could be valuable allies.”

“Loyal to whom? The Circle? The Chantry?” Elisabeta shook her head. “That isn’t encouraging. Why do we want the help of people who are so brainwashed they reject freedom when they finally get it? I’ve allied with Dalish, Circle mages, dwarves, and a Guerrin who still had his army. That last alliance is the one I regret most. Now I’m supposed to discuss an alliance with the Circle Mages who chose to stay prisoners? Do you know that the Templars would take their babies when they were born? They ripped children from their mothers’ arms all because those mothers were mages.”

“I… did know that,” Cassandra admitted. “I haven’t always agreed with the Chantry’s methods, but I do with their message.”

“I’m not going,” Elisabeta decided as she found a glove in a café.

“You need to go,” Cassandra insisted. “We can’t ignore potential allies.”

Elisabeta supposed she was right, but didn’t have to like it. “Fine, we’ll make an appearance. I guess we’re going shopping for appropriate clothes. I wonder if I can find something in Ferelden style. I refuse to look like an Orlesian.”

“Appropriate clothes?” Cassandra grimaced.

“That’s right, if we have to go you are going to wear a dress,” Elisabeta declared. The look on Cassandra’s face made the prospect of going to an Orlesian soiree almost worth it. “We’ll send Solas back to Haven to tell them what is delaying us.”

“I can go with you, Herald,” Solas insisted.

“You really want to go?” Elisabeta looked at him sideways, brows furrowed. “Why? Now I’m afraid to have you within a hundred feet of that estate.”

“Yep. Only us poor schmucks who would rather go back to Haven are going,” Varric agreed.

“Oh, Tempest, I bought you a present,” he passed a large package out to her.

“You bought me a bagpipe?” She sniffled. “It’s beautiful.” She gave the instrument a testing blow. The sound came out; clear and melancholic. “Thank you. I’m touched, did you remember me mentioning I played? I got you something, too.” She handed him the firebird quill and the air dried one, with the gold inkpot.

“Ah, Tempest, I’ll cherish these,” he promised. “I haven’t had time to write since the Seeker, there,
dragged me away from Kirkwall.”

“I haven’t drawn since I… left… Denerim, nor have I played,” she stroked the bagpipe. “I guess we both need to find the time. Let’s go find that last item.”

As they finished up their errands and leaving Val Royeaux when they were stopped again. “If I might have a moment of your time,” a soft, feminine, Orlesian accent stopped them. They turned to see a dark haired elf in mages robes approach them.

Cassandra knew the woman. “Grand Enchanter Fiona?”

“The leader of the Mage Rebellion,” Solas added. “Is it not dangerous for you to be here?”

“I heard of this gathering,” Fiona explained. “And I wanted to see the fabled Herald of Andraste with my own eyes. If it’s help with the Breach you seek, perhaps you should look to your fellow mages.”

There was something about the Grand Enchanter’s eyes that reminded Elisabeta of Alistair. She crushed that thought. She had to forget him. She had to move on. “I wasn’t a mage before Andraste returned me to Thedas, but I would have preferred to deal with the mages the Templars.”

“We’re willing now,” Fiona assured her. “That’s the important thing. Consider this an invitation to Redcliffe; come meet with the mages. An alliance could help us both, after all. I hope to see you there. Au revoir, my Lady Herald.”

“Wait!” Elisabeta still had questions. “I must know…”

“Yes, my lady?” Fiona had begun to turn back towards the city, but stopped.

“I… I have a friend, an old friend, who may be among your number,” Elisabeta explained. “I miss her and wish to see her again. Is there a mage from Kinloch Hold named Wynne in Redcliffe? She might be known as a Hero of the Fifth Blight. She was…”

“I’m sorry, my lady,” Fiona took a deep breath.

“It’s all…” Elisabeta began, but the Grand Enchanter continued.

“She was one of the casualties of the Battle of the White Spire,” Fiona finished. “The moment we cast the vote to leave the Circles, the Seekers and Templars swarmed us. It was less of a battle and more of a massacre. They proved that they would not just let us leave. I lost track of Wynne during the fighting, her son Rhys had cast the final vote to declare our freedom. By the time the dead were accounted for, she was among them. I’m so, so sorry.”

Elisabeta just nodded as she tried, and failed, to hold back tears. “Thank… thank you. I appreciate you telling me. I…” Oh, sweet Maker, she needed to sit down. Wynne had been old, but she needed her. She had already lost Alistair to that… Whore of a MacTir. She had no idea where the rest of her companions were, either. Even her dog was gone. Leliana seemed to be all she had left in Thedas. She glanced at Varric; she had this new friend at least. Her gaze went to Cassandra, and a potential friend. Then it went to Solas, well she had Varric and Cassandra. Varric’s arm slid around her.
“I’m sorry for your loss,” Fiona walked away as Varric hugged Elisabeta.

“It’s all right, Tempest, let the storm come,” he told her and held her while she mourned her friend.
To Recruit or Not to Recruit

Chapter Summary

Elisabeta meets Red Jenny and then goes to a soiree.

Elisabeta walked into the Orlesian Estate where Red Jenny had asked to see her. The last time she had dealt with Red Jenny had been in Denerim, why would she move to an estate near Orlais. The estate was as over decorated and pretentious as all of the others she’d seen in the overblown, pompous nation.

A fireball hit the wall near her as she entered. “Great, it was a trap.” She unsheathed the two new swords that Harritt had made for her. She called them kindness and patience, because Josephine told her she needed to use more kindness and patience with her adversaries.

“How did you find me?” The Orlesian mage demanded.

“Who are you?” Elisabeta demanded to know. “I was told to meet Red Jenny here. You are obviously not them.”

“Do not pretend you don’t know who I am,” the Orlesian mage sneered. “It must have cost the Inquisition dearly.”

“Oh, yeah, we spend precious resources going after non-account Orlesians all the time,” Elisabeta snarked.

“No we don’t,” Cassandra’s voice was stony.

Out of one of the darkened corners of the courtyard, an elf appeared. She flipped onto a stack of crates and pointed her bow at the mage. “Just say what?”

The Orlesian was just as startled as Elisabeta and her party. “What the…?” His words were cut off as an arrow pierced his heart.

The elf wrinkled her pert nose. “Ugh, he was a squishy one. Did you hear that? You heard me, though. Just say what? I’m Sera; you may also know me as Red Jenny.”

Elisabeta smiled at the sound of the Ferelden accent. While the explanation of who Sera was confused her companions, she’d seen and experienced stranger. She welcomed the woman on board.

Sera accompanied Elisabeta to Vivienne, Madame de Fer’s, salon. She refused to change, though. She wore a torn tunic and yellow plaid pants. Elisabeta, herself, was dressed in Highever style. Her chemise was cream with an underskirt that was a green and black plaid. The lined overdress was a green that brought out her sea green eyes even more. Her light red curls were pulled back by several braids and cascaded down her back. There was a small circlet set in her hair. She’d been delighted
to find a seamstress in Val Royeaux who offered Highever styled clothing in her shop. She said she now had an exchange with a seamstress in the teyrn. She sent Orlesian clothes and received Highever styles in exchange. Elisabeta was less happy at the prospect of her former people wearing Orlesian style clothes.

“I look ridiculous,” Cassandra tugged at the skirts of her blue, Antivan style dress. The low cut bodice and imperial waist emphasized the impressive bosom she tried to hide and the skirt exaggerated her already long legs.

“You look wonderful, Seeker,” Varric assured her. He was still dressed in his normal clothes, insisting his chest hair was appropriate dress for the soiree.

The group approached the estates, a swagger in their step and small smiles at the Orleans who eyed them nervously. The majordomo was acting as court marshal and introduced Elisabeta. “The Herald of Andraste and agents of the Inquisition!”

“Mordez Moi, Orlesian,” Elisabeta hissed at him as she passed. “Je m'appelle Elisabeta, pas Herold.”

“You’re the daughter of Bryce Cousland?” An elderly man approached her.

“Yes,” she gave him a small smile. “Did you know him?”

“I did,” he led her to where a servant was passing by with mugs and flutes. He grabbed two flutes and handed one to her. “I had heard that you are dead.”

“I was,” she took a sip of the wine. It was inferior, that figured. “It’s a long story.”

“I have a feeling that it is the most interesting thing at this party,” he led her towards some of his friends. “Why don’t you tell us all about it?”

“There are parts I’d rather not even remember,” she sighed.

“Fine,” he shrugged. “Make up something interesting to fill in those parts.”

Even as she laughed, she remembered telling Alistair something similar once. “All right, I’ll tell you what happened to me if you tell me about this Madame de Fer and why she is throwing this party at this duke’s estate.”

“You have a deal,” he agreed. “I think the day has greatly improved.”

“Thank you, good ser,” she gave him a bow and followed him to his comrades. All of whom were men and women who’d called the Cousland friends at one point.

“So Andraste exchanged your life force with that of someone else?” Lord Idun raised a mug to his lips an hour later. “Wow.”

“I know, it’s even more exciting than an Orlesian Duke carrying on with a mage,” she still didn’t believe that the duke’s wife had been all right with his long time affair with this Vivienne.

“There you are, the so called Herald of Andraste,” a deeply accented Orlesian voice interrupted the group.

“Do I know you?” Elisabeta blinked at him. “And no, I’m not the ‘so called Herald of Andraste’, I go by Elisabeta Cousland. I am part of the Inquisition, though.”
“The Inquisition is nothing but a bunch of washed up sisters and thugs, it’s pig swill,” he continued.

“Do you have a point or did you just come to me to insult the Inquisition?” Elisabeta demanded to know. “If you are trying to go get a reaction, I suggest you go bother Cassandra.”

“You are nothing but a false prophet,” he yelled at her.

“Oh? You try dying and coming back to life then,” she challenged. “I’m not going to be questioned by some cheese crumpet munching git.”

“That is it,” he declared. “We shall go outside where your honor will face my blade.”

“Fine,” she shrugged. “If I must kill you with kindness and patience, I will. Let’s go.”

“My lady,” Lord Idun protested.

“It’s all right,” she assured him. “Kindness and patience are the names of my swords. Plus, I was taught to duel by the famed Antivan pirate, Isabela.”

The aggressive Orlesian reached for his sword, but stopped frozen. “Poor Marquis,” a dark skinned woman with an obviously faux Orlesian accent tsked. “This is no way to talk to my guests. What would your aunty say? Here you are all dressed up in your best hose and doublet. Didn’t she buy those for you for the grand tourney? Yet the other chevaliers have gone and you remain.” She gave Elisabeta a sidelong look, as if judging her appearance. “You are the injured party, my dear, what would you have me do with him?”

“I’ve never gotten to kill an Orlesian before,” Elisabeta realized. “I want you to let him go so I can duel him. You’re ruining my fun.”

“Lissa,” Cassandra’s voice carried across the room, as did its warning tone.

“Well, I haven’t,” she kept her voice light and innocent. “And she is.”

“Why don’t we step away so we can talk?” Vivienne walked into an antechamber. Elisabeta rolled her eyes at Vivienne’s back as they walked.

“How did a mage come to be holding parties in a duke’s estate?” Elisabeta asked as they posed in front of a large, bay window. There was something so indefensible about a window that big.

“I’m sure someone has told you about my… friendship… with the duke,” Vivienne waved that away. “I’m more concerned about what the Inquisition and I can do for each other.”

“Yes, about that,” Elisabeta agreed. “How is your healing magic?”

“Excuse me, my dear?” Vivienne pulled out a fan and began waving it about.

“Can you do even the most basic healing spells on a battle field?” Elisabeta pressed.

“My dear,” Vivienne let out a long suffering breath. “I am the head of the Loyal Mages.”

“So you should know how to heal and mix a mean healing potion,” Elisabeta agreed.

“My dear, you aren’t listening to me,” the fan moved more vigorously.

“Are you telling me you can’t heal people?” Elisabeta frowned at her.
“No, I cannot,” Vivienne admitted. “My talents…”

“Then what do I need you for? I already have my shifty, apostate mage,” Elisabeta cut her off. “Thanks for the drinks. You need better food at your parties, though. You need better drinks, too.” She walked away.

“What happened?” Cassandra saw Vivienne fuming behind Elisabeta.

“She has no healing skills, this was a waste of time,” Elisabeta walked to Lord Idun. “It was good seeing you, come visit the Inquisition some time.”

“When this is over, it will be time for you to return to Highever,” he hugged her.

“I will,” she promised, before exiting the estate with her head held high. Her companions followed.
Chapter Summary

Amid the Encircling Gloom

Elisabeta returns to Haven. A war table mission brings very welcome news.

Leliana greeted Elisabeta when she returned to Haven. “How did it go?”

“The Templars have collectively gone insane and the Chantry Clerics aren’t much better,” Elisabeta reported. “On a side note, I recruited a Red Jenny and Val Royeaux is over rated.”

“Val Royeaux is not…” Leliana shook her head. “Red Jenny is a real person?”

“Yes and no,” Elisabeta dismounted from Rowan. “I’ll tell you tonight over dinner.”

“What about the Grand Enchanter that Solas mentioned you were going to talk to?” Leliana prompted. “Josephine was worrying about her coming. She is said to be very particular in her tastes.”

“Oh, you’d heard of her?” Elisabeta took her packs off of her horse. “Did you know she can’t even heal? I wasted my time going to that party. It was full of Orlesians.”

“So you didn’t recruit her?” Leliana realized.

“She can’t heal,” Elisabeta said it even slower. “I need a healer. I need…” Her voice cracked. “Did you know that Wynne died during the Battle of the White Spire?”

“I… I’d wondered,” Leliana admitted. “A list of the dead was brought to the Divine, but it was incomplete. Her body wasn’t left behind, but her son disappeared. He was rumored to have been seen with a rogue Templar. She wasn’t part of the group that went crazy, but still left the Order itself during the fight.”

“Wynne found her son?” At the end of the Fifth Blight, Wynne hadn’t known what had happened to the baby who had been ripped from her arms at birth.

“She did,” Leliana confirmed. “His name was Rhys and he was at the White Spire.”

“I guess that’s something.”

“Come,” Leliana insisted. “Cullen and Josephine are waiting in the Chantry to hear more news.”

Elisabeta wished she could just go back to her cabin and take a nap.

“We can’t just give up on the Templars,” Cullen insisted. “There must be another way to contact them.”

“We need to go get the mages,” Leliana insisted.
“The Templars…” Cullen began.

Elisabeta shook her head. “Wynne was at the White Spire when the Templars attacked it. She was there when the vote was cast. It is her people I must go save in her stead. She would be fighting for them, even now, if the Templars had not killed her. I know where my loyalties must lie.”

She turned to leave, but was stopped by Leliana. “Walk with me a bit longer.”

“Of course,” she stepped in time with her friend.

“I’ve heard rumors of a Grey Warden who is operating out of the Hinterlands,” Leliana explained. “You need to find him. Lissa, your… your former comrades have all disappeared. Oghren was among the Grey Wardens in Amaranthine. I knew the Wardens in Orlais had disappeared, but now it appears that those in Ferelden have as well. King Alistair is the only one accounted for. He and this Blackwall who has been helping farmers near Redcliffe fight off bandits.”

“Oghren is missing? They’re all gone? Well, the Orlesians weren’t exactly a help during the last Blight, but Oghren was. I thought he and Felsi got back together, why would he have joined the Wardens. Why…” She shook her head. “I’ll go and talk to him on my way to see Fiona,” Elisabeta assured her. “I was never really part of the Order. I was put through the Joining in Ostagar and within forty eight hours it was just Alistair and I left. Still, they are needed if there is ever another Blight. You and I know why.” She’d already saved Thedas from one Blight, but there were two more old gods somewhere in the Deep Roads. Even now, darkspawn searched for them. Without the Wardens, her world was doomed. Shit.

“We do,” Leliana agreed. “I’ll see you at dinner.”

Elisabeta didn’t get far before Inquisition business stopped her again. This time it was the second of command of a small mercenary band called the Chargers. His captain was interested in joining and wanted to talk to the Herald of Andraste about joining the cause. She agreed to work it into her schedule. She would head north after talking to Fiona. That would put her near Highever. Perhaps it was time to make the journey home already.

Highever was obviously on Elisabeta’s mind that night. She’d had trouble sleeping and taken her new bagpipe to the lake. She was playing when she heard singing from behind her.

*Lead, kindly Light, amid th'encircling gloom;*

*Lead thou me on!*

*The night is dark, and I am far from home;*

*Lead thou me on!*

*Keep thou my feet; I do not ask to see*

*The distant scene--one step enough for me.*

She turned. It was Cullen singing the words to the song she was playing. “I’m sorry if I woke you.
I… it is hard to sleep sometimes.”

“So Varric mentioned to me,” He sat beside her. “I… also suffer from nightmares. You know part of the reason. What I went through wasn’t as literal of a Hell as the Void, but it still haunts me.”

“I imagine so,” she agreed. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“I’d rather listen to you play,” he admitted. “There isn’t enough music in Haven. I just hope you don’t mind if I sing along.”

“I think I’d like that,” she smiled. “I was without music for so long… in that place. It’s such a wonderful, soul touching thing. I don’t know how to describe it. It a place where the soul is meant to be lost, it had no place. I never appreciated how wonderful it is. If I could go back and thank my mother for all of those voice and instrumental lessons, I would. If I could go back and just see her again, I would,” she admitted.

“My parents died during the Blight,” Cullen revealed. “I would give anything to go back in time and leave my studies for one day and spend the day with them.”

“So would I,” she nodded. “Maker, I miss them.”

“Do you wish Andraste had taken you to the Maker’s side and saved Trevelyan?” He wondered.

“There are times,” she admitted. “It’s hard to return to a life after being… gone… for so long. The one thing I wanted to return to most is no longer mine to return to. I still have Leliana, though. And I have new friends.”

“That you do,” he agreed.

She lifted the pipes to her lips and began playing again.

_White are the far-off plains, and white_
The fading forests grow;  
The wind dies out along the height,  
And denser still the snow,  
A gathering weight on roof and tree,  
Falls down scarce audibly.

The road before me smooths and fills  
Apace, and all about  
The fences dwindle, and the hills  
Are blotted slowly out;  
The naked trees loom spectrally  
Into the dim white sky.

Elisabeta trudged into the Chantry for yet another war table mission. She had a mug of Oolong tea and a crumpet. Most of the missions had to do with patting nobles on the head and soothing feathers. Cullen’s men had finished building the watch towers in the Hinterlands, though, and she wanted to take care of getting the Inquisition’s horses on her way to speak with Fiona and the mages.

“We received a new message this morning,” Josephine reported as Elisabeta trudged in. “Oh, you and Cullen look so tired Herald. Perhaps you should spend your nights sleeping instead of continuing to serenade Haven every other night.”
“From your mouth to the Maker’s ear,” Cullen muttered.

“Here, here,” Elisabeta agreed.

“Our message comes from an important Ferelden noble,” Josephine bristled.

“If it’s Queen Anora, tell her she can kiss my blessed ass,” Elisabeta informed her.

“I will say no such thing,” Josephine gasped.

“You’re right,” Elisabeta conceded. “I don’t want that viper’s lips anywhere near me.”

“It’s from Fergus Cousland, the Teyrn of Highever,” Josephine began. “He wishes to convey his deepest sympathies for the death of Divine Justinia V and Highever will be holding a vigil for her. He has invited the Inquisition to attend.”

“We don’t have time…” Cullen began.

His words were cut off by the crash of Elisabeta’s mug. The crumpet followed. Her hands were over her mouth and she was crying again. “Fergus…” Her hands clutched the table. She looked at Leliana. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I thought you knew?” Leliana had forgotten that Fergus Cousland had made his way to Denerim, very much alive, after the Blight had ended. “Oh, Lissa.”

“He’s alive,” she was smiling through her tears. “Fergus is alive. He is the teyrn. I’m going to the vigil.”

“I’m afraid that it is not a priority,” Josephine objected.

“My brother has invited me home and I am going,” Elisabeta insisted. “My family will always be a priority.” Home, the word that had meant so much to her, yet one she thought she could no longer use. Tears streamed down her face. Highever was back in the hands of the Couslands, her home had been returned.

After leaving the meeting, Elisabeta walked to Varric’s tent. “He’s alive,” she hugged him.

“Great,” Varric patted her back. “Who’s alive?”

“My brother,” she shed more tears of joy. “My brother is alive. He holds Highever. My home is waiting for me again. My…” She broke off as she was overcome yet again.

“Oh, Tempest,” he regretted that he didn’t have this type of relationship with his brother. This was what Griffon would have been like if Bethany had been restored to him. He held Elisabeta and then invited her to join him in celebratory drink. There was one thing she had to do first, though.

She went into the forest to be alone. There, she knelt and thanked the Maker. After all that had been taken from her, He’d protected her brother. A precious jewel had been returned. I’m going home she thought. I’m going home!
Vivienne arrives at Haven, demanding a place in the Inquisition. Another guest arrives as well.

The overly ornate carriage stuck out like a sore thumb as it trumbled into Haven. The outside was I white lacquer with gold trimming. The seats were covered in blue velvet. The passenger’s head was held high as she sniffed in disdain. Madame de Fer instructed her driver to stop the coach just outside of the Chantry. She stepped out and walked in, grabbing the first elf she saw. “I must speak with Ambassador Montilyet.”

“That’s nice, like I give a care,” the elf snorted. “Hey, weren’t you that tart who is boffing a duke and threw a boring party at his house in Orlais a couple of weeks ago? Get better booze woman.” She blew a zerbert, lifted two fingers, and strolled off.

Vivienne stood in shock. She grabbed the next person who walked by, also an elf. “Ambassador Montilyet’s office, now.”

“She’s there… the last room on the left,” the elf pulled away and ran. He had no idea who the woman was, but didn’t care. There was something not right about her. Why had she assumed his job was to give directions?

Vivienne stalked to the room indicated by the man she had assumed to be a mere servant. She found the ambassador sitting behind her desk, reading a missive. She looked up. “Why does Bann Alfstanna need a satin blanket embroidered with sea horses for her horse when she comes to visit and does she really have to have quarters facing the lake ‘because it’s will remind her more of home’. In another missive, she asked to be put near the Herald ‘because she wanted to see if she is who she is rumored to be. She would know’.”

“A satin blanket for a horse is a very bad idea,” Vivienne declared. “I am here, because your Herald insulted me.”

“I’m sorry, but that doesn’t actually tell me who you are,” Josephine was sad to say that. “She insults a lot of people.”

Vivienne struck a pose. “I am Grand Enchanter Vivienne of the Montsimmard Circle of Magi, Head of the Loyal Mages. I attempted to discuss an alliance with your so called Herald of Andraste, but she just kept asking me if I was a healer.”

“Are you?” Josephine perked up a bit.

“No,” Vivienne glowered at her.

“That is too bad,” Josephine let out a sigh. “Lady Elisabeta desperately wants a healer on her team. I do appreciate, however, what an alliance with the Loyal Mages could do for the Inquisition. Sit down and I’ll happily discuss that with you.”

“Very well,” Vivienne looked around. “Do you have a more comfortable seat for me?”
Josephine was proud of herself for securing an alliance with the Loyal Mages. “Welcome to the Inquisition, Lady Vivienne. We are happy to have you.”

“Yes, dear, you are,” Vivienne stood. “The Loyal Mages will ensure that order, proper order, is restored to Thedas. Now as to my quarters…”

She was cut off by the sound of a dog barking and a loud boisterous voice. “Tell Leliana that her favorite Crow has come to nest. Oh… and I brought a friend.”

“Obviously you need me,” Vivienne pulled out her fan. “Why do I smell wet dog?”
Alistair, the King of Ferelden, closed his pack. He looked at the harp that he kept on his bedside table. It was a smaller lap harp that he planned to one day learn to play. It had belonged to Elisabeta and was one of the few things of hers he had kept. There was a strange, magical wooden box on top of the desk in his office that held another.

The door opened and Anora poked her head in. “I don’t see why you feel obliged to go. We could have our own memorial to the Divine here. There is no need to go to Highever. Fergus Cousland is just trying to manipulate you. He expects you to name his daughter, Eleanor, as heir.”

“Eleanor is going to be my heir,” Alistair’s voice was matter-of-fact. “The Couslands are second only to the Theirins in Ferelden, even if Fergus and his children are all that’s left.”

“What about the Guerrins?” She urged. “Or we could try to have one of our own.”

“The Couslands have always outranked the Guerrins, besides Eamon’s only child is a mage,” Alistair reminded her. “As far as I know, Teagan has no children. Perhaps you and he were planning to change that?”

Anora let out a little gasp, as if hurt and shocked by Alistair’s not very subtle accusation. She wasn’t fooling him, though. He knew that Teagan had celebrated becoming arl by spreading the queen’s legs. “As for the suggestion of us having a child together… my dear, you never had a child with Cailan, nor with your myriad of lovers that we both try to pretend don’t exist. There is no reason for us to think about that route again.” His marriage was one of curtesy and tolerance. They partnered as far as the rule of Thedas went, but he even regretted giving into Eamon’s pressures to marry Anora.

After Elisabeta’s death he’d found himself facing running Thedas by himself and he’d grown scared. It wasn’t long after he’d taken her ashes up to Highever that Eamon had come to him. Most of the nobles accepted that he was indeed the bastard son of King Maric, but there were those who questioned it. Eamon insisted that marrying Anora would unite Ferelden and bring healing to the land faster. It was also give a stronger, more united front against the Orlesians. Besides, Alistair needed to marry and have an heir. Eamon had given many reasons why the new king should marry his brother’s widow and the new king had acquiesced to his urgings. What did it matter? He would never be able to marry the woman he loved, she was dead.
He’d soon learned that every insult Elisabeta had hurled at Anora was true. She was a cold snake who craved power. Her father had spoiled her, putting ideas in her head that she was born to rule over others. She also wasn’t at good at running the country as she’d tried to convince others. Elisabeta had argued with Eamon when he’d suggested Alistair and Anora wed. First she’d let him know in no uncertain terms that she was not handing the man she loved over to another woman. She’d then listed evidence as to why Anora was a horrible queen. A civil war had raged under her rule, her first husband had been killed by her father’s machinations, the most powerful teyrn in the land had been killed in his own home and his family massacred, one of the arls had been poisoned and his lands sieged by the walking dead, and a Blight had swept through the land. Still, they had settled into a joint rule and Ferelden was prospering. Now, rifts were ripping the skies of Thedas and the Divine was dead. He’d received word of an Inquisition forming, but that was it. He was shocked that Leliana had sent no note.

“Alistair,” Anora interrupted his thoughts. “Are you even listening to me?”

“I’m sorry… what?” He glanced at her.

“There is no reason we cannot try for a baby together,” Anora huffed. “I don’t know where you get the idea that I’m not faithful, but there is no harm in trying to produce our own heir.”

“We’ll talk more about it when I return from Highever,” he ran a finger along the strings of the harp. She was dead and he needed to move on. He didn’t love Anora, but she was his wife. Then again, did he want to share a woman with his uncle? She was his wife, though. They had a nice enough relationship in public. Maybe it would be nice to have a constant bed companion again.

The trip to Highever wasn’t dull. They had encountered two rifts. Alistair’s personal guard, John, tried to stop the king as he approached the first rift. “Your majesty, your guards will take care of this.”

“I can help,” Alistair protested. “I helped kill an archdemon.”

“Yes, your majesty,” John agreed. “Stay back here and help if any get through. “I’ll stay with you.”

Alistair let out a long suffering sigh. This was typical. Ever since he became king, no one would let him have any fun. He twirled his sword in boredom as his soldiers took care of the rift.

When Alistair arrived in Highever, he was met with open arms. “It’s good to see you again, Al,” Fergus embraced him.

“Uncle Alistair!” Eleonore raced to him.

He scooped up the five year old child and embraced her. She had her aunt’s haunting sea green eyes. She was the closest thing he had left to his Elisabeta. No wonder he planned to make her his heir. Not only were the Couslands next in line, but if she had half of her aunt’s spirit, then Ferelden would be the better with her at the helm. “How’s my favorite girl?”

“I’m good, but Bryce keeps following me around,” she referred to her younger brother. “Momma keeps telling me that I’m too young to learn to use a sword. Dadda tells her that he and Aunt Lissa had lessons with wooden swords at my age. That’s why she was so good. If she was so good, why
“Did she die?”

“I’ll tell you someday,” he kissed the top of her head.

“Oh, the ‘quisition, Herold, is coming,” she added. “He sent word and may be staying at our castle. Will you be this trip?”

“Not this time,” he regretted that. After the Divine is honored, I have to go on to West Hill. There is a rift there.”

“Isn’t it Herold’s job to close them?” She pointed out. “I’ll tell him as soon as daddy meets him.”

“You do that,” he encouraged.

“Where is he?” She looked around. “Daddy went to meet him.”

Fergus came back after several minutes. Cassandra and a one-eyed Qunari accompanied him.

“Sorry, I…” There were tears in his eyes. He looked nervously at Alistair, his look filled with both hope and fear. “Will you be staying at the castle tonight?”

Alistair shook his head. “I have to go to West Hill to deal with a rift.”

“I can have the Herald take care of that on our way to Redcliffe,” Cassandra offered.

“Why isn’t this Herald of Andraste here now?” Alistair wondered.

“She…” Cassandra hesitated. “Perhaps you should talk to her after the ceremony.

“She is visiting the memorial to my family,” Fergus informed him. “She asked for some time alone, but will try to join the crowd during the ceremony itself.”

Alistair found that rather strange, but could not think of anything to say. He remained silent as the reverend mother got up to speak. However, as she droned on, he found a moment to duck out and go to the Cousland memorial. He’d wanted to lay flowers on the statue that commemorated Elisabetta’s life and death… only; he’d forgotten to bring any flowers. The statue to her, his lost love, was that of a woman in warrior’s dress holding a sword as if to strike down. He didn’t think it did her justice.

As he drew closer, he heard soft crying. There was something familiar about the sound. Then a figure came into sight. She wore a dress in the Highever style and her light red and gold curls blew gently in the breeze. A pair of sea green eyes lifted to his. It couldn’t be. Was he seeing a ghost or deluding himself into thinking that this was his Elisabeta? She slowly stood, as if she were going to walk to him, but then stopped.

“Beta?” The name was a whisper.

“Your Majesty, the crowd is noticing your absence,” John spoke from behind him. “Is that the Herald of Andraste? She fits the descriptions I’ve heard.”

Fergus had said that the Herald had gone to the memorial. “It must be,” Alistair followed him away, stunned at how much the woman who played a key role in the Inquisition looked like his Elisabeta. He returned to listening to the reverend mother drone on and trying not to look bored out of his mind. His mind was racing at what he’d seen, though, and was definitely not bored.
After the ceremony, Alistair said goodbye to Fergus’ family.

“She didn’t want to talk to you?” Fergus asked.

“Who?” Alistair wondered. “The Herald of Andraste? We didn’t have a chance.”

“I guess it’s better you didn’t,” Fergus shrugged. “You are a married man, after all. Perhaps it’s better that you two not chance restarting anything. After all, she is trying to begin a new life after being dead for ten years and had enough on her plate with the Inquisition. She doesn’t need to deal with things she can no longer have.”

He saw those eyes again. It couldn’t be. “She… isn’t the Herald of Andraste just some mage who managed to survive the Conclave and can now close the rifts?”

“Alistair,” Fergus rubbed his eyes. “I had problems believing the evidence in front of my eyes, too. She is… somehow… it’s Elisabeta. Our Elisabeta. The Herald of Andraste is my little sister. The Maker… Andraste… they gave her back to us.”

“I… I should go see her,” he couldn’t believe that it had been her he’d been looking at. It wasn’t a ghost or a doppelganger. “I should…”

“You should go,” Fergus advised. “Among the belongings you gave to me when you brought her ashes to Highever was a pair of rings. You took the ring she gave you off of your hand and you wear someone else’s ring now. Let her find happiness with someone else, as you did.”

No, Alistair wanted to scream. No, he hadn’t found love with anyone else and had no desire to. He wanted to rush to the woman he still loved, would always love. Fergus was right, though. He was married and she deserved more happiness than he could give her. She’d been gone for ten years and… and… her death was his fault. All he had to do was agree to Morrigan’s plan and go through the dark ritual. They would have been together the last ten years, then. As it was, he’d watched her die, helpless to stop it; to take her place as he’d planned. It was his entire fault. He nodded and rode away.
Elisabeta returns to Highever.

Elisabeta’s first stop from Haven had been the Storm Coast, where she’d found the Chargers fighting off Venatori. That’s what they apparently called themselves according to the mercenaries who had been fighting them. She didn’t like finding the cultists so close to her home, especially crazy Tevinter cultists. The head of the Chargers was a Qunari, one of the horned type. He seemed confused that she’d believed his people didn’t have horns.

“I met an Arishok once without horns,” he admitted. “It’s rare, though.”

“I knew a Sten of the Barasaad,” she explained. “He had no horns.”

“He didn’t do something great, that would have celebrated by all Qunari did he?” Iron Bull had an idea of whom she might be speaking.

“No,” she shrugged. “I found him in a cage, awaiting death by darkspawn. A reverend mother had thrown him in there for killing a family of farmers.”

“Oh,” Iron Bull didn’t think that fit what he knew of the Arishok. “Do you know who the Ben Hassrath are?” They had then spent half an hour negotiating his work in the Inquisition, since he was a spy for the Qunari, but agreed to pass Qunari secrets on to the Inquisition. At the end of the discussion, they sent the Chargers on to Haven and Bull accompanied her to Highever.

Elisabeta’s heart pounded and she found herself twitching with excitement as she approached Highever. She knew she was near when she Castle Cousland rising above the forest, standing guard over the Waking Sea. There it was, the home she’d been dragged away from so many years before. “It still stands. The castle was on fire the last time I saw it,” she told her companions.

“It’s made from sturdy stone and bricks, the wood would have been replaceable, but the foundation would have remained,” Iron Bull studied the structure.

“Like the Couslands, the castle survived that dark day,” a retainer rode towards them. “The teyrn is still at the castle. He is cautious these days and wanted me to meet you first, to ensure you are truly the Inquisition representatives.”

“Does he expect us to carry membership cards,” Elisabeta rolled her eyes. “Actually, that isn’t a bad idea. Cassandra, we should do that.”

“How are we going to make these cards,” Cassandra’s voice was flat.

“I might know someone in Kirkwall who could,” Varric offered. “At least it would be something for those who lead the Inquisition and those who tend to accompany the Herald. We
could be our own private club.”

“Really?” She let out a long suffering sigh.

“Talk to your contact, Varrie,” Elisabeta instructed. “Make sure they know my name isn’t Herold.” She turned to the retainer. “I’ll just go to the castle and meet Fergus there, then.”

“Teyrn Cousland insisted that…” The teyrn began.

“Teryn Cousland lost the ability to give me orders when I broke one of his teeth with a wooden sword when I was six and I know the way to the castle,” Elisabeta urged her horse forward, bending forward at the waist to allow Rowan more head as she galloped towards the castle, her home.

As she approached the castle, the clouds overhead split and sunlight shone through; framing her. Hihever itself was welcoming its lost daughter home. The sun still shone around her as she rode through the gates and into the courtyard. Some of the older soldiers, those who had by a miracle survived Howe’s betrayal and onslaught, stopped in their tracks and stared at her. “By the Maker…” Ser Gilmore’s voice trailed off as he looked at his childhood “It can’t be.”

In the middle of the men was her brother. The brother she’d thought lost in the Korcari Wilds. “Fergus!” She jumped off her horse.

Fergus stood stone still. “You’re dead.”

“Not anymore,” she objected. Her voice softened. “I thought you were dead.”

“I was found by Chasnd and nursed back to health,” he explained. “You had a funeral, though. Your ashes were scattered over the sea.”

“It’s me,” she assured him. “Fergus Sarim Cousland, you snuck out of the castle, while buck naked, when you were six and were found by a local shepherd. Who else would know that I didn’t tell Oriana that she wasn’t the first girl you took to ‘your secret hideout’, as you called the caves near the waking sea. I recall there was a local girl named Natasha you’d snuck into those caves. She came screaming out of them, half-dressed after you two had discovered that giant spiders had moved in. Then there was the time you’d used our mother’s prized chalice to make sand castles when you were ten. I never did tell her it was you. Nor did I tell father that you took his prize stallion out hunting when he told you that you couldn’t. Who else knows that you hate Brussel sprouts and your favorite food is strawberries? Who else would help you try to steal mother’s ship for a midnight cruise? Who else’s mother swore she was born with eyes the color of the sea as a tribute from the sea gods, acknowledging the offspring of the greatest noble born pirate ever to sail the Waking Sea?”

Fergus walked slowly towards her. “Pup?” He touched her hair. “It really is you,” he pulled her into his arms. “Oh, pup. How?”

Elisabeta felt her tears begin to flow as her brother used their father’s old nickname for her. “It was a true miracle. Andraste herself truly did return me to Thedas. I’ll tell you the story over dinner tonight.”

“I look forward to it,” he continued to hold on to her as her companions caught up to them.

“Wow, I didn’t know they gave such warm welcomes in Hihever,” Iron Bull eyed the embracing siblings. “Am I next?”

“Bull…” Cassandra swallowed hard, her eyes swimming with memories of love and a pain
she did not wish to share. “Don’t interrupt their moment. Teyrn Fergus Cousland is our Lissa’s brother.”

“Qunari don’t have families,” he commented, eying the pair who’d found each other again. “They like to see us as one big family.”

“That is their mistake,” Cassandra stated.

Fergus, finally, let his sister go. “We need to go to the dedication. There is something I want to show you on the way there, pup.”

The small garden was a work of love. There were statues and flowers all around. There was a statue of a woman with a serene expression, carrying a small child. The child was reaching out to someone else, a smile on his face. Antivan bluebells had been imported and planted around the pair.

There was also a woman in pirate’s garb, her left hip cocked up and her hand on her side. The statue of a soldier was kneeling before her, placing flowers at her feet. The flowers, and the live ones planted around them, were rose hips; they were native to Highever. Those around the statues ranged in color from white to dark pink.

The last statue caused Elisabeta to pale some. It was that of a woman dressed as a warrior. She was raising a large sword as if about to stab it through and enemy. Rosebushes had been planted around her. They now seemed to both protect and trap her.

A stone bench was set nearby, as if to invite people to come by and gaze at the statues and flowers. She sat down. “Tell me that isn’t supposed to be me.”

“You were missed, sis,” Fergus kissed the top of her head.

“The others…” She gazed at her rendition of her departed sister-in-law and nephew, as well as that of her parents. She hadn’t been able to give them any type of rites. “Did you…”

Fergus sat down beside her. “I’d lost everyone, pup. I needed this. I needed to remember those the Maker had given to me. At first it was to give me a place to mourn, and then it became a place I could cherish as I tried to move on. I have remarried and… I have two more children. They are beautiful children. River and the children are already with the reverend mother, I’d love for you to meet them. King Alistair should be here at any moment, as well.”

Elisabeta felt her heart speed up at the mention of Alistair. Part of her wanted to run to where he’d be, the rest of her knew how much hurt that would cause. “Is An… his wife going to be there as well?”

“I don’t know,” Fergus looked over at the statue of his first wife as if looking to her for answers. “She doesn’t often come to Highever with him, but she does like to be seen; to make sure no one forgets she is queen.”

“He married her,” she whispered. “I could see him again, but he could be with her.” She looked to the statues of her parents. They’d been so much in love and had built such a beautiful life together, before choosing to die in each other’s arms. “Perhaps it’s best if I don’t see him. I need to continue to build a life without him. Cassandra, could you attend as the Inquisition’s representative, please? I want to stay here and… I never even got to say goodbye.” She wasn’t sure if she meant her parents
or Alistair. “Not a real goodbye, anyway.”

Cassandra nodded and let Fergus lead her away. “Iron Bull, with me.” He obediently followed.

Elisabeta didn’t know how long she’d sat at the beautiful memorial before she sensed a presence, a very familiar presence. It was as if the other half of her soul had reached out to knit back together with the part she still carried. She lifted her eyes and met a pair of familiar, golden brown ones. He’d changed, it had been ten years after all and he hadn’t been restored to life by a goddess. His hair was blonder, and styled differently, and he had a tidy, close cut beard. There were also a few new lines around his eyes. Worse was his stance and expression, it was evident that some of the joy had been seeped from him and he was harsher. She’d wanted him to stand up for himself more often, but there was just something more rigid about him.

He spoke first; at least she thought he had. “Beta?” His old nickname for her was little more than a whisper.

She stood, unsure if she was about to go to him or run for him. She realized that she needed to go to him. She needed to touch him, to make sure he was really in front of her.

“Your Majesty, the crowd is noticing your absence,” a dark haired soldier broke their moment.

Alistair nodded and left with him. Just like that, he’d left her? Did he not even want to see her? She realized that he likely didn’t. He was married now, to Anora. He didn’t need old lovers chasing after him. He didn’t need them at all. She was an inconvenience now. If she tried to go after him, she’d also be an embarrassment. What would she say anyways? Thanks for breaking your promises? Hey, I’m back from the dead, is there something you wanted to tell me? So, what’s it like bedding a viper, does she try to sink her fangs in you while you hump her? The thought of Alistair with that snake made her blood boil. No, she wouldn’t go after him. He’d chosen long ago. Heck, he’d just seen her and chose to walk away. She would just avoid him from then on. Thedas was a big place, it wouldn’t be hard.

Elisabeta slowly made her way to the back of the crowd that was listening raptly to the reverend mother. She was speaking of the Divine’s deeds and tragic death, going on about her greatness and how she would be missed. From her own understanding, Kirkwall’s chantry had been destroyed and the mages and Templars had both turned on the Chantry. She wasn’t sure how that made the woman great.

As the woman droned on, her eyes met those of the king’s and held for several moments. Maker’s Breath. Her breath stilled and her heart began to beat faster. She used to love gazing into those big, brown eyes and even now the world seemed to freeze around her when she did. How did he have so much power over her still?

When the reverend mother was done, Fergus lit a symbolic flame and the people all bowed their heads. Yet the cursed ex-lovers still locked gazes as if their souls were trying to communicate with each other. It was Fergus who broke the spell. He whispered in Alistair’s ear and led him away.

Elisabeta moved to rejoin Cassandra and Iron Bull, but was stopped by an elderly lady. “I have sold my weaves to the Couslands for three generations now. How did you manage to return to life Little Lissa?”
Elisabeta recognized the woman. “It was a gift from Andraste.”

“Bianca, James,” the woman called to two of her grandchildren. “Come listen to this.” She turned back to Elisabeta. “You’re the Herald of Andraste, aren’t you?”

“I am,” Elisabeta confirmed.

“Tell us what the Inquisition is doing.” James pleaded as he joined them. “If Andraste resurrected our hero to help them, their work must be important.”

Elisabeta had a large crowd gathered around her by the time Fergus came to her. “Sorry, I was just seeing... the king... off.” He took in the gathered Highever citizens. “Pardon me, everyone, but I’d really like to catch up with my little sister. I’m afraid you’ll have to forgive me.” He took her hand and led her away. “Let me introduce you to River and our children. Then we’ll have a nice dinner and get you settled in.”

Dinner was a lively fare. The Iron Bull kept young Bryce entertained. The toddler and Qunari seemed charmed by each other. Eleanor was more interested in Cassandra. She asked her question after question about her sword and the Seekers.

“You would think that she didn’t know that you know how to handle a sword,” Elisabeta commented to Fergus.

“River wants her to be an archer like her,” Fergus revealed. “Eleanor wants to be a warrior.”

“Like your father?” Elisabeta thought it sweet.

“Like Uncle ‘Tair,” Eleanor declared. She scowled at her aunt. “He didn’t stay to visit because of you.”

Elisabeta’s head jerked back as if she had been slapped. “Really?”

“Eleanor Oriana Cousland!” Her mother glowered at her child. “Apologize to our guests. The Inquisition being here had nothing to do with him having to leave. There is a rift in West Hill and he wanted to get it contained.”

“That’s their job, isn’t it?” Eleanor indicated the Inquisition members. “He pob’ly didn’t stay cause he doesn’t’ like the ‘quisition.”

“This is your Aunt Lissa’s home as much as yours young lady,” Fergus’ voice was firm. “I, for one, will be saying a prayer of thanks to the Maker tonight that she is back here again, even if she does have to leave to go save Thedas.”

“One of the guards told another that it was good that the king and Aunt Lissa weren’t both staying here,” Eleanor declared. “He said ‘it would only be trouble’ and that the evil queen would have a fit.”

“He’s likely right,” Elisabeta stood. “I’m going to bed. I hope no one is sleeping in my room now.” She left the dining hall without a backward glanced and walked through the castle to the family wing, her feet taking her unwaveringly to the room where she’d slept most of her life.
When she opened the door, she let out a little sob. Very little had changed, but there were a few items that had changed. It still had the same bedspread and curtains. But on the bed and bedside were some of the items she’d had on when she’d died.

“Alistair gave me most of your belongings,” Fergus spoke from behind her. She hadn’t realized he’d followed her, which was rather sad for a rogue. “Most of them are in the chest,” he indicated the chest at the foot of her bed.

Elisabeta sat down on the floor and opened it up. There were her sleeping clothes, the armor that she was wearing when she’d died, a pair of leather leggings and a few tunics, as well as a few dresses. She began lifting out the items on top of the clothes. The first was a blue ribbon choker with a silver pendant that depicted a pair of griffons facing each other. “This was a gift from Alistair,” she whispered. She still remembered the sweet, loving look on his face as he tied it around her neck in the middle of the Denerim market. He’d kissed her neck tenderly after he had. “As were these,” she lifted a pair of gold combs with tiny diamonds and apatite stones.

“They’re very pretty,” Fergus dutifully nodded.

“I’m glad you approve,” Elisabeta muttered. Then she lifted the other two items, a pair of rings. One was a winding blue and silver metal. The other was gold with an engraved Highever pattern. She’d found her missing engagement ring. The one she’d thought had likely still been on her hand when her body was cremated. No, here is was. Nestled next to it was the one she’d given to Alistair. It had been her father’s, recovered from Howe’s body. She still remembered the searing anger she’d felt when she realized that he’d taken it. She also remembered how touched Alistair had been when she’d held it out to him after accepting his ring. He’d put it on his left hand and swore he would never take it off. Yet here it was. “He…” She choked on a sob, her hand closing on the rings she held in her palm. He drew her legs to her chest, closed her eyes and let the tears flow.

“Lissa… pup?” Fergus sat beside her, unsure what to do. He drew her into his arms and just held her as she sobbed.

It was several moments before she could talk again. “He… he gave you our rings.”

“Wasn’t one of those our father’s?” He questioned.

She nodded. “I gave it to him when… Fergus, we were engaged when I…” She couldn’t say the rest.

“I know,” he patted her back awkwardly. “He told me. He said that I should give the rings to my first child so they and their spouse could wear them one day. He said something poetic about them possibly being his heir, if he never had his own children, and how that meant that one day the King and Queen of Ferelden would wear them.”

That just made her cry harder. “We were supposed to wear them and pass them down to our children… that will never happen, though. Will it?”

“Pup…” Fergus had no idea what to say. He did want her to move on, to find her own happiness. “I thought… well, they’re your rings. Alistair said you took father’s ring off of Rendon Howe’s body.”

“I did,” she confirmed.

“So you should give them to your children, the ones you’ll have some day when you find someone worthy of your love,” he assured her.
“Or when I enter into some loveless political marriage,” she snorted. “Apparently, that is what everyone is doing these days.”

“Hey, I love River,” Fergus protested. “If I can find love again, then so can you. I promise.”

Elisabeta climbed to her feet. “I guess you’re right, at least in my head I know that is the right choice.” She went through her old belongings on the bedside table and found a gold chain. She put the rings on there and put the chain around her neck. She noticed her old harp sitting in a corner. She plucked one of the strings and then began tuning it. “What about my lap harp? I purchased one while I was running around Ferelden during the Blight.”

“It wasn’t among the things Alistair gave me,” Fergus found that strange.

“How about my swords?” she continued to tune the harp. She decided that she would send it onto Haven.

“Alistair sent back the Sword of Cousland, which I’m grateful for,” Fergus admitted it. “I have been using it.”

“That’s fine,” she nodded. “What about Starfang and the Asturian’s Might?”

“How many swords did you need?” Fergus chuckled.

“Two,” Elisabeta shrugged. “But it’s always nice to have a backup.”

“He only gave me one back,” Fergus admitted. “He keeps one that belonged to some mighty Grey Warden displayed at the castle.”

“That would be Asturian’s Might,” her mind went back to when she’d seen Alistair earlier in the day. He hadn’t been wearing a sword at all. She wondered if that were wise for a Ferelden king. Starfang was made from star metal and was superior. She couldn’t see him keeping it, though; not the man who had married Anora and sent her brother their engagement rings. “Was there a magically preserved rose? It was in a strange wooden box that kept it bespelled?”

“No,” he confirmed. “Maybe it was destroyed. I know there was a rose on your body when you were cremated. Your friend, Leliana said Alistair had placed it there. She came up to Highever with me to ensure that all of those loyal to the Howes were gone.”

“I guess it doesn’t matter anymore,” she needed to let go, not hang on. She tested the harp again and then began running her fingers across the strings, the melody was somber and full of melancholy.

Fergus sat down on the bed. “I’m glad you’re home, pup. You don’t know how thankful I am that you have been returned to us. Don’t worry about Eleanor; I think she’s a bit jealous of you. She has a crush on the king. She’s only five and has a crush.” He didn’t mention that the king’s own feelings had been evident to anyone who’d seen him looking at Elisabeta. If Anora had been there, he would have had to protect his sister from the queen’s wrath. He studied his only sibling. Perhaps it would have been Anora who needed protection. “I hope you can stay more than one day.”

“What about the rift in West Hill?” She continued to play.

He waved the concern away. “The king will take care of it; he didn’t just get his sister back. Besides, you can easily win Eleanor’s affections if she sees you sparring with the guards in the morning.”
Elisabella let out a little laugh. “It’s good to know she’s a Cousland.”
Recruiting

Chapter Summary

Elisabeta travels back to the Hinterlands, going through Lothering.

Elisabeta stopped in at West Hill on her way to the Hinterlands and closed the rift reported there. She had sent a few of her personal effects to Highever, including her harp. Then she had stayed in her home for another two days. Fergus had been right, the moment her nieces had seen her spar with Ser Gilmore, she’d won the girl’s admiration.

During the journey, she worried if Alistair might still be there and harshly reminded herself for the hundredth time that she didn’t care anymore. She was moving on and he was no longer part of her life.

She was both sad and relieved when she efficiently closed the rift with only a handful of Ferelden soldiers there. Most had no clue who she was, but there were a few who gasped as they realized just who and what she was; not to the Inquisition, but to Ferelden.

“It’s her,” one declared to his companion. “I fought in the final battle against the archdemon in Denerim. That’s our hero. Andraste has returned her to us.

They stopped to camp south of the town of Lothering, as they progressed to Redcliffe. Elisabeta was disturbed by what she saw. She remember a town with lush farms, green grass, trees, and refugees fleeing for their lives. Now the ground was brown and cracked. Vandal Aria and Felicious Aria were breaking through the ground. It would be many more years before the land was useable. “Cassandra, can we find out if the Crown has used mages to try and heal this land?”

“I’ll have Josie ask around,” Cassandra shook her head at the area. “Was this caused by the Blight?”

“Lothering used to be a lush, green land,” Elisabeta revealed. “I met Leliana here. There was a darkspawn horde on its way when I did.”

“Hawke is from Lothering,” Varric revealed. “He’s talked about running from here. His family… they didn’t quite leave on time, an ogre killed his sister. He really loved her; he says she was the best of the Hawkes. I never thought that I would be here to see what was left behind.”

“I didn’t think I’d return, eith…” Elisabeta stopped talking as she passed by the remains of the chantry building. There were swords and armor scattered around. There were also piles of ash, as if those who’d finally come back to take care of the casualties of the Blight had just piled up the remains of the darkspawn’s victims and burned them in a huge pyre. “This isn’t right; they should have been given proper Andrastian funerals.”

“Whoever oversaw the cleanup efforts was probably more concerned with making sure they didn’t raise as the undead,” the Iron Bull reasoned. “There was no time left for sentimentalities and
they would have been lucky if there was anyone left for such emotions.”

“Bethany Hawke and Aveline’s first husband, Wesley, were both killed fleeing this place,” Varric revealed. “I wonder if there is anything of theirs left among the rubble. I wonder if we can at least give them a proper funeral at last.”

“We can look,” Elisabeta offered.

“I’d also like to find their home,” Varric admitted. “There may be something salvageable that we can take back for Hawke.”

“I thought you didn’t know where Hawke is,” Cassandra’s voice was terse.

“That doesn’t mean I can’t hold on to the item,” Varric shrugged.

“Let’s look around… and loot,” Elisabeta slid from her horse.

That night, Elisabeta unpacked her pipes and stood on a small hill, looking towards Ostagar as she played. Her leather battle coat swayed in the wind and her long braid swirled around her matching, tilted brim hat. The song was solemn and comforting as she played to the spirits of those who’d fallen during the Blight.

“You fought in the Blight?” Bull spoke when her first song had ended.

“I did,” she confirmed. “I… well, let’s just say I was the last victim of the Blight.”

“Do you want to talk about it?” He urged. “Perhaps it would tell me what is going on between you and the King of Ferelden.”

“I’m trying to get past that;” she lifted the pipes back to her lips.

“O.K.,” he stopped her before she had a single note out. “Can you just tell me about some of the battles? Did you ever fight a dragon?”

“There were a few dragons,” she admitted.

Things had improved a bit when Elisabeta’s group returned to the Hinterland’s Crossroads. They spent a day asking around about a Grey Warden running around and then went to the cabin where he was believed to be staying. The cabin was situated picturesquely by a lake. It was small, but well kept.

Near the cabin, we burly man in Grey Warden armor standing in front of men who were dressed, and held their weapons, like farmers who were hoping they just had to scare away a few crows. “They will make this a fight, not us,” he declared. “Remember how to carry your shields! You’re not hiding, you’re holding. Otherwise, it’s useless!”

“Blackwall?” Was he really instructing men who had never fought before? Elisabeta knew without a doubt that Grey Wardens didn’t recruit those who had no idea to fight.

“You’re not…” he approached her, sword drawn. “How do you know my name? Who
sent…?” Shouts interrupted him. He lifted his shield, stopping an arrow meant for Elisabeta’s head.

A man dressed in a bandit’s garb and carrying a mace shouted, running out from the nearby trees. Elisabeta briefly wondered how they had approached so quietly. They would have either had to cross the lake or made the trip through mountainous foliage. It wouldn’t have been easy.

“That’s it,” Blackwall declared. “Help or get out. We’re dealing with these idiots first.” He turned to the men who were likely more skilled at wielding pitchforks. “Conscripts, here they come!”

Elisabeta unsheathed her swords and slipped into the shadows. She took her first two opponents out before they even realized their danger. Meanwhile, Varric’s Bianca released arrow after arrow, as Iron Bull swept two of the supposed bandits into the lake where their blood mingled with the water. Cassandra took out the remaining one.

Elisabeta continued to watch the men go.

As the men walked off, Varric murmured to Elisabeta. “What did they do? We saved them.”

“Noticed that, too, did you?” Elisabeta continued to watch the men go.

Blackwall gazed at Elisabeta. “You’re no farmer. Why do you know my name? Who are you?”

“I’m many things to many people,” she began. Something seemed off about him. She figured that it had to do with his being a Grey Warden, when she no longer was. She couldn’t quite put her finger on things, though.”

“Well, I’m asking,” he growled.

“My parents named me Elisabeta Cousland. I’m an agent of the Inquisition.” That was all she planned to tell him for now. “I’m investigating whether the disappearance of the Wardens has anything to do with the murder of the Divine.”

“Maker’s Balls,” he cursed. “The Wardens and the Divine? That can’t… no, you’re asking, so you don’t really know. First off, I didn’t know they disappeared. But we do that, right? No more Blight, job done, Wardens are the first thing forgotten. But one thing I’ll tell you, no Warden killed the Divine. Our purpose isn’t political.”

“Isn’t…” She gave a little snort and shook her head. “There seems to be a few things wrong with that statement. If the Wardens just disappeared after every Blight, Thedas would be in even worse shape every time one started. I’m not accusing, though, not yet. I just need information. I’ve only found you, not any from Ferelden and not the rest from Orlais.”

“Why do you believe I’m from Orlais and not a Ferelden Warden,” he seemed a bit nervous suddenly.

“You’re accent is decidedly Orlesian,” she informed him. “Relations between Ferelden and Orlais would have had to have drastically changed in the last ten years if the Crown is all right with a large group of Orlesian Wardens moving in, instead of replenishing Ferelden’s numbers among her own people.”
“Perhaps I was assigned to Ferelden before the last Blight,” he challenged.

“No, you weren’t,” she crossed her arms. She wasn’t going to tell him just how she knew he couldn’t have been assigned to Ferelden or how she knew that only one Ferelden Grey Warden made it through the Fifth Blight alive.


“Have you?” She didn’t want to tip her hand about just how much she did know about Grey Wardens. He hadn’t reacted at her name, so she thought he was unaware of her own connection to the Grey Wardens. Still, some things really bugged her. “You called those men recruits, but did you even put any of them through the Joining?”

“The Joining… uh, yes, the Joining,” he stammered. “That is done at our fortresses and I didn’t want to take those men from their families.”

“Yet they think they’re Grey Wardens now,” she continued to push. “What is going to happen when they try to go up against a darkspawn? They don’t have the ability to sense them yet. They don’t appear to have the skills to fight them, either. When did Wardens start recruiting the untrained?”

“We can train them after recruitment,” Blackwall shrugged. “Things are different in peacetime. There isn’t much interest since the archdemon is dead and there is no need for conscription, since there’s no Blight coming. Treaties give Wardens the right to take what we need. Who we need. These idiots force this fight, so I pretended to conscript their victims. They had to do what I said, so I told them to stand. Next time, they won’t need me.”

“Since when can Wardens take what they want?” She had worked so hard negotiating treaties and working for the money to pay for the supplies her team needed. They could have just taken what they wanted? Dang, she wondered if Alistair had known. Likely he hadn’t. They had been the two youngest Grey Wardens.

“It’s complicated,” he shrugged. “If there’s a Blight, everyone has to help fight it. The treaties are ancient, Outside of Blights; they are as binding as a clever tongue can make them.”

“Really, then why…” She broke off. She was going to ask where the Orlesian Grey Wardens were while Ferelden fought on its own. That would be revealing more than she planned to, yet. It was easier to investigate the disappearance of the Grey Wardens without anyone realizing it was a former Warden, returned from the dead, asking. It was also obvious that this Blackwall hadn’t ever tried to enforce a treaty with a Circle of Magi that was being overrun by abominations, a dwarven kingdom in a civil war, or Dalish Elves who were under siege by werewolves. That was part of her problem, she realized. He didn’t seem to react like a man who had stayed home while the neighboring kingdom was battling the Blight. Something was definitely off. “Well, thank you, Warden Blackwall. Your information has been… well, rather useless. But you tried.” She moved to walk away.

“Inquisition…” Blackwall called after her. “Agent, did you say? Hold a moment.” He rushed to her. “The Divine is dead and the sky is torn open. Events like these, thinking we’re absent is as bad as thinking we’re involved. If you’re trying to put things right, maybe you need a Warden. Maybe you need me.”

She lightly bit her bottom lip. If she let him join and took him to Haven, then Leliana could figure out who he really was. No one in their right mind would pretend to be a Grey Warden. Perhaps he was just trying to forget his inaction from ten years before. She could make sure at least
one Orlesian Warden did the right thing this time. “The Inquisition needs all the support it can get, very well, Warden Blackwall. Welcome aboard.”

“Good to hear,” he smiled at her. “We both need to know what’s going on and perhaps I’ve been keeping to myself for too long.”
Elisabeta approached Redcliffe Village. She’d been in the village before, but it seemed to be in a new location. The entrance had definitely moved. As she approached the gates, she thought back to the last time she’d been in the seemingly cursed village. That time, she’d found the people cowering in the cellars of their home and the chantry building from the walking dead. It was also when Alistair had told her the truth of who he was, that he was King Maric’s bastard son and the last of the Theirin line. They’d had that in common, or so she’d thought at the time. Now she knew the Couslands would go on. Would the Theirins, though? They’d once dreamed of combining their bloodlines, of creating life together; a son and daughter. They would have his sense of humor and her determination. Now, because of twists of fate and a broken promise, those children would never come to be.

She unsheathed her swords and unleashed her anger on the demons spilling from the rift. Her handsome prince was married to someone else. The children and life they’d dreamed of together were obliterated from existence and she’d do the same to the demons. She noticed that they were spawning and moving strangely, they’d slow down and then speed up as if time itself was slowing down and then speeding up. She cut a swath through the demonic creatures and lifted her left hand. The light shot out and tore into the rift. She then pulled back, stitching the hole into the Fade closed.

“Are you all right, Tempest?” Varric frowned at her.

“Just some bad memories,” she assured him.

“Thank you!” The guard gushed. “You have saved the city!”

“For the third time,” Elisabeta muttered. “One would think this city could figure out how to defend itself.” As she entered the gate she looked back and then back at the town. “They rebuilt in a different spot. That explains the more defensible position… from walking dead.”

“This town is full of mages now, though,” Bull pointed out.

“They needed defense, too,” Elisabeta shrugged. “Those Rogue Templars were rather bloodthirsty.”

“The bandits running around seem to be just as bad,” Blackwall pointed out.

“Seeker Pentaghash!” A scout ran to her. “I told the others you were coming, but no one was expecting you.”

“They weren’t expecting the Inquisition?” Elisabeta’s leather, musketeer style hat covered most of her hair and shadowed her face, but her raised eyebrow was evident.

“Not even Grand Enchanter Fiona?” Cassandra was shocked.

“No, my lady,” the scout trembled before her.
“Go to Haven and report to Leliana,” Cassandra was visibly trying to hold her tongue. The sound of disgust didn’t come out until after the scout had left.

“So Fiona just forgot chatting with us?” Elisabeta rolled her eyes. “This town is cursed, I’m telling you.”

They continued into the city, the crowds were made mostly of mages, but there were a few locals walking around. They walked past an older woman who was telling stories to those gathered around her. “King Alistair is from here. He and the Hero of Ferelden…” She stopped speaking. “The Warden!” She gasped and rushed to Elisabeta’s group.

“Yes, I am Warden Blackwall,” Blackwall smiled at her, benignly. “How might I be of service, my lady?”

“Not you,” she waved him away and beamed at Elisabeta. “It is you, isn’t it? I remember you. First you saved us from the walking dead. Then you returned when the horde came and saved us again. Now, in our time of need, you’re back.” The woman embraced her. “But you died at the Battle of Denerim, didn’t you?”

“I did,” Elisabeta confirmed. “Andraste brought me back.

“Praise be to the Maker,” the storyteller continued to hold onto her. “Our hero has returned to us. It is the Warden!” She announced to everyone.

“Warden?” Blackwall studied her, Elisabeta thought he looked nervous.

“I was a Green Warden,” she still didn’t want him to know her own connection to the Grey Wardens yet. “We were a group of young nobles who went around helping the people of Ferelden. It isn’t like I have the taint or anything.”

“Taint?” Blackwall repeated. Elisabeta narrowed her eyes at him. “Um… of course, you don’t have the taint. Why would you?”

“I just thought that you had thought she’d meant Grey Warden,” Elisabeta still eyed him suspiciously. It was the first time she wished she did have her old Grey Warden abilities, just so she could detect whether or not Blackwall had the taint.

“A Tevinter Mage had taken over and thrown Arl Teagan out of the castle, he is trying to force all of the Children of Redcliffe out of our home,” the storyteller continued. “We need your help once again.”

“Because no one else can seem to deliver you from invaders and marauders,” Elisabeta murmured. “Teagan certainly seems incapable. This may take a bit of finessing, but I shall save you… again.”

“I’m glad you’re helping the town’s folk,” Blackwall complimented her.

“I’m surprised they managed to rebuild without me,” Elisabeta muttered. “Do you know that they were suffering from an outbreak of wyvern fever the first time I ever visited Redcliffe? When I returned after the Battle of Ostagar, they were under attack by the walking dead.”

“Which I unleashed on them,” a sandy haired young man spoke from nearby. He had been on the docks with some of his friends.

“Connor?” Elisabeta supposed she shouldn’t be surprised to see him. She knew he’d been
sent to Kinloch Hold after Morrigan had chased the demon out of him. “What happened wasn’t your fault.” It was his mother’s.

Cassandra scowled. “His case is a shining example of why we need Circles.”

“It’s true,” Connor sighed, melancholically. “I caused so much death and destruction.”

“It was his mother’s attempts to hide the truth that led to the disaster,” Elisabeta countered. “She wanted to keep his magic a secret and hired an apostate to teach him. Only the apostate happened to be working for Loghain at the time, because it was better than going with the Templars who were hunting him. He poisoned Connor’s father. Connor had no one to guide him, except his crazy Orlesian mother who had to ask who I was. It wasn’t as if we’d seen each other less than a year before at Arlessa Wulff’s banquet.”

“You’re being more forgiving than I deserve,” Connor protested.

“I was there, Connor,” she reminded him. “I know what happened. I have been returned to Thedas by Andraste herself. She forgives you, you were a frightened child.”

“But…” Connor began.

“Are you questioning Andraste’s Herald?” Elisabeta put her hands on her hips. “You are forgiven, live with it.”

“The tavern is nicer since they rebuilt,” Elisabeta observed as she walked in.

Fiona rushed to her. “We’re waiting for the magister, he should be here soon.”

“Magister?” Elisabeta repeated. “And how exactly did a magister come to be calling any shots in Redcliffe?”

“Sit down, I’ll explain,” Fiona led her to a table.

“This had better be the most compelling explanation I’ve ever heard,” Elisabeta muttered.

A barmaid ran to the table and placed a flute of red wine in front of her. “It’s the Dragon 9:30,” she smiled. “In your honor. It’s compliments of Madame Bella,” She leaned closer. “She and I beg you to help us again!”

“I’m working on it,” Elisabeta whispered back. She turned her attention back to Fiona. “You approached me in Val Royeaux about a possible alliance. Now I come to Redcliffe to talk to you and I hear you’ve made an alliance with a Tevinter Magister. This is not a good thing; it’s a very dumb move. I’m also very unhappy to hear we have a large Tevinter presence in the city known as Ferelden’s First defense. So what’s the deal, Fiona?”

“It was shortly after the Breach appeared,” Fiona explained. “The Templars were bearing down on us when Magister Alexius and his fellow Tevinters appeared. They repelled our assailants and saved several mages. Since then I have… turned over the Southern Mages to him.”

“Turned over?” Elisabeta took a sip of her wine. “I didn’t realize they were your property and part of your domain to give over to anyone. This is Ferelden, not Tevinter. The last person who
tried to condone slavery in this nation lost a duel to me and I let my boyfriend behead him. His head rolled across the bannorn and landed at his daughter’s feet. It was a thing of beauty. Where is Arl Eamon? He was there and could tell you all about it.”

“He’s in Denerim,” Fiona explained. “He moved there to be King Alistair’s head advisor. He made his brother, Teagan, arl as his son, Connor, could not inherit… due to his being a mage.”

“Ah, the Herald of Andraste,” a Tevene accent interrupted her. “I’m sorry to keep you waiting. I am Magister Alexius. The Southern Mages are mine, so you will be dealing with me.”

“Oh, they’re yours?” Elisabeta leaned back and glanced at her friends.

“They have entered into indentured servitude to Tevinter,” Alexius explained.

“Oh, really?” Elisabeta glanced at her friends. “The last time I dealt with Tevinter Slavers, they were more forward about what they were doing.” She leaned across the table towards Alexius. “Those slavers are all dead now, by the way.”

“Are you threatening me?” Alexius’ eyes widened.

Elisabeta raised her eyebrows. “I’m just giving you the history of Ferelden. After all, you are a long way from home.”

“I am,” he acknowledged. “But you are no Ferelden, either.”

“Yes, I am,” she corrected him. “Does the accent not give me away? I’m from Highever.”

“You’re… not from Ostwick?” His brows creased in confusion.

“No, I’m definitely from Highever,” she assured him. “I have an annoying little title that even has ‘of Ferelden’ in it, but that is neither here nor there. We were talking about the mages.”

“Yes, you will need to deal with me if…” Alexius stopped talking as a man in a garish yellow outfit approached. “Ah here he is…” The magister began.

“I…” The man stumbled. Elisabeta rogue reflexes allowed her to easily leap from her chair and catch them man.

“Felix,” Alexius immediately began fussing over the man like an overprotective, obsessive mother hen with her favorite chick. “You aren’t well come with me.”

When he was one, Elisabeta looked down at the note the man in garish yellow that Alexius had called Felix pressed into her hand. *Meet me in the chantry; your life is in danger.* She showed the note to her companions.

“He could be a potential ally,” Blackwall decided.

“It’s probably a trap,” Varric signaled the barmaid. “We should go and trigger it.”

“That sounds like a plan,” Elisabeta smiled when the barmaid set another wine in front of her without her even having to ask.

The tavern owner, Bella, came up to them. “Can you do something about the Vints?”

“I’m working on it,” Elisabeta assured her. “It may take some doing, though. They seem to be well entrenched in here.”
“A little too well,” Bella sat across from her. “A few of the ‘Circle Mages’ seem a little too fond of Tevinter and just happen to not be able to recite the Canticles of Light, or any other canticles, correctly. They are like the children of nobles who skip the Chant on Sunday morning to go sailing. Who grows up under the stern eye of the Chantry, with Templars guarding them, and can’t do their canticles?”

“They probably have had spies in here since the rebellion,” Varric spoke up. “They’d have been foolish not to, but if they are still undercover then something bigger is going on here. It sounds like they had a bigger plan all along.”

When they’d finished drinking, Elisabeta began striking up conversations with the mages who patronized the tavern.

“Tevinter is our salvation,” a gaunt blonde mage declared to her not ten minutes later.

“Really?” Elisabeta raised an eyebrow. “And where are you from?”

“I was in the Ostwick Circle,” she declared. “They always overlooked my talents, though.”

“Oh? Perhaps you’d like to recite the Canticles for me. I always liked the part about the magisters invading the Golden City or Andraste becoming the Maker’s Bride,” Elisabeta requested. “Any Circle Mage can do it.”

“You’re just trying to trick me,” the mage flounced away.

“Spy,” Varric concluded.

“Spy,” Elisabeta agreed.

They met up with a tranquil on their way to the stairs and recruited him. He’d be a great aid to Minaeve and claimed he was great with healing potions. When he made the pronunciation, Elisabeta had hugged him. He was now on his way to Haven.

In the tavern’s rooms, they found references to the atrocities committed by the Templars. Entire Circles were annulled for giving their mages too many freedoms.

Elisabeta glared at Cassandra. “So this is what the Seekers and Chantry were up to while I was gone. They were slaughtering innocents.”

“I had nothing to do with that… and neither did the Divine,” Cassandra insisted.

“If the Divine isn’t responsible for the actions of the Seekers and Templars, then who is?” Elisabeta challenged. “She oversaw the Chantry and claimed to have been anointed by the Maker. Are you telling me the Maker is all right with what happened or with the head of Andraste’s Chantry being so busy attending parties in Orlais that she ignores what is happening to His children? “Do the Templars and Seekers not answer to her? If she isn’t responsible, then who is?”

“Those balls and parties are an important part of politics,” Cassandra declared. “Her Most Holy endured them for the sake of the Chantry.”

“Her focus should have been on her sheep, not keeping the Cheese Eating Mask Monkeys happy,” Elisabeta stuffed the account in her pack and stormed off.

“I thought Ferelden’s king was obsessed with cheese,” Bull followed her. “Owe, Varric, why’d you kick me?”
Elisabeta stopped for a moment. “Yes, he is very fond of cheese. I’m impressed by the Qunari spy system. Did you also know that he tells bad jokes and his favorite color is blue? Oh, yeah, Ferelden needs to fear you guys.” She rolled her eyes and kept walking down the stairs.

“You know the…” The Iron Bull stopped and glared at Varric. “Why do you keep kicking me?”

“I want you to be quiet until we can have a private little conversation,” Varric hissed. “It appears there are some things the Ben Hassrath have not uncovered.”

Neither of them noticed Blackwall glaring stonily behind them. They did notice that Cassandra was fuming.
Elisabeta walked into the new chantry in Redcliffe to discover a rift in the middle of the grand hall. A mage was fighting the demons that were spilling out of it.

“What is it with this town?” She unsheathed her swords and lopped off the closest demon’s head as her companions entered the fight. “Leave it for 10 years and it goes to shit.”

“Oh, yea, this is what I signed up for!” Bull roared. “Who’s your daddy?”

Elisabeta snorted. Why hadn’t Sten been so free spirited? She’d thought all of the Qun were dour sourpusses until now. She lifted her left hand and spilled energy into the rift. More demons popped out, but her companions were on them like white on rice before she could even swing her sword. She lifted her hand again and poured more energy into the rift. When she pulled back, the energy stitched it shut.

“How did you do that?” A rather handsome Tevinter mage beamed at her. “You don’t know, do you? You just wiggle your fingers and it happens.”

“Who are you?” Elisabeta was pretty sure she’d never met the rather dapper Vint before. His accent was definitely Tevinter.

“Ah, I’m getting ahead of myself, I see,” he grinned cheekily at her. “Dorian of House Pavus, most recently of Minrathus,” he bowed to her. “How do you do?”

“Watch yourself,” Bull warned. “The pretty ones are always the worst.”

“Suspicious friends you have here,” Dorian’s elegant eyebrows lifted.

“Suspicious and a bit offensive, I thought I was the pretty one,” she performed a curtsey that had Dorian gazing at her in admiration. “Elisabeta of the House of Cousland, most recently of Haven; although, I am one of the Highever Couslands.”

“You are very lovely,” Dorian agreed. He swept up an arm and posed. “But there is none more dashing than I. I have the fact that I am the only child of Magister Halward Pavus and a wonderful catch.”

“I am the only daughter of Bryce and Eleanor Cousland and the younger sister of Teyrn Fergus Cousland,” Elisabeta announced. “We are the most powerful noble family of Ferelden, second only to the king.” She stepped in front of him and also posed, one hand on her hip and chin lifted.

He laughed merrily. “We must just be amazing together.”

“Yes, we must,” she agreed.

“Are they bonding over how pretentious their families are?” Cassandra snorted in disgust to cover
up her astonishment.

“You could join them, if you just embrace your own family, Seeker,” Varric pointed out.

“The last of the Couslands…” Blackwall frowned. “I swear I’ve heard of the family before.”

“So you’re a powerful mage?” Elisabeta eyed Dorian.

“I am,” he agreed.

“So you can heal during a battle, right?” She gazed at him hopefully.

“Well… no, that is a specialization that I didn’t learn,” he admitted. “I…”

“What is going on?” Elisabeta threw up her hands. “I am stuck in the Void for ten years, come back, and mages have all forgotten how to heal! The healers apparently all died… or blew up chantries and disappeared.”

“Yes, well… sorry,” Dorian was confused by her dismay. “I… anyway, Magister Alexius used to be my mentor, so my information should be valuable… as you can imagine.”

“That is true,” Elisabeta agreed. “That may not be your greatest value. How good of a mentor and teacher might you be to someone who suddenly woke up with, or returned from the dead with, magical powers? Could you teach her how to channel and control them? Because all she has now is a bald elf who hates boots and loves naps. He tried to get me to go into the Fade. The last time I was dragged there, well… I don’t remember it all and I think I met Andraste. The time before that, though, I was alone and fighting darkspawn, golems, demons, crazy mages and Templars, and Chantry sisters with shivs. It was horrible and I don’t want to go back. He went storming off when I told him I’d killed spirits and demons in there.”

“I could help you, yes,” Dorian agreed. “Wait! Came back from the dead?”

“Great, you’re coming with us,” Elisabeta decided.

“You can’t just invite a Tevinter Magister home with us,” Cassandra protested.

“You heard him,” Elisabeta pointed out. “He isn’t a magister.”

“Don’t you want to talk about how your life is in danger?” Dorian wondered. “Let’s start with Alexius claiming the allegiance of the mage rebels right out from under you. As if by magic, yes? This is exactly right. To reach Redcliffe before the Inquisition, Alexius distorted time itself.”

“Oh, you mean he used magic to suddenly appear right after the Divine died?” Elisabeta considered the possibility. “I was making my way out of the Abyss and being brought back to life by Andraste, so I believe it. Besides, that rift we closed when we arrived in Redcliffe was twisting time, funkily. Of course, that could be something to do with Redcliffe. I swear this town is cursed.”

“You catch on… wait,” Dorian’s eyes widened. “Made your way out of the Abyss?” He shook his head. “I’ll have to ask you about that later, we have to worry about the rifts and time distortions now. Soon there will be more rifts like the one you saw here, which I would love to discuss as soon as you explain what you mean by making your way out of the Abyss. I’ve changed my mind and I must here about this now. The rifts are what can wait.”

“I’ll tell you the story in exchange for teaching me how to control and channel the magic I suddenly had when I returned to life,” Elisabeta promised. “I had no magic before I died.”
“Very well,” he wanted to hear this story. “For now, let’s concentrate on Alexius, the magic he is using is wildly unstable, and it’s unravelling the world. What I don’t understand is why he’s doing it, ripping the world apart just to gain a few hundred lackeys?"

“He didn’t do it for them,” Felix emerged from the shadows.

“took you long enough,” Dorian gave his friend a little bow. “Is he getting suspicious?"

“No,” Felix shook his head vigorously. “But I shouldn’t have played the illness card. I thought he’d be fussing over me all day.” He looked to Elisabeta. “My father’s joined a cult of Tevinter Supremacists. They call themselves the ‘Venatori’. And I can tell you one thing; whatever he’s done, he’s done it to get to you.”

“All this for me?” Elisabeta’s hand fluttered over her heart and she sniffed. “And here I didn’t get Alexius anything.”

“Send him a fruit basket,” Dorian suggested. “Everyone loves those. You know you’re the target. Expecting the trap is the first step in turning it to your advantage.”

“Are you coming, Dorian?” Felix turned to leave.

“Oh, no,” Elisabeta put a possessive hand on Dorian’s arm. “He’s coming with me. You are free to tag along as well. You don’t know healing magic do you?”

“I’m not the most gifted…” Felix let out a sigh. “No.”

“Did the Chantry put some sort of ban on healing magic?” Elisabeta wondered. “What is going on around here?”

“I guess I’m going with the Herald,” Dorian put a hand dramatically on his forehead. “It seems she has magical powers that no one taught her to use and only I can save her from herself.”

“Something like that,” she agreed. “Plus, he needs to tell me about these rifts and time magic. In exchange, I’ll tell him all about returning from the dead.”

“I’ll keep in touch,” Dorian promised his friend. “For now, I must go and join the rustics.”

“Oh, Haven is even rougher than you think,” Varric warned.

“It used to be inhabited by cultists,” Elisabeta informed him. “And the fact that they liked to commit human sacrifice wasn’t why they remained undiscovered for thousands of years.”
The sun was still shining when Elisabeta stepped out of the chantry. “Dorian,” she looked back at her newest companion. “Did you need to pick up any new supplies here?”

“I don’t believe so,” he sniffed. “I don’t suppose they have any high quality staffs or mage coats.”

“We have and excellent smith at Haven,” Elisabeta assured him. “Let’s go get you some supplies. If nothing else, we should get some better materials for our smith. He doesn’t have much back in that village.”

They headed into several of the shops. As Dorian perused different material, the storyteller wondered in. “Oh, I was hoping to see you again, Lady Cousland. There is another story that I feel compelled to tell you.”

“Oh?” Elisabeta hoped it didn’t have anything to do with Ferelden’s current leadership.

“There is a story about a spirit of valor that lives in a nearby lake. Some call her the Lady of the Lake,” the storyteller began. “Young ladies bring her daisies and crystal grace, but she is of Valor and prefers blood lotus. Some say she is waiting for another flower as well, one that represents valor and a pierced heart. Go to her, she may be of aid.”

Elisabeta had an idea of a proper offering. “I will, thank you.”

Upon reaching the Crossroads, she deployed some of the troops into the city itself. “Don’t interfere with what is going on with the mages… yet. Just watch over the townsfolk and keep them safe.”

“This should be Cullen’s decision,” Cassandra objected.

“He isn’t here and the people asked for our help,” Elisabeta countered. “I’ll send him a message, letting him know what is going on, but I’m not changing my mind.”

The Ferelden Crown is not going to like this,” Cassandra didn’t let up.

“I really don’t care what they do and don’t like,” Elisabeta pointed out. “They should have been taking care of their people. If they don’t like the Inquisition being in a key strategic city, then they can get off of their butts and protect their own people. I thought that is what Alistair was going to do when I helped put him on the throne. It was his birthright, but I really thought he was going to do well by it. Then he proved me wrong by continuing to listen to Eamon and marry Anora. I dare any of them to come challenge me to my face. Now if you’ll excuse me, I need to go pick some flowers.”
“I can’t believe you are really doing this,” Blackwall shook his head as Elisabeta walked along the docks near the cabin where he had stayed during his time in the Hinterlands.

“The storyteller’s other tales were all true,” Elisabeta revealed. “Why not this one? Now move a bit back, we don’t want to scare this spirit.”

“You don’t want to be trafficking in spirits at all,” the Iron Bull protested.

“Now you sound more like Sten,” Elisabeta shooed him back. Then she knelt on the docks and did not lower a single flower, but a bouquet into the water. It was a blood red rose surrounded by blood lotus. She’d tied red twine around the stems to hold them together.

The tip of a sword slowly appeared, then the hand holding it. Elisabeta reached to take it from the hand. When her own hand touched the hilt, the rest of the spirit emerged. It appeared to be that of a young woman. Her blonde hair flowed in an unseen wind and she was clad in a flowing white dress.

“There you are, finally,” the spirit spoke. “Elisabeta Cousland, the chosen leader of Ferelden.”

“Alistair is the leader of Ferelden,” Elisabeta protested.

“You were meant to rule at his side, though, weren’t you?” The spirit gently reminded her. “You, who were born of the mighty Couslands, who lost their chance at greater titles, first when Elethea listened to the wrong advisers and lost to King Calenhad. Then again when your own father supported Cailan. The banns were ready to name him king, instead. Many lost lives could have been prevented that day.”

“I… yes, they could have,” she agreed. “My father would never have trusted Loghain.”

“No, he wouldn’t have,” the spirit smiled gently. “You are still meant to be a great leader of Thedas and I give you this to aid in your cause. New trouble stirs and you must use it to defeat a would-be god.”

“A would be god?” Elisabeta repeated. “Is that who killed the Divine?”

“It is,” the spirit agreed. “Take this sword, Excalibur, and use it to unify the people of Thedas together. It is a sign of your position and destiny.”

“I will,” Elisabeta studied the sword. It was well balanced and made of a strange silver metal that might even be stronger than star metal. The hilt was decorated with Highever knots and the end sported a red ruby. The cross guard had the same pattern, but with a rose in the middle and blood lotus at either end. She ran a finger along it, she could feel power coming from the sword itself.

“Thank you…”

“I have many names,” the spirit continued to smile. “Some call me The Spirit of Valor. Others call me The Lady of the Lake. One mage used to call me Nimue. You may call me friend. You will always have my blessing, just remain worthy of the sword.” She sank back into the lake.

“Thank you!” Elisabeta called again.

The land lifted again, this time holding a leather scabbard that held the same markings as the sword.
Elisabeta took it and sheathed her prize.

“Your majesty,” Dorian bowed.

“Watery tarts handing out swords is no system for government!” Bull objected. “A council deciding what is best for the people is better than someone lobbing swords at whomever they please.”

“What did she mean by you putting Alistair on his throne and that you were supposed to rule by his side?” Blackwall wanted to know.

“It’s just an old heartache and choices having consequences,” she waved it off. “Someday I may tell you about it, but not now. Now we need to get back to Haven.”
Elisabeta returned to Haven with three new companions and the belongings of a previous life, although she’d sent much of that ahead of her.

“I’ll get settled in before our first lesson,” Dorian told her as they rode into the town. He looked around. “That may take a while.”

“I need to speak with the Inquisition’s leaders,” she informed him. “That will also take…” She trailed off as she heard a dog’s barking. Hearing a dog’s barking shouldn’t have been that strange in Haven, after all they were still in Ferelden, yet she hadn’t seen any dogs there. This dog’s bark was very familiar. She was sure her ears were playing tricks on her, but slid from her horse and followed the sound anyway.

The sound was coming from where the Inquisition’s soldiers were training. Sure enough, she could see Cullen yelling at the men. There was a mabari standing beside him, barking, as if also giving orders to the inadequate fighters. The markings were exact, still she did not dare believe.

She didn’t have to say anything, the dog’s ears perked and his nose went into the air, sniffing. Then he turned around and began giving a succession of yips. The large mabari ran at her.

“I’ll take care of this creature,” Bull began moving forward. She hadn’t seen him nearby.

“Don’t you dare touch my dog!” She shouted at him.

Calenhad sprang past the Qunari as if he weren’t there and jumped on Elisabeta, his paws on her chest. He gave another bark and licked her face.

Elisabeta threw her arms around him. “Calenhad!” She burst into tears and her mabari began nuzzling her in comfort. She sank to the ground and pulled him into her lap. “Oh, Calenhad, you’re alive.” She kissed the top of his head and his nose.

“He’s been keeping me company since he came to Haven,” Cullen sat down beside them and began petting Calenhad. “He is a fierce and mighty warrior.”

“That he is,” Elisabeta agreed. “Although, he is past due for retirement.”

“That doesn’t mean he can not assist in commanding,” Cullen scratched the dog’s ears.

“No, it doesn’t,” she agreed. “It is so good to see you, old friend. Did you know that Fergus is alive and has more children?”

The dog huffed. He knew, but Fergus hadn’t been his human. He’d belonged to her.

“Where has he been sleeping?” She asked Cullen.
“In your cabin,” he admitted. “He sniffed it out his first day here and insisted on sleeping beside your bed, he’s been waiting for your return. Although, he keeps me company in the mornings and Leliana in the afternoons. She says they have fought many fierce battles together.”

“So they have,” she agreed.

“Leliana asked to talk to you when you returned,” Cullen admitted. “So did Josephine.”

“They can wait a while,” she continued to cuddle with her mabari hound. “Calenhad and I are having a reunion.”

“I hope you don’t mind if I keep you two company while you do, my lady,” Cullen continued to stroke a hand along Calenhad’s flank.

She was shocked that he would take time from his duties, but he had obviously forged a friendship with her dog and that was the highest recommendation of character anyone could have. “I would be happy for it.”

Elisabeta went to Leliana first. She could hear the spymaster talking to someone else. Her steps sped up when she heard the other voice.

“So she knows about Alistair and his… poor decisions, my poor deadly goddess,” there was still a thick Antivan accent in his words and a devil may care undertone. Yet there was also sorrow in them, as if he took on some of her pain. It was that that caused her to continue to walk slowly to the tent.

“Zevran?” She noted that he did look a bit older and now sported a scar near his hairline and another along his left jaw. “Where have you been? Did you bring Calenhad back to me?”

“Lissa!” He gathered her into his arms. “So it is true, the Maker has returned you to us in our time of need. Yes, I had Calenhad with me. He has aided me in hunting down the leaders of the Crows for the last eight years.”

“How did you end up with him?” She hadn’t thought them overly close and would have suspected Sten of stealing her dog before anyone else did.

“I… it is not a story you likely want to hear,” he warned.

“The parts that she doesn’t know only make you look even better,” Leliana assured him.

“I can not look any better than I am,” Zevran assured them. “Still, if you must know, I shall tell you. After your…funeral…” Zevran sniffed, but made sure to keep his arm around Elisabeta, assuring himself that she was really there. “I stayed with Alistair. I’d decided, before the final battle, to become your bodyguard. Who better to guard Ferelden’s queen than a former assassin? When… well, I decided to honor you by guarding Alistair. After all, if I couldn’t protect you, I’d protect the person you loved the most. It only took a few weeks for Eamon to begin insisting that Alistair find a bride and continue the Theirin line. After a year, he began insisting that Anora was the only viable choice. He would pressure Alistair and hounded him relentlessly until he gave in a couple of years later or so it seemed.”

“Eamon did want him to marry Anora, he’d pressed the match since we revived him using
Andraste’s ashes,” Elisabeta remembered.

“I do seem to recall that, yes,” Zevran agreed. “Alistair would not go for it and you were determined that the shrew not get anywhere near the throne or your man.”

“It seems she has both now,” Elisabeta bit her lip, refusing to give into the pain of that.

“Yes, well, I wasn’t going to stick around to watch that happen and told Alistair that myself,” Zevran slid to the ground and patted the spot beside him, waiting for Elisabeta to sit down beside him again. “I informed him that if he married her, it would betray your memory and all you stood and died for. I also called him a coward and a schmuck for not standing up to Eamon. You had taught him to stand up for himself and his giving in was equivalent to spitting on your pyre.”

“Thanks for that,” she hugged him.

“He claimed it was what was best for Ferelden,” Zevran patted her back. “On the morning he married the shrew, I left. As I was packing up, Calenhad came into my room. Alistair had insisted on keeping him. Well, Calenhad wasn’t going to stick around either. He sat beside my bag and put his favorite chew toy down beside it. I took that as him expressing his wishes and we departed together.”

She kissed his cheek. “Thank you for your loyalty. I saw him while in Highever, you know.”

“You saw Alistair?” Leliana had known the circumstances of Zevran’s departure from Denerim and had only been listening with half an ear.

Elisabeta nodded. “He was at the dedication to Justinia.”

“What did you say to each other?” Leliana put down her reports.

“Nothing,” Elisabeta slumped against Zevran. “He said my name and then his guard, or an aid, or somebody came up and talked to him. He just walked away. He made no effort to even talk to me.”

“What about after the ceremony?” Leliana pressed.

Elisabeta just shook her head. “He immediately left for West Hill. I… Fergus gave me everything that Alistair had sent to him after… the battle.” She pulled the chain out from under her tunic. “I’m thinking of having Josephine write and demand Starfang back; he gave Fergus almost everything else, including our rings.”

“Did he keep nothing?” Zevran was scandalized.

“The rose, the first present he’d ever given me, was magically preserved,” Elisabeta recalled. “That wasn’t in Highever, neither was my lap harp.”

“I remember listening to you play that thing,” Zevran smiled. “Most often, it was Leliana playing her lute and singing around the campfire. You’d wait until you were alone in your tent. Alistair being in there with you apparently still counted as alone.”

“The music helped with our nightmares,” she explained. “Besides, a noblewoman who plays the harp is so clichéd.”

“I miss hearing you play, too,” Leliana admitted. “Although, I have enjoyed the sound of the bagpipes at night when you’re in Haven.”
“I had my larger harp from Castle Cousland sent ahead,” Elisabeta admitted. “Everything else I brought along is in my pack. So Zevran, how many of the Crows’ leaders have you killed.

Zevran leaned back. “Let me tell you about my wicked adventures in Antiva.”

It was several hours later, that Elisabeta stepped into the chantry with the intent of finding Josephine.

“There you are, my dear,” Vivienne stepped in front of her.

“What are you doing here, you wannabe Orlesian who can’t even do healing magic?” Elisabeta raised an eyebrow. “And why are you in my way? I’m looking for Josephine.”

“I heard you are talking to the Free Mages,” Vivienne didn’t move. “They are dangerous, you have no idea what can happen without Chantry oversite.”

“I’ve seen the worst that can happen with Chantry oversite,” Elisabeta announced. “They couldn’t do worse policing themselves than they did under the thumb of a bunch of religious zealots. Now, I came to talk with Josephine, not you. I have no interest in talking to a Templar Tramp.” She moved to step around Vivienne, but the mage stepped in her way again.

“Darling, you obviously…” Vivienne didn’t see the fist coming. She was knocked back half a foot and landed on her butt, legs splayed in an undignified spread. “Why you…” She sent a freezing spell at the Herald of Andraste.

What she did not realize was that she was facing the Hero of Ferelden. Elisabeta quickly unsheathed her swords and crossed them, blocking the spell. A light flared from Excalibur and the spell rebounded, freezing Vivienne in her undignified splay.

Elisabeta sheathed her swords and walked into Vivienne’s office. “Why was I just confronted by the Chantry Shill?”

“Who?” Josephine looked into the hall and saw the iced Vivienne statue. “What happened?”

“She tried to freeze me, her spell was rebounded,” Elisabeta shrugged. “I am the chosen of Andraste after all.”

“Tell me you didn’t punch her first,” Josephine waved at Vivienne’s position.

“She wouldn’t get out of my way,” Elisabeta explained. “Besides, anyone who would pretend to be Orlesian really needs to be punched. Does she think I can’t tell a fake Orlesian accent? Where is she from really?”

“The Free Marches,” Josephine admitted. “Leliana had her background looked into after she joined the Inquisition and I agreed to…” She stopped, looking at Elisabeta nervously.

“What did you agree to Josephine?” Elisabeta pressed.

“I agreed that she could have a spot in your inner circle,” Josephine finished.

“You what?” Elisabeta glared at the ambassador. “She can’t do healing magic and dresses like she’s from Orlais. Furthermore, they are my inner circle. She can work for you.”

“Threnn is still trying to requisition a healer who can hold their own in a fight, perhaps Vivienne can help me with that,” Josephine hedged. “But I did agree to…”
“She can take care of my dog while I’m away from Haven,” Elisabeta wasn’t sure she wanted to do that to poor Calenhad, though.

“I don’t think Commander Cullen would agree to that,” Josephine sighed. “He is already wrestling care of that mon… lovely example of a mabari war dog from your friend who thinks I’m either his long lost sister or his next lover.”

“Why not both?” Elisabeta remembered how Zevran used to hit on her until he realized that her heart had been spoken for and that what was between her and Alistair was simply physical or a fling.

“He’s an elf and both my parents are humans,” Josephine pointed out. “There is no way I am his sister.”

“You could be the sister of his heart and his next lover,” Elisabeta sat down. “Give it a shot. Meanwhile, I have returned with three new members of my inner circle, I really don’t need another.”

“Vivienne can teach you to control your magic,” Josephine further argued.

“Not in the condition she’s in now, she can’t,” Elisabeta smirked. “Besides, I brought Dorian back to Haven and he’s teaching me.”

“Dorian?” Josephine repeated.

“He’s a mage from Tevinter with inside knowledge about the Magister who has taken over Redcliffe,” Elisabeta explained. “Alexius used to be his mentor.”

“Speaking of Redcliffe, I understand that you ordered Inquisition soldiers into the city,” Josephine lifted her quill. “I imagine that Ferelden’s rulers will not be happy when they hear that. What should I write to them to explain our presence?”

Elisabeta leaned forward. “Tell them that they aren’t doing their jobs, so their people came to me for help. Tell them this isn’t the first time and that Anora is still an incompetent git. Tell Alistair… the king…” She stopped for a moment; a lump had formed in her throat. “Tell him that I expected better from him.” *Tell him I still love him.* NO! She didn’t want that getting to him. That was a personal problem that she had to overcome. “Also, tell him I want my swords back, especially Starfang.”

“I can’t tell them that!” Josephine was scandalized.

“Fine, I will then,” Elisabeta grabbed Josephine’s quill and paper. She wrote the exact message and made sure to sign her name large and clearly. “I’ll have Ser Plucky deliver it.” She stood, strolled pass the Vivienne ice sculpture to Leliana’s tent. “I have a message I need delivered,” she declared.

“No!” Josephine ran after her.

Leliana took the message and read it. “There is nothing erroneous in the message and explains perfectly the Herald’s motivations. The Inquisition will back her.” She whistled for one of her birds, while Zevran read the message.

“Leliana!” Josephine objected.

“Anora is a git, she’s right about that,” Zevran agreed as Leliana tied on the message and sent the bird.

“What is all of the commotion?” Dorian entered the tent.
“Well, hello,” Zevran stood and eyed the Tevinter Magister.

“Just a diplomatic disagreement,” Elisabetta assured him. “I’m ready for my first lesson.” She let him lead her away.

“Who’s that?” Zevran eyed the mage’s backside as he left with Elisabetta.

“He’s a Tevinter mage,” Leliana warned. “You don’t want to find yourself shackled and on the way to the Imperium.”

“He can tie me up any time he likes,” Zevran declared. “As long as I get to tie him up later.”

“I thought you wanted to tie me up,” Josephine objected.

“Oh I do, my little apricot,” Zevran assured her. “You would enjoy it, believe me. Have I mentioned that I was born in a whore house? You wouldn’t believe what I learned… and how I need a sweet noblewoman to teach me… proper manners.”

“I should have grabbed Dorian to unfreeze Vivienne,” Josephine silently cursed herself for not thinking of it earlier. “Perhaps I could get Solas to do it.”
Elisabeta breaks out her harp

Elisabeta left her bagpipes in her cabin and had a couple of workers take her harp down to the lake for her. She sat down behind it and closed her eyes. She strung a finger along the strings, eliciting a beautiful scale from them. It was still in tune, despite everything that had happened to her since she’d last played it.

She opened her eyes when she heard Josephine’s voice. “Solas and Dorian both refused to do it. Solas said Vivienne would learn humility this way. Dorian just laughed. Will you please unfreeze Madame de Fer?”

“I’m sorry, my lady,” the mage in question answered. “I would not dare to presume that my skill matches hers and could easily break one of her spells. If I did, she’d harangue me and try to outdo me on every occasion. I would prefer to be ignored by her, like everyone else she deems beneath her notice.”

Elisabeta shook her head. She supposed she should feel at least a little bad for what she had done to the enchantress. She didn’t, though. Vivienne seemed to represent everything she despised. Everything that woman did, she did for power. She wasn’t there for her people, as she claimed. She lived with a married Orlesian duke while the mages back at her circle were left to the mercies of the Templars without anyone to speak up for them, much less protect them. Let her suffer from her own rebounded spell.

Elisabeta’s fingers moved along the harp strings as she sang.

*Cruel is the weather*

*Above Highever*

*And crueler the fate of Tristana the fair*

*For daring to find a lover*

*Tragedy followed that young pare*

Cullen slowly approached her as she played, Calenhad walked sedately beside him. She nodded to him and continued.

*She fell for her lovely Sloan*

*And gave her heart to him alone*

*Yet when he went off to war*

*His own heart it seemed felt free to roam*
And he thought his deeds would be hidden in the clamor

When Tristana learned of his betrayal
Her heart broke and she wore a black veil.
Then came her parent, Tristana you must wed another
And this time she was decked in a white veil
As she vowed her hand and heart to his brother

“To his brother?” Cullen interrupted her song.

“It was no more than he deserved, the cheating snake,” Elisabeta declared. “Although, the brother turns out to be a sniveling coward himself.”

“Really?” He sat down beside her and shook his head. Calenhad sat on her other side and laid his head on her lap.

“Yes, and then Sloan returns and he and Tristana realize that they both still live the other, but it’s too late. Neither can take back their mistakes of the past. He tells her he thought he would die at war and just sought comfort and she tells him perhaps it would have been better if he had, but she’d still be married to someone she can’t care for. They go on this way for decades, each pining for the other, but unable to go to the one they love … and then they die, ironically on the same day.”

“Well, I guess that’s something,” Cullen shook his head. “Why couldn’t she just wait to fall in love with someone worthy of her heart?”

“I always thought her parents pushed her into the marriage,” she mused. “If the brothers had a nice inheritance coming and she was even a minor noble, it wouldn’t have been unheard of. It could have been the other way around as well, a social climb and she was the one with the fortune. I was lucky that my parents had decided to let me marry for love; otherwise, I would have been married off quite early to whomever they thought was the best match. As it is, the boy I was courting was killed when Rendon Howe attacked my parent’s castle and the man I loved married a horrid shrew while I was dead. At least I’m not tied to a sniveling coward.”

“That’s true,” Cullen agreed. “I guess the absence of a title has its advantages.”

“I’m sure it does, Commander,” she agreed.

He laughed. “Fine. How about something less tragic, though?”

“Spoilsport,” she huffed. “My life is tragic, I’m wallowing. If you insist, though…” She began to sing again.

Now come and listen to my tale,
My tale of a hateful witch
Who tried to cast on the Herald of Andraste
She truly was a bitch
Now her powers were not up to the task

For they paled compared to the Makers, Alas

Cullen started laughing. “You’ll have to teach me this one.”

“Right after I teach you *The Empress and the Mabari*. The empress’ unmentionables end up strewn across Southern Thedas and that’s the least of her problems,” Elisabeta began singing again.
It's an Obvious Trap

Chapter Summary

Elisabeta gets an invite to Redcliffe Castle.

“Let’s not do the Stormcoast again,” Dorian protested as Elisabeta sipped her wine. They sat a table in the tavern with Iron Bull and Sera.

“I thought we did well,” Sera burped. “We killed a bunch of spiders and got the Sword people behind us.”

“You did it by killing only one person, too,” Bull raised his mug. “Good work, boss.”

“Hmm… I like boss better than Kadan,” Elisabeta decided. “That’s what Sten started calling me. I have no idea what it means.”

“He called you Kadan!” Bull dropped his mug.

“Whoa there big man,” Dorian protested. “I’ve damaged enough outfits teaching Lissa to channel her magic.”

“I only ruined one,” Elisabeta protested. “I thought my magic was coming along nicely.” She had managed to channel flame into her sword and one point and ice at another. She was hoping for electric next. Each element made her swords more deadly. She kept Excalibur in her right hand and channeled with her left.

“There you are,” Leliana walked in. “Josephine wants to talk to us, but you said you wanted to speak to me in private first.”

“I do,” Elisabeta waved farewell to her friends and followed Leliana. When they were in a secluded corner she spoke. “It’s about Blackwall.”

“What about him?” Leliana had her own suspicions, but wanted to see if they matched with Lissa’s.

“I know that Warden Blackwall is a Grey Warden,” Elisabeta began. “I found a couple of references to him during the Blight and Riordan mentioned him briefly. I’m not sure the man I recruited is a Grey Warden, though. When Andraste brought me back, she undid the Joining, but this suspicion is from more than not being able to sense him. He seems confused about references to Wardens being tainted and the requirements of the Joining. I plan to question him further, see what he says. I want you to look into him, though. Something isn’t right.”

“Agreed,” Leliana nodded. “Oh, before we do see Josephine again, she will probably bug you about unfreezing Vivienne. She is still decorating the chantry hall.”

Elisabeta threw up her hands. “I’m only beginning to learn to channel and control the powers I have. I don’t know how to unfreeze her.”
Elisabeta passed Vivienne on her way to the war room. The enchantress was still frozen, sprawled on her bottom. That had been quite the spell. It had probably depleted all of her mana, which would be why she was unable to free herself. She could hear Cassandra and Cullen arguing in the war room.

“We don’t have the manpower to attack the castle,” Cullen was saying as she walked in. “Either we find another way in or give up this nonsense and go and get the Templars.”

“Redcliffé is in the hands of a magister,” Cassandra countered, warming Elisabeta’s heart. She understood the danger. “This can not be allowed to stand.”


“He finally figured out what my name was? Good for him,” Elisabeta pumped her fist into the air once. “What does he say about me?”

“He’s so complimentary that we are certain he wants to kill you,” Leliana revealed.

“Not this again,” Josephine visibly retrained herself from rolling her eyes.

“Redcliffe castle is one of the most defensible fortresses in Ferelden,” Cullen protested. “It has repelled thousands of assaults. If you go in there, you’ll die,” he told Elisabeta. “And we’ll lose the only means we have of closing these rifts. I won’t allow it.”

“You won’t allow it?” Elisabeta repeated. “The only man who got to tell me what he will and won’t allow died over ten years ago, when he allowed an enemy, who was in the guise of a friend, into our castle. However, I do appreciate you pointing out what value I hold in the Inquisition. Apparently, it is the Mark on my hand that matters, not me. What if I cut off my left hand before going? Would that make you happy? Maybe the Mark would still work without me. You can hold it up to the rifts and see. Wait, no, I like my left hand. We’ll use magic to transfer it to some schmoe more willing to do what you say.”

“We can’t leave the mages under Alexius’ control,” Leliana protested. “And we’d have a hostile force on our doorstep.”

“Even if we could assault the keep, it would be for naught,” Josephine protested. “An Orlesian Inquisition’s army marching into Ferelden would provoke a war our hands are tied.”

“An *Orlesian* Inquisition?” Elisabeta snorted. “I did not sign up for anything *Orlesian*. The Chantry denounced us and no one in this room is Orlesian by birth. Even Leliana’s mother was from Ferelden. She was just raised in Orlais. You also forget that we are leaving a hostile army *in* Ferelden. Redcliffe is known as Ferelden’s first defense. It is the easiest way to invade the country. The south is protected by the Wilds, the north by the Waking Sea, and the east by the Amaranthine Ocean. I know how formidable that castle is to get into. Queen Moira allowed herself to be captured just to get in and talk to Arl Rendorn Guerrin. She was able to convince him to join the rebellion against Orlais, though. So her plan worked. I went through the family’s escape tunnel when I had to sneak in. Leliana was with me. Alistair is apparently asleep on the throne and Anora is incompetent, but I will *not* abandon my country!”

“There must be a way,” Cassandra insisted. “There is a tunnel into the castle?”

“Yes,” Elisabeta confirmed. “Where is Teagan, anyway? It was his job to protect *his* castle. Was
he hiding in the chantry again? I didn’t see him there, but I wouldn’t put it past him.”

“Once he was displaced, Arl Teagan rode straight to Denerim to petition the Crown for help. I doubt he’ll want our assistance once the Ferelden army lays siege to his castle,” Josephine enlightened her. “Especially since you insisted on sending soldiers into the city.”

“If the Ferelden army is going to lay siege, those soldiers are needed to protect the town’s folk,” Elisabeta insisted. “If they aren’t, those soldiers are still needed to protect the town’s folk against the invaders.”

“I could send agents through the tunnel,” Leliana decided.

“Too risky,” Cullen declared. “Those agents will be discovered well before they reach the magister.”

“Why? I managed to get through a battalion of the undead with just Leliana and Alistair. Oh, and Calenhad and Wynne, of course. The tunnel emerges in the dungeons. Not only does that allow a widening of the staging area, but there may be sympathetic prisoners down there now. The dungeons then lead to the courtyard and into the castle itself,” Elisabeta explained. “The courtyard is the most likely area for anyone to notice our agents, but it also has plenty of shadowy corners and a lot of trees. Heck, it even had a revenant when I snuck in.”

“What we need is a distraction,” Leliana declared. “Perhaps the envoy Alexius wants so badly.”

“Focus their attention on Lissa, while we take out the Tevinters,” Cullen’s hand moved to the pommel of his sword. “It’s risky, but it could work.”

“Fortunately, you’ll have help,” Dorian threw open the door and posed dramatically. “You didn’t think you could have a meeting about Alexius without me, did you. I’m going with you to Redcliffe.”

“Well, of course, you are,” Elisabeta agreed.

“Felix will slip me into the castle, unseen before you make your grand entrance. Your agents won’t make it pass Alexius’ magic without my help,” he declared. “From there, I will add to the chaos and be able to watch your back. I do like watching your back,” he added.

She began to smile, but it slipped. What mysteries do you find in those swaying hips? “Thank you.”

“The plan puts you in the most danger,” Cullen looked her in the eyes. “We can’t in good conscience order you to do this. We can still go after the Templars if you’d rather not play the bait.”

Elisabeta let out a sarcastic laugh. “Come on, Dorian. Let’s go save Redcliffe and the mages.”

“Well, at least she’s laughing again,” Leliana watched her friend leave.

Zevran strolled into the war room. “Are you having councils without me? For shame. My little kumquat,” he addressed Josephine. “You must tell me what was so concerning that you are sending Lissa off to Redcliffe again. Don’t you know that bad things happen when she visits? The town has been attacked by the undead, it was attacked by darkspawn, and she cured Eamon and saved his life. The latter might be the worst thing that has happened to poor Ferelden. We should go with her.”

“Perhaps next time, Zev,” Josephine sighed. “Our jobs are here in Haven for now.”
Alistair ran a finger along the mahogany box that he kept on his Bocote desk, as he thought. Inside the box was a magically preserved rose. He’d kept the box on his desk for over a decade now. He would often run his finger along it as he tried to decide what she would have advised him to do. He now knew that he hadn’t been taking that unspoken advice. Beside the box, now sat the lap harp she’d played for him night after night. After he’d seen her again, after so so many years, he’d begun to get professional lessons to play it. If the music master thought it strange that the king was taking harp lessons, he said nothing.

A messenger walked in with a pile of missives for him. “We have reports from our spies in Orlais on their civil war, two letters from the Free Marches, one from Navarra, and one from the Inquisition.”

“Thank you,” Alistair took them. He opened the one from the Inquisition first, wondering if it was from their Ambassador, Josephine, or from Leliana. He had demanded to know why he was receiving reports of Inquisition soldiers in Redcliffe. He still needed to figure out what to do about the castle being occupied and now had to deal with the Inquisition inserting their soldiers into the town. The castle wouldn’t be easy to retake it. Anora suggested not trying and Eamon insisted it had to be dealt with at once.

The letter wasn’t from Josephine or Leliana. After all this time, he still recognized his Beta’s handwriting. He could even tell that she’d been angry when she wrote it; from the handwriting, not just the words. Those words were quite heated.

“Is everything all right, your majesty,” Eamon entered the room, Anora trailing behind him.

“It is the answer from the Inquisition, about their moving troops into Redcliffe,” he handed the letter over.

Eamon’s eyes widened, causing Anora to snatch the letter. “She’s… she… she died at the end of the Blight.”

“It’s her,” Alistair assured him. “She is the Herald of Andraste. The early reports about the Herald’s identity were wrong. It’s Beta… Elisabeta Cousland. She doesn’t think we are doing a good job and that she will do it for us, then.”

“Fuck you, Anora!” Anora repeated the words near the bottom of the message. “How dare she. We will write the Inquisition immediately and assure them that they can not talk to us like this!”

“I believe she has earned the right to do so,” Alistair disagreed. “If you write a letter to her, challenging her, she’d likely just come here and…’” Actually, he liked the idea of having her around. Even if he couldn’t be with her anymore, he just wanted to be near her again. To look into those sea goddess eyes and hear her mystic voice. “If it will make you feel better, go ahead.”

“Alistair!” Teagan marched into the room, sweaty. His retainers behind him. “There has been a
disaster at Redcliffe and you must help me. A Tevinter Magister has taken over. I think it may be an invasion.”

It was time to do his job, Alistair decided. He turned to Eamon. “Get my army ready. We are marching on Redcliffe.”
Infiltrating Redcliffe Castle
Chapter Summary

Elisabeta plays bate and meets with Alexius.

Elisabeta traveled through the front gates of Redcliffe Castle with Varric and Blackwall by her side. “Blackwall, how did you become a Grey Warden?” The same as you, I drank from a goblet of magic badness and passed out. She gave a half smile at the remembered answer. Maker, how could she miss someone so much, someone who had hurt her while she was dead?

“I was recruited in the Free Marches and then assigned to one of our keeps in Orlais,” he answered. “I’m sure there is more to becoming a Grey Warden then being recruited,” she knew it, but wasn’t going to tell him how.

“Well, the recruiter has to think you are worthy of becoming a Grey Warden,” he insisted.

“There aren’t any secret rituals or…” She was cut off by a mage who’d betrayed the cause of his own people by becoming Alexius’ lackey. He was flanked by two armed men in Tevinter style clothes and horned masks. It was as if a Magister had had children with a particularly snooty Orlesian countess. The offspring was a combination of the worst of the two in both looks and personality.

“Alexius’ invitation was for Lady Cousland only,” he stood in front of them.

“You wouldn’t expect me to travel by myself, would you?” She gasped in shock. “I am a proper Ferelden lady. These are my chronicler and fashion expert.” She struck a pose, her leather battle coat expertly framing her and her hat tilted in a roguish style.

“Your what?” Now the mage was confused.

“Chronicler and fashion expert,” Varric repeated. “I write down her ladyship’s exploits so all of the bards and minstrels can sing about it.” He began to sing. “Now here’s the tale, the tale of the beautiful Lady Cousland. She has saved cats, she has saved dogs, and she has even saved a nug. That nug, Ser Schmooples now resides with the Maker, but Schmooples II continues on. He is the spoiled one of the Nightingale.”

“Schmooples?” The mage blinked as if trying to wake up.

“Well, I didn’t name him,” Elisabeta objected. “The Nightingale did. That is one bird you do not want to argue with.”

“It’s true,” Blackwall spoke up. “All of these deeds were done while she was clad in only the finest of fashion. Her coat is made from bear leather, native Ferelden Great Bear leather. It is why it is fashionably black. Her hat is made from the same material. See how they contrast with her pale skin and bring out the color of her hair and eyes. They are both so lovely. The matching black ribbon in her hair that was my doing.” Secretly he thought it a silly noble affection, the ribbon.

“What about the gold chain hiding something under her clothes?” The mage couldn’t believe he’d
just asked.

“That is to add mystery,” Blackwall assured him. “The gold reflects the red gold of her hair, but makes the beholder wonder, what does she have to hide under there? Perhaps it is a sign of her station or a token from a lover?”

“You wouldn’t expect me to go before Alexius without them, would you?” Elisabeta fluttered her lashes, as if she were a harmless Orlesian lady. She wondered if this mage had any idea how dangerous any Ferelden lady really was. “What if I say something that needs to be recorded? What if I see something that inspires me? I need my expert to tell me whether or not we should change my look.”

“They’re armed, though,” the mage pointed out.

“This is Ferelden, everyone is armed. My lady-in-waiting is armed, even when she does my hair,” Elisabeta assured him. “We’re barbarians, didn’t anyone tell you?”

“Good point,” the mage acceded. “Follow me.” He led them past the two Venatori and into the throne room.

Elisabeta looked around the room. Either Alexius or Teagan had done some major redecorating, likely both of them had. Alexius sat in a throne in front of the fireplace, flanked by Felix and Fiona. Yet flanking them, in a pose as if they were about to attack, were two large statues of mabaris. The dragon and serpent were not aware of the danger of the mabari; for the great war dog would snap the neck of the serpent and rip out the throat of the dragon.

Alexius still seemed to be oblivious of the danger, as the Daughter of Ferelden and Chosen of Andraste approached, flanked by the Free Marchers.

“The agents of the Inquisition have arrived,” the mage lackey announced them.

“My friends,” Alexius stood up. “It’s so good to see you again. And your… associates… of course. I’m sure we can work out some arrangement that is equitable to all parties.”

Fiona turned on him. “Are we mages to have no voice in deciding our fate?”

“Fiona,” Alexius voice dripped with long-suffering impatience. “You would not have turned your followers over to my care if you did not trust me with their lives.”

“Because you have one of those faces that just screams trustworthy,” Elisabeta raised an eyebrow. “Fiona may have mistakenly turned her people over to you, or been compelled to by nefarious means, but I still welcome her participation in these talks.”

“Thank you,” Fiona nodded to her.

Alexius turned and walked deliberately back to the throne. He turned dramatically and slowly sat down. Not paying attention to the looming mabari beside him. “The Inquisition needs mages to close the Breach and I have them, so what shall you offer in exchange.”

Elisabeta walked to one of the statues and laid a hand on its head. “I’ll let you leave Ferelden with your life.”

“Are you threatening me?” Alexius was actually surprised.

Felix turned on him. “She knows everything, father.”
“Felix,” Alexius slowly shook his head. “What have you done?"

“Your son is worried about you, you are in over your head and this can not end well for you,” Elisabeta explained.

“So speaks the thief,” Alexius growled. “Do you think you can turn my son against me? You walk into my stronghold with your stolen mark, a gift you don’t even understand, and think you are in control. You’re nothing but a mistake.”

“Your stronghold?” Elisabeta raised her eyebrows and let her gaze tell Alexius that she thought him batshit crazy. “This castle belongs to Clan Guerrin and has for hundreds of years. I am not their biggest fan, but this is definitely their home. If you think I am a mistake, take it up with Andraste and the Maker. I would be happy to arrange an introduction.”

“You are nothing and compared to the Ancient One, less than nothing,” Alexius sneered.

“Father, listen to yourself,” Felix pleaded. “Do you know what you sound like?”

“He sounds exactly like the villainous cliché everyone expects us to be,” Dorian emerged from a side room.

“Dorian,” Alexius was not happy to see him. “I gave you a chance to be a part of this. You turned me down. The Elder One has power you will not believe. He will raise the Imperium from its own ashes.”

“That’s who your master is, and the one who killed the Divine, isn’t it?” Elisabeta deduced. “Is he a mage?”

“Soon, he will become a god,” Alexius declared. “He will make the world bow to mages once more. We will rule from the Boeric Ocean to the Frozen Seas.”

“You can’t involve my people in this!” Fiona insisted.

“Alexius,” Dorian’s voice was a mix of anger and pleading. “This is exactly what we talked about never wanting to happen. Why would you support this?” No one noticed the Venatori behind him, drop to the ground; quite dead.

“What is it with Tevinters wanting to be gods?” Elisabeta asked her companions, who both shrugged. “Isn’t this how the Blights started? Yes, I’m pretty sure it is.”

“Stop it father,” Felix continued to plead. “Give up the Venatori. Let the Southern Mages fight the Breach and let’s go home.”

“No! It’s the only way, Felix,” Alexius insisted. “He can save you.”

“Save me?” Felix was incredulous.

“There is a way,” Alexius persisted. “The Elder One promised. If I undo the mistake at the temple.”

“I’m going to die,” there was no fear in Felix’s voice at those words. “You need to accept that.”

“Seize them Venatori!” Alexius dramatically pointed at Elisabeta. “The Elder One demands this woman’s life.”

The Venatori’s answer was not what he expected. Instead of marching or running boots, there were grunts and thuds. Alexius watched in shock as his remaining Venatori lining the throne room, fell
dead. Inquisition soldiers stood where they once had.

“Hah!” Elisabeta raised an arm. “Your men are dead, Alexius. Seizing me will now be quite difficult for them.”

“You are a mistake!” Alexius lifted an amulet. “You should not have existed.”

“No!” Dorian shot an arcane bolt from his staff and towards the amulet.

Alexius was forced back, but the spell had been cast. A vortex appeared. When it closed, Elisabeta and Dorian were gone.

“Well, shit,” Varric cursed.
Elisabeta felt herself falling; she landed on all fours in a pool of water. It took her a moment to realize that she was in a flooded dungeon. The room looked vaguely familiar. Had she been here before?

“Blood of the Elder One!” Two Venatori were in the room with her, both gripped large two-handed swords. “Where did they come from?” They charged.

Elisabeta unsheathed her swords as Dorian swung his staff in front of him. He unleashed a fireball at their attackers, even as she caused the sword in her left hand, Kindness, to ice over. She blended into the shadows and re-emerged behind the furthest Venatori, crossing her swords at his neck; decapitating him.

Dorian’s set a jet of fire at the other Venatori, engulfing him. By the time the man realized he should submerge himself in the water they were wading in, it was too late for him. Elisabeta looted the bodies and nearby storage containers while Dorian studied the bodies.

“Interesting,” he mused. “It’s probably not what Alexius intended. The rift must have moved us to… what… the closest conclave of arcane energy.”

“The last thing I remember, we were in Redcliffe Castle’s hall,” she looked around again. “Wait… we’re still in Redcliffe castle. I have been here before, it’s their dungeons.”

“You’ve been in the dungeons of Redcliffe Castle before?” Dorian raised an eyebrow. “Do tell.”

“I was sneaking in to save Teagan and find out what dastardly evil creature was causing the walking dead to attack the village,” she explained. “The family escape tunnels emerge here in the dungeons. There was even a bloodmage locked up. Isolde was blaming everything on him.”

“Was it his fault?” Dorian’s dislike of bloodmages was evident.

“He did poison Eamon,” Elisabeta conceded. “But, no, Connor had become possessed by a desire demon and the demon was responsible for the rest.”

“Consorting with demons is never a good idea,” he agreed. “If we’re still in the castle, it isn’t just where, but when. Alexius used the amulet as a focus. It moved us through time.”

“Did we go forward or backward?” She wondered. “I don’t remember Redcliffe castle looking this bad, but it does overlook Lake Calenhad. It could have flooded in the past. Wait, never mind. There have never been Venatori in the castle, so obviously it was forward. Now the question is how far forward were we flung?”

“Excellent question,” Dorian agreed. “We’ll have to find out, won’t we?”
“What was Alexius trying to do?” She wondered.

“I believe his original plan was to remove you from time completely,” Dorian deduced. “If that happened, you would have never mangled his Elder One’s plans.”

“I didn’t,” she reminded him. “That was Tranquil Trevelyan, although she wasn’t very tranquil after she ended up in the Fade. I can still hear her screaming as her emotions all returned. It would have just meant that she was the one he was facing. That idiot! It would also mean that I would likely have been right back in the Void.” Now she was angry. She began picking the lock, trying to still her furious hand. “I’m going to kill that bastard and then beat him with his own head. Souls can’t be destroyed. Why don’t Thedosians understand that?” The door swung open and she marched out.

“I think your surprise in the hall made him reckless,” Dorian continued to talk. “He tossed us into the rift before he was ready. I countered it, the magic went wild and here we are. Makes sense.”

“Sure, your old mentor is insane,” she checked the nearby cellblocks and then headed up the stairs.

“I don’t even want to think what this will do to the fabric of the world,” he followed. “We didn’t so much travel through time as much as punch a hole through it and toss it into the privy, but don’t worry. I’m here, I’ll protect you.”

That took some of the wind out of her. She’d never had anyone offer to protect her, not since her father checked under her bed for monsters. She found her heart softening even more to him. “Thank you,” she said softly and turned around to kiss his cheek. The sound of clanking distracted her.

The halls of Redcliffe had been destroyed and now catwalks stood in their place. Two Venatori were running towards them. “I’m really not liking Alexius’ decorating decisions.” They easily disposed of the two Venatori, without even breaking a sweat. “You have a plan to get us back, I hope. We need to stop this crime against good taste.”

“Agreed. I have some thoughts on that,” he assured her. “They’re lovely, thoughts, like little jewels.”

They found a couple of mages who seemed to have completely lost their minds. They were practically unaware of Elisabeta and Dorian’s presence. There was red lyrium in their cell and they were chanting to Andraste. Then they found Fiona. She was standing, encased in red lyrium. When they first found her, she was leaning against the wall as much as her situation allowed. She stood straight, however, when she saw Elisabeta. “You’re alive… again! I saw you disappear into the rift. I should have… known… that Andraste would just send you back to us again.”

“Is that red lyrium growing from your body?” Elisabeta studied the mage. “How?”

“The longer you’re near it… eventually… you become this,” Fiona’s words were labored. “Then they mine your corpse for more. I have lasted… longer… than the others, likely because of whatever drove the taint from my body.”

“The taint… were you infected by a darkspawn?” Elisabeta was surprised. She only knew of one way to save, or rather delay the death of, someone who had been tainted.”

“Not exactly,” she laughed bitterly. “I was a Grey Warden.”
“You managed to undo the Joining?” Elisabeta was impressed. “How? Could it be done to save others?”

“Joining? Grey Wardens?” Dorian was confused.

“I was a Grey Warden when I died,” Elisabeta explained. “Andraste took the… taint from me. All Grey Wardens are tainted; it’s how they can sense darkspawn and archdemons.”

“I don’t know how I did it,” Fiona admitted. “It was when… well, I guess there is no need to keep the secret anymore. I became pregnant. After I gave birth, the taint was gone. I… other Grey Wardens have given birth before, but they haven’t had their taint removed when the umbilical cord came out.”

“Other Wardens have given birth?” So she and Alistair might indeed have been able to have a child together if she hadn’t died.

“It’s rare, the Wardens aren’t exactly an ideal place to raise a child and few keep them,” Fiona explained. “I had… my best friend…Duncan… take my son to… friends he trusted to love the child and raise them right. They were… connected… to his father.”

“Duncan?” The surprise was evident in Elisabeta’s voice. “You were best friends with that… Duncan.” She had never forgiven him for conscripting her and dragging her from her family. She’d had no desire to become a Grey Warden and he’d forced her. It was the one matter she and Alistair had fought most often about. Alistair worshipped the man.

“You knew him?” Even now Fiona smiled.

Elisabeta was struck by how much that smile reminded her of Alistair. Maybe it had something to do with people who loved Duncan. “He conscripted me.”

“I’m sure Duncan was an amazing man,” the impatience in Dorian’s voice was almost palpable. “We have other concerns right now.”

“No, kidding,” Elisabeta pointed at Fiona. “Fiona has red lyrium growing out of her. I was saying that is quite a problem.”

“Can you tell us the date, Fiona,” Dorian wanted to get back to his biggest worry. “It’s very important.”

“Harvestmere 9:42 Dragon,” Fiona answered.

“9:42?” Dorian was shocked. “Then we’ve missed an entire year!”

“And I missed everything again!” Elisabeta sighed. “One year isn’t as bad as ten, though. It looks like we need to get back. I wonder how far back that amulet can take us. If I can go back to 9:31 perhaps I can prevent my first death and that of the Divine.”

“I… don’t believe it would work past the… explosion… at the… temple,” Fiona was finding it more and more difficult to talk. “The rifts… are… likely… fueling… it.”

“Dang, so I couldn’t prevent Alistair from marrying that shrew, Anora?” Elisabeta exhaled. “Of course, one would think he wouldn’t, because the woman he claimed to love asked him not to. What I would have needed to do was kill Eamon on the rooftop of Fort Drakon. I could make it look like a darkspawn did it.”
“We apparently can’t get back that far,” Dorian reminded her. “But we can go back to the point where Alexius sent us forward. We just need the amulet.”

“Please stop this from happening,” Fiona pleaded. “Alexius serves the Elder One… more powerful than the Maker. No one challenges him and lives.”

“Um, that Maker brought me back from the dead. Well, His Andraste did,” Elisabeta admonished Fiona. “I would like to see the Elder One do that? Killing is much easier than creating or restoring life. I’ve fought an old god before and won, this Elder One will be but another false God that I take down.”

“Our only hope is to find the amulet that Alexius used to send us here,” Dorian insisted. “If it still exists, I can use it to reopen the rift at the exact spot we left… maybe.”

“Good,” Fiona approved.

“I said maybe,” Dorian advised her. “It might also turn us into paste.”

“You must try,” Fiona leaned forward again; the effort to stand straight any longer was too much. “Your spymaster, Leliana, she is here. Find her quickly, before the Elder One learns you’re here.”

“He has my Leliana!” Elisabeta was not going to leave her best friend in the hands of a Venatori madman. “We’ll find her. Be assured of that.”

The next person that Elisabeta found, however, was Blackwall. His eyes now glowed red and he seemed a bit spacey. “Andraste have mercy,” he begged when he saw Elisabeta and Dorian. “You shouldn’t be here. The dead should rest in peace.”

“This isn’t the first time I’ve returned from the dead,” Elisabeta revealed.

“Only this time, she didn’t die,” Dorian sat down to explaining everything while Blackwall freaked out. Elisabeta picked the lock and let him out.

Blackwall decided he’d gone mad, but would go with it. Then he followed them on their search.

Next, they found Varric; he was humming as they approached. Varric took everything a bit more in stride. “Andraste’s sacred knickers, you’re alive.” He stood up, revealing that his eyes, too, glowed red now and a red glow seemed to come off of him. “Where were you? How did you escape?”

“We didn’t escape,” Dorian explained. “Alexius sent us into the future.”

Varric stepped out of the cage the moment Elisabeta opened it. “Everything that happens to you is weird.”

“You noticed that too, huh?” Elisabeta thought back through her life. Yes, weird was one word for it.

“If we get to Alexius, I may just be able to get us back to our own time,” Dorian added. “Simple really.”

“That may not be as easy as you think,” Varric warned. “Alexius is just a servant. His Elder One assassinated the empress and led a demon army in a huge invasion of the south. The Elder One
rules everything. What’s left of it, anyway. Alexius is really not the one you need to worry about.”

“Everything?” Elisabeta repeated. “Highever… all of Ferelden? What about their rulers?”

“They’re all dead, every noble house has been wiped out… sorry, Tempest,” Varric realized what he was saying.

Tears sprung up in Elisabeta’s eyes and then began falling as she thought of her brother and his family. And Alistair… no… she felt her heart still and then crack. She couldn’t breathe for several moments. NO! The tears flowed as she slumped against the wall, falling slowly to the floor, her legs curling up against her chest as if they could somehow protect the heart that was breaking. She’d already thought it broken, but this… “How,” she finally managed.

“Highever was one of the last domains to fall,” Varric sat down beside her. “When Fergus repaired the castle, he wanted to ensure no invading army could take it again. It was more impregnable than Redcliffe and he used its position against the Waking Sea to his advantage. But there is only so much that wood and stone can do against an army of demons. He made sure he kept his family with him until the end.”

“At least he didn’t have to live with their deaths this time,” she wondered who’d had to tell Fergus about Oren and Oriana after the Blight. What about…”

Varric knew her enough to know whose name she was reluctant to say. “King Alistair led his armies against Redcliffe several times. He and Curly joined forces and the joint Ferelden-Inquisition Force tried to penetrate the walls of the castle three times. Alistair and Cullen both died upon it the third time. After news of your death got out… well, Kingly went to Leliana and the Inquisition and begged for their help. He… he felt he had let you down and… the man was inconsolable… he welcomed his death; he just wanted to avenge you first. Curly was more than willing to help.”

That only made her cry harder. At least he… they… were at the Maker’s side, she tried to assure herself. Neither was floating in the Abyss. It was of little comfort.

“We have to go find Leliana and Alexius,” Dorian pulled her to her feet. “We can mourn later, or better yet, get back to our time and make sure they don’t die.”

Elisabeta considered punching him, but he was right… and it would be a shame to bruise that handsome face. “Fine, just point me towards someone I can kill. Someone point me towards this Elder One.”

“Be careful what you wish for,” Varric warned. “You want to take on Alexius, I’m in. Let’s go.”

Venatori continued to try and stop Elisabeta and her friends, much to their own detriment. Unfortunately, they were too late to save a Chantry Cleric from being killed. The woman’s only crime was the refusal to denounce the Maker.

“I’m here to avenge the faithful,” Elisabeta declared as she killed the woman’s torturers and the man who’d taken the cleric’s life. “And I’m solving this theological disagreement by sending you all to the Maker himself.”
“She is like a force of nature,” Blackwall stopped fighting to watch Elisabeta perform a whirlwind move that took down three Venatori at once. She kicked a fourth one for good measure.

“There was a reason Andraste chose her,” Varric shrugged.

As they moved along, they could hear someone else being questioned.

“How did Trevelyan know of the sacrifice at the temple?” A deep voice was asking. “Answer!”

“Ask her yourself,” it was Leliana’s voice. “I understand that she is with the Maker now. I never met her.”

“How did she make herself look like the Cousland woman,” the deep voice was followed by a loud slap.


“There’s no use to this defiance, little bird,” the deep voice insisted.

“You’re wasting your breath,” Leliana informed him.

“So be it,” was the answer. As Elisabeta opened the door, a Venatori was grabbing some sort of tool and approaching Leliana. She looked horrible. Her skin was deeply scarred and rough. Her eyes were becoming sunken and her lips pronounced. It was a nightmare version of the beautiful bard she’d once been. Elisabeta was ready to kill the Venatori, and Alexius, for that alone. Alexius would already die for so many other reasons, though. “You will break.”

“I’ll die first,” Leliana’s outer condition may have gravely deteriorated, but her spirit had not. Her eyes widened as she saw Elisabeta. “Or you will.” She wrapped her legs tightly around the neck of her torturer. In a move that would have made the most dedicated warrior envious, she snapped his neck with her thighs.

“You’re alive,” she breathed as Elisabeta finessed the locks of her chains. “Will Andraste always send you to me in my time of need?”

“I pray so,” Elisabeta hugged her. “You look horrible.”

“Pfff…” Leliana waved her concern away. “I feel great. Anger is stronger than any pain. Do you have weapons?”

“Lel, this is me you’re talking to,” Elisabeta put an arm around her, offering support.


“You aren’t curious how we got here?” Dorian obviously was dejected by not getting to tell his story again.

“No,” Leliana informed him. “I’m not.”

“Alexius sent us into the future,” Dorian told her anyway. “His victory, his Elder One, it was never meant to be.”

“What he means is we need to get an amulet from Alexius and return to the moment he sent us through the vortex,” Elisabeta explained. “It may be the only way to defeat them. It will be the
“Well, I’ve suffered, the whole world suffered,” Leliana announced as she went to a nearby chest and pulled out a longbow. “We’ve gone through it. Still, it may be our only option. You’re right, it is the only way to bring back everyone we lost. Elisabeta, Alistair…”

“I know, Varric told me. Let’s go kill Alexius, you know how fond I am of revenge. We kill him after we remind him that there is but one god and he is the Maker, that is,” Elisabeta declared.

“That sounds good to me,” Leliana agreed.

The two women led the way from the cells towards the rest of the castle.
Elisabeta and Dorian continue to make their way to Alexius.

On the way to Alexius’ chambers, Elisabeta’s group passed through several rooms. In the modified dining room, it wasn’t where the dining room had been a year before, they found a written prayer. It denounced the Maker and praised the Elder One as the new God. “People are bowing down and worshiping this false god,” Elisabeta threw the prayer in disgust. “This is a job for Andraste’s Herald then. I shall avenge both His faithful as the Herald and my countrymen as Ferelden’s Hero. Someone find me more Venatori to kill.”

“This way,” Leliana took the lead.

They went through the courtyard, where Elisabeta had to close two more rifts. Then she looked at the sky. “Makers breath!” Barely any blue was visible, it all glowed green.

“The rifts continued to expand unchecked,” Varric explained. “They’re everywhere now. Redcliffe was one of the worst places hit.”

“Isn’t it always?” Elisabeta noted. “I swear there is something else going on in this area. I would love to do a study of its history. Perhaps send a team out to find out if there is any reason it is constantly being hit by supernatural, and non-supernatural, attacks. It is as if someone cursed this town… or perhaps the Guerrins.”

They continued into the main hall of the castle, where they found yet another large rift and a dozen hapless Venatori fighting it. Elisabeta was happy to lead the charge that killed the Venatori and demons alike, and then she closed the rift. The next thing she knew she was on a silly quest to find a bunch of shards to open the lock that Alexius had put on his door.

“Really?” She shook her head. “Does he expect his own Venatori to attack him?”

“Yes, he does,” Leliana’s voice was matter of fact. “While some may sing the praises of this Elder One, plenty have realized that they made a mistake when they backed him. What good is it to win, if the entire continent is laid waste in the process? Before long, this Elder One and his demons will be all that is left.”

“Not once I get that amulet,” Dorian swore.

About half an hour later, they ended up finding Connor, only to watch him die fighting a demon possession the moment they opened his door. “Really?” Elisabeta folded her arms.

“He fought that demon to the last,” Dorian admired him.

“Of course he did, after what happened the last time he was possessed,” Elisabeta snorted. “He was no fool, despite who his parents were.” She looked at her companions. “My vengeance list is full. Does anyone want to avenge Connor?”

“I’ll do it,” Dorian swore.
“Good, let’s find those shards,” Elisabeta went to the next room.

She soon found Alexius’ journal: *Nothing works. I have tried countless times to go back before the Conclave explosion, before Felix's caravan was attacked by darkspawn, before the Venatori first arrived in Minrathus - without success. The Breach is the wellspring that makes this magic possible, and travel outside of its timeline is impossible. The Elder One's demand that I change the events of the Conclave can never be fulfilled. He may kill me for failing him, but I must protect Felix from his wrath.*

“It is as I thought, the time magic only works up until the point when the Breach first appeared,” Dorian observed.

“That figures,” Elisabeta let out a deep sigh. “No way to go back before then… to fix other events. Something else gets me, though. Dorian you said Felix was suffering from a long time ailment. That wasn’t it, was it?”

“What do you mean?” He tried to keep his voice casual.

“Felix and his caravan were attacked by darkspawn,” Elisabeta jabbed a finger at the journal. “He had the taint, didn’t he?” She turned on Blackwall. “Who are you Warden Blackwall?”

“What do you mean?” Even now Blackwall was nervous.

“Why didn’t you sense the taint in Felix?” She pressed.

“I… I don’t know what you mean,” Blackwall took a step back.

“I mean that a Grey Warden would have sensed that Felix was tainted. The only thing that could have saved him was the Joining,” she took a step forward. “If I do go back, you are not going to know this about me again, but I’m the frelling Hero of Ferelden. I died when I killed the archdemon on top of Fort Drakon. I was a Grey Warden. When Andraste brought me back, she took that all out of me, which is good as I didn’t want to be struck down by the Calling in thirty years.”

“You’re the Hero of Ferelden!” His eyes widened and he looked like he was going to throw himself at her feet and start praising her.

“Let’s just go,” Leliana urged. “There is no time for this now.”

“Fine,” Elisabeta conceded.

In the next room she found more notes. *Introduction of blight to prisoners yields no discernible pattern. Disease progresses erratically; some subjects die within hours despite all efforts, others show no symptoms at all. Subjects may harbor some natural resistance, which makes isolation and testing a priority.*

“They were purposely giving people the Blight?” Blackwall had not realized this. “Why?”

“He was trying to cure Felix,” Dorian admitted. “Yes, Felix has the Blight.”

Then there was yet another note. *Six more subjects died. Transfusions of blood from resistant prisoners slow the rate of corruption only slightly. Healthy flesh taken from live subjects and implanted in the infected will often die even before corruption spreads to it. In cases where implantation is successful, blight corruption spreads across donor flesh faster than host flesh. Prisoner Leliana has been the most useful source of resistant blood and skin to date.*
“They were…” Elisabeta looked to her best friend, noting every single scar and blemish. She reread the words that Leliana had been the most useful. “Leliana, when I first met you, you said that the Maker had sent you to me.”

“Yes, I told you about my dream, or vision, or whatever it was,” Leliana confirmed.

“You said Oghren became a Grey Warden,” Elisabeta tapped her fingers on the desk where she found the note. “Do you know how he fared at the Joining, I mean obviously he lived.”

“I heard he drank from a chalice, burped, and that was it,” Leliana recalled.

“He didn’t even lose consciousness?” Elisabeta shook her head at wonder. “Wynne was a functioning abomination and Sten a hornless Qunari. I wonder what I still don’t know about Alistair and Zevran. I think you all may have been Maker sent.”

“Well, thanks for that,” Leliana raised an eyebrow. “I don’t feel Maker blessed at the moment.”

“You’re still alive,” Elisabeta looked to Varric and Blackwall. “And you actually look better than these two. Who was your father?”

“I don’t know,” Leliana admitted. “Whoever he was, he must be dead now.”

“I’m not so sure,” Elisabeta murmured. “If you never found out, I don’t know how I can and my theories are a little too wild.” Her thoughts ranged from Leliana’s father being a Grey Warden to him being the Maker Himself. Although, her real guess was King Maric. There were legends that spoke of dragon blood in the veins of the Theirins. Dragons were resistant to the Blight.

“Might I suggest we continue looking for shards?” Dorian interrupted. “Fathers are not a topic I like discussing.”

“I adored my father,” Elisabeta recalled. “He was a wonderful man.”

“He didn’t have preconceived concepts about who you should be?” Dorian wondered.

“He had a few ideas and did try to point me in the direction he wanted me to go, but he was never too pushy about it,” she explained. “Right before Howe’s attack, he was leaving me in charge of the castle as he went off to fight at Ostagar. I was expected to take my place among the rulers of Ferelden one day, but at least my parents had decided to let me marry for love and pursue my own interests as well. For noble parents, they were quite loving.”

“Yes, it sounds like they were,” Dorian tried not to let his envy show.

When the last shard had been found, Dorian took the lead to Alexius’ door. He placed the shards and then threw open his arms. “Open sesame.” The doors swung open as if on their own, with a loud bang.

The throne was gone from the room, but the fire still burned. Alexius stood in front of it. A humanoid creature crouched on the ground near his feet.

“I am Elissa Cousland, daughter of Teyrn Brice and Teyrna Eleanor Cousland,” she
announced herself. “I am here to avenge the lives of those I loved; Alistair Theirin, Fergus Cousland, Eleonore Cousland, Bryce Cousland II, Zevran Aranai, Cullen Rutherford, Sera: The Red Jenny, Cal…” She turned to Varric. “What about my dog?”

“I’m sorry,” Varric shook his head.

“Calenhad the Mabari,” she continued.

“I did it for my country, for my son,” he interrupted.

“I am not done listing names,” she clenched her teeth. “And don’t think your son is more important to you than all of those people were to me.”

“She really loved her dog,” Varric agreed. “Oh, and the king, her brother, her nieces and nephews, I wouldn’t interrupt her again if I were you. She’ll probably just kill you more.”

“I will also be avenging…” Elisabeta continued to list names.

“I knew you would appear again,” Alexius didn’t care about her list, although he wondered why the king of Ferelden had been listed first. “But I didn’t know it would be now. I knew I hadn’t destroyed you, my final failure.”

“Was it worth it?” Dorian needed to know. “Everything you did to the world, to yourself.”

“It doesn’t matter now,” Alexius didn’t even look up. “All we can do is wait for the end.”

“It does matter,” Elisabeta assured him. “Everyone who died because of your actions matter to me. People I love more than my own life are dead now. Do you think you were the only one who had someone they cared about in this world?”

“I’ve tried to undo this,” Alexius admitted. “Hundreds of times, I have tried to go back and change the past. But the past can not be undone. All that I fought for, all that I have betrayed, and what have I wrought? I have brought ruin and death, there is nothing else. The Elder One comes for me, for you, for us all.”

Leliana leaped forward and grabbed the creature on the ground, holding a knife to its throat.

“Felix,” Alexius held out a pleading hand.

“That’s Felix,” the horror in Dorian’s voice was palpable, as he took an involuntary step back. Then he took a step forward, letting his anger wash over him. “Maker’s Breath, Alexius, what have you done?”


“Hand over the amulet first,” Elisabeta commanded. “Then we will talk about this.” She didn’t think letting Felix live was doing him any favors.

“Let him go and I swear, you’ll get what you want,” Alexius parlayed.

“I want the world back,” Leliana let the knife slide across Felix’s throat. He fell dead at his father’s feet.

“No,” Alexius’ first word was soft and disbelieving. ”NO!” He lifted his staff and fired and cracked it across Leliana.
The rogue was sent flying, but she simply rolled and landed back on her feet, bow drawn. She fired and flipped away. As she moved out of the blast, Elisabeta disappeared and reappeared behind Alexius. Even as he tried to use his magic to summon a rift, she moved him so he was off balance. Then she used Excalibur and Kindness in a Punisher move. Kindness now had flames of fury coming off of her. He faltered and then felt a bolt from Bianca in his shoulder.

“I’m sorry about this Alexius, but it’s the only way,” Dorian hit him with a fireball.

Alexius tried to cast again, but was hit with an arrow, even as the flaming sword and the holy one crossed sending his head rolling across the hall.

Dorian knelt by the body. “He wanted to die. All of those lies he told himself, the justifications, he lost Felix long ago. He didn’t even notice. Oh, Alexius.”

“I’m sorry for your loss,” Elisabeta rubbed his back. “I know what it’s like to lose those close to you. Now, let’s use that amulet and stop several people I love from dying.”

Dorian held up the amulet as he took it from Alexius’ body. “This is the same amulet we used before. I think it’s the same one we made in Minrathus. That’s a relief. Give me an hour to work out the spell he used and I should be able to reopen the rift.”

“An hour,” Leliana decided the Dorian had either lost his mind or was secretly an idiot. “That’s impossible. What part of ‘there is a demon army on its way’ did you not understand? You must go now.” As if to emphasize her words, the room began to shake.

“That would be the demon army,” Varric confirmed.

“It’s the Elder One,” Leliana agreed.

“You can not stay here!” Blackwall held his sword and shield ready. He and Varric nodded to each other.

“We’ll hold the outer door,” Varric explained. “When they get past us, Leliana will be the next level of defense.”

“No,” Elisabeta shook her head. “Varric, I can’t let you sacrifice yourself.”

“I love you, too, Tempest,” he smiled sadly at her. “If it weren’t for Bianca and that king you can’t get over, and the ex-Templar who seems to have a thing for you, or… actually, there are a couple of other guys who were pining away, but you never noticed… well, if it weren’t for all of those, we might have had something. As it is, I was glad to call you friend and favorite storm cloud.”

“Leliana, I can’t let you commit suicide,” Elisabeta pleaded.

“Says the woman who already sacrificed herself for Thedas,” Leliana reminded her. “You were stuck in the Void for ten years; at least we will go to the Maker. Just look at us, we’re already dead. The only way we’ll live is for none of this to have happened. This time, we’ll be the sacrifice. You do what you do best and save the world. Cast your spell,” she told Dorian. “You have as much time as I have arrows.”

Elisabeta kept her eyes on the doors as she slowly backed up with Dorian.

“Though darkness closes over me, I am shielded by flame,” Leliana drew her bow, arrow at the ready. The door opened and demons threw Varric and Blackwall’s bodies into the room.
“Andraste guide me,” she released arrow after arrow. “Maker take me to your side.” The arrows continued to speed into the demons coming through the door, felling one after another.

“Leliana!” Elisabeta stepped towards her friend.

Dorian grabbed her arm and dragged her back. “If you move, then we all die!”

Venatori had managed to get past Leliana’s arrows. She hit them with her bow and began slashing with her dagger. She rolled over the back of one of the traitors to humanity and used the momentum to kick one of his fellow human vermin. One of them caught her and held her as a demon approached. It then looked like he slit her throat, but she continued to fight.

Dorian pulled Elisabeta back through the rift.
Heartbroken Heroes

Chapter Summary

Alistair and Anora arrive in Redcliffe. There is a lot of yelling.

“Well, shit,” Varric cursed when Elisabeta had disappeared, taking Dorian with her. Then the rift reopened and both were back. “Never mind,” he grinned.

Alexius backed up as Elisabeta marched towards him, rage in her every step.

“You’ll have to do better than that,” Dorian declared.

Alexius sank to his knees. As Elisabeta stood over him. “Did you really think that could stop me? I have already returned from the dead once. I have faced an archdemon and you think a time vortex could stop me?”

“You’ve won,” Alexius conceded. “There’s no point in extending this charade.” He looked to his son, who was once again himself. “Felix.”

“It’s going to be all right father,” Felix assured him.

“You’ll die,” Alexius’ heart wrenched just saying the words.

“Everyone dies,” Felix declared. Alexius just closed his eyes.

“You don’t have to yet,” Elisabeta informed him. “There may be a way to extend your life. We just have to find the Grey Wardens. Their Joining might give you a few decades. You’ll spend them fighting darkspawn, but they will be years of life to spend.”

“Unfortunately, they’ve disappeared,” Blackwall reminded her.

“We’ll find them,” Elisabeta assured him. “I’ll let you know when I do and get your decision then.”

Felix nodded.

“Thank you,” Alexius stood and allowed the Inquisition soldiers to lead him away. Felix followed.

“Well,” Dorian watched them go. “I’m glad that’s over with.”

As if to mock his words, the sound of metal boots marching in order filled the hall. The soldiers wore silver armor with orange trim. Their helmets had the most ridiculous orange ribbons painted onto them.

“… or not,” Dorian had a bad feeling about this.

At the end of the soldiers, Alistair walked in with Anora at his side. They both wore the same shade of brown with white fur trim. Elisabeta felt her nausea well up. It mixed with the myriad of other emotions that were welling up at seeing Alistair again. She was sure that Anora was
responsible for both the bad fashion and the ridiculous Ferelden uniforms. At the end of the hall, far from danger, was Arl Teagan. Teagan’s eyes widened, recognizing her, but Alistair’s full focus was on the woman he blamed for Redcliffe’s predicament."

“Grand Enchanter Fiona,” Alistair addressed her, as Anora folded her arms in what she thought was an intimidating manner. “Imagine how surprised I was to learn you’d given Redcliffe Castle away to a Tevinter Magister.”

“King Alistair,” Fiona approached him.

“Especially since I’m sure Redcliffe Castle belongs to Arl Teagan,” he continued.

“Your Majesty,” she began. “We never intended…”

“You pose a wonderful question,” Elisabeta stepped forward.

“Beta,” Alistair took a step back. “I… what are you…”

“What,” her mouth dropped open. “You didn’t see me standing here?” She let her anger boil, it was the only emotion that wasn’t confusing her and tearing her apart. She’d been trying to deal with the loss of Alistair in that dark future and he was before her. He wasn’t alone; Anora was at his side, in a position that she’d once thought would be hers. Not that of queen, but Alistair’s partner in life. There she was, the evidence that he’d broken a promise to her. She also noted that Starfang hung at his side.

“I… Fiona…” He stammered and then told the truth. “I don’t know what to say to you, Beta. There are millions of things I want to, but not with all of these people standing around us.”

“Well, I have plenty to say to you. The first thing I want to know is how Fiona could give away Redcliffe Castle when it is Arl Teagan’s responsibility to protect it,” she challenged. “Did he give it to Fiona at some point and go on vacation? It is his job to protect Ferelden’s first line of defense, not hers, and a Tevinter Magister seems to have easily taken it from him. Not one villager mentioned any battle, just people being thrown out; including Teagan. Was he cowering in the chantry, expecting others to do the fighting, again?”

“That’s beside the point, Beta,” Alistair’s voice was firm, but his hand reached out to touch her.

She took a step back. “No, it isn’t. You can’t lay all of the blame on Fiona.”

“She supported the magister and turned the mages over to him,” Anora spoke up. “We wanted to help the mages, they’ve made it impossible. Fiona and her followers are no longer welcome in Ferelden.”

“Shut up, Anora,” Elisabeta commander. “Don’t worry, Fiona’s my newest ally and the Free Mages are now part of the Inquisition. Believe me; none of us want to spend a single moment more in your company than is needed. The last I saw of you, you were being escorted to a tower. You were supposed to be executed after the Blight. How did you manage to live? Did you seduce Eamon? Did you seduce a bloodmage into bespelling Eamon? I know he has an undue influence over Alistair. I would hope your Templar training would have been enough to protect you from any blood magic influences, Alistair. Alas, it appears that no one could protect you from bad advice or your own bad decisions. I thought Templars took their vows seriously, I guess it’s a good thing Duncan saved you from that life then.”

“Beta,” his tone grew a bit impatient.
“You promised!” She realized that her voice was growing higher and louder. “I asked one thing of you. Do you remember that? I made you promise one thing if I died. One thing! You couldn’t even keep your word to me. Did you ever love me or was I just some fling that you decided to marry because my family is so highly ranked?”

“I do love you, Beta,” he insisted. “I never meant to…”

“To what?” She cut him off. “To get caught? I was dead so promises to me no longer mattered? It was hard enough to…” She shook her head, aware that tears were welling up. “Are there any promises to me that you have kept or was everything a lie?”

“I’ve never lied to you,” he insisted.

“Alistair…” Anora interrupted.

“I told you to shut up, you vile snake!” Elisabetta shouted at her. “One more word from you and I will cut your tongue out myself.”

“You can’t let her talk to me like this,” Anora looked to her husband.

Alistair ignored her, his eyes on Elisabetta. His heart was breaking as tears began falling down her beautiful face. Each one tore at his soul. “Beta, I never meant to hurt…”

“Of course not, I was dead. According to Morrigan, my soul had been destroyed,” she let the tears flow, too angry to bother fighting them. Not that she had any luck in that area lately. “I’m sure you thought what I didn’t know couldn’t hurt me. Well, guess what? I know, you idiot! I can’t believe that all that time I spent in the Void I was clinging to…” She shook her head. Then she reached up and pulled the chain from under her shirt. Their engagement rings were there, side by side. She unclasped the chain and slid the blue and silver ring he’d given her so long ago from it, the token of his love and devotion.

“Elisabetta, I still lo…” His words were cut off as the ring hit his nose. It hurt! He reached up to rub it and the ring fell into his hand. He looked down for a moment. “Beta, I…”

“You what? You’re sorry you brought your whore of a wife to Redcliffe? You’re sorry that you couldn’t keep your promise to your dead fiancée?” The tears were beginning to obscure her vision. She restored the chain and turned, she had to leave. She couldn’t stay.

“I had to do what is best for my kingdom,” he stared at the ring still.

“Except you didn’t do that,” she assured him. “You did what…” She realized that arguing with him about Eamon was futile. She hoped it had been Eamon’s idea. She didn’t know what she’d do if Alistair had decided to break his promise to her on his own. She took another step away from him. “Oh,” she glanced back. “I want Starfang back.” When he just placed his hand on the hilt of the sword, but didn’t remove it, she shook her head and forced herself to continue walking. Fine, he’d keep her sword. It wasn’t worth trying to scuffle with him for it.

“Beta!” Alistair called after her. “I…”

Her legs buckled, but Dorian moved to sweep her up. She wound her arms around his neck as he carried her from the room. “Fiona is coming with us as full partners, yes?” He asked. She nodded.

“Get your people together, Fiona,” Dorian called. “We’re going home.”
Alistair closed his hand around the blue and silver ring he’d once slipped onto the left hand of the only woman he’d ever loved as he watched another man carry her away.

Dorian didn’t go far; he just went to the grand entrance of the castle and found a stone bench to sit on. He kept ahold of Elisabeta as he sat down. She curled around him, bathing his shoulder with her tears. He gently rubbed her back. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“She used to be engaged to King Alistair,” Varric came and sat beside him.

“So I gathered,” Dorian sighed dramatically, to think that the dwarf would not realize his vast intelligence had allowed him to quickly assess the situation. “I take it he gave you the ring you just threw at him, Lissa?”

“Engagement,” she managed.

“What?” Dorian wasn’t sure he’d heard right.

“It was a ring to mark their betrothal,” Varric enlightened him. “Tempest made the king in there promise that if she died, he wouldn’t marry Loghain’s daughter. That was his wife, Loghain’s daughter, standing beside him.”

“Ouch,” Dorian shook his head.

Blackwall quietly slipped into the room. “Fiona is gathering her people together. She will meet us at the Crossroads in two days’ time. Then we can return to Haven. I think it best we leave after the Herald just told the Queen of Ferelden to shut up.” He ignored the wild gestures that Varric was making towards him. “Josephine isn’t going to like that.”

“Is féidir le Josephine mo asal a phóg,” Elisabeta muttered in native Highever.

“What?” Blackwall had no idea what she’d said.

“You don’t want to know,” Varric assured him. “How many languages do you speak, Tempest?”

She didn’t say anything more, but held up three fingers.

The door opened yet again and Arl Teagan walked in. “Lissa…” He hesitated.

“Don’t worry, now that the Magister is in our custody, we’ll get our men out of your town,” Blackwall assured him.

Elisabeta lifted her head. “You don’t speak for me, Warden Blackwall. What do you want, Teagan?”

“I… you’re alive,” he managed. “Can I not come and say hi to my friend and tell her how happy I am to see her again?”

“Happy? Friend?” She glared at him through her tears. “You’re just happy I’m here to fix your messes again. Did you have anything to do with that unholy union in there?” She jabbed a finger towards the throne room, where she assumed Alistair and Anora still were. “Did you back it or was it just your brother?”
“Eamon felt…” He began.

“Eamon felt,” she cut him off, her voice rising. Dorian kept his grip on her, half in support and half to keep her from ripping out the arl’s throat with her bare hands. “Eamon has wanted to be the power behind the throne as long as I’ve known him. Your father thought he was that to Queen Moira, didn’t he? He made sure your sister was betrothed to Maric, a convenient little arrangement for the Guerrins. How long has your family been trying to wrestle true control of Ferelden from the other noble families? Does Eamon openly call himself the King Maker now? That’s what you’ve all wanted for generations. Well, know this. The Couslands will not stand idly by while you play games that would make the Orlesians envious. I’m declaring a feud against the House of Guerrin here and now. We aren’t friends and never will be. I will use everything within my influence to stop your family’s continued rise to power.”

“Are you sure this is such a good idea,” Blackwall couldn’t believe he was witnessing the Herald of Andraste declaring war on a family. “Aren’t we supposed to be better than this?”

“Clúdaithe, Blackwall,” Elisabeta snapped at him, not caring that he didn’t understand the ancient language.

“Very well, my lady,” Teagan bowed. “The Guerrins accept your challenge. After all, we are the ones in positions of power now and you have been dead for ten years. Do your best.” He swept out of the room.

“Did he just forget that your brother is still a teyrn?” Varric wondered.

“I’ll write Fergus and let him know I declared a family feud,” Elisabeta leaned back against Dorian. “He never liked Eamon or Teagan, anyway. Eamon married an Orlesian and Rendorn was an Orlesian sympathizer until Moira convinced him to join the Ferelden Rebels. Father always suspected they were more power hungry than truly in it for the cause. Rendorn sent Eamon and Teagan to the Free Marches when he began fighting; they weren’t part of the effort to regain our freedom.”

“They could cause trouble for the Inquisition,” Blackwall objected.

“It doesn’t look like they were exactly helping us before,” Dorian pointed out.

“Still, Lissa has told the Queen of Ferelden to shut up and now declared a feud on the rulers of Redcliffe,” Blackwall didn’t want to be the one to try to smooth over matters between Ferelden and the Inquisition now.

“I don’t think it’s nearly as bad as you fear, Blackwall, relax,” Dorian had seen the way the King of Ferelden looked at Elisabeta.

Alistair continued to stare at the ring in his hand for several moments. Then he took a leather binding from his own clothing and slipped the ring through. Then he tied it around his own neck for safe keeping.

“You aren’t going to keep another woman’s ring, are you?” Anora demanded an answer.

“Yes, I am,” his voice was cold. Elisabeta had thrown the ring he’d given her, the token of his love and devotion back at him. What did Anora expect him to do with it? He would keep it, just
as he was keeping Starfang. The sword had been with him since he’d lost Elisabeta. It was like always having a piece of her by his side. He wasn’t giving that up, not even to her. “Oh, look, your boy toy’s back.” He noted as Teagan marched back into the room.

“Is the Inquisition going to get their soldiers out of Redcliffe now?” Anora asked Teagan as he strolled to them.

“I’m not sure,” he looked back at the door. “Elisabeta seems to have gone insane. I don’t know if it has something to do with dying and coming back or if this Inquisition really is made up of a bunch of crazy seekers and washed up Chantry Sisters. Probably, both. She is being unreasonable and we should make an effort to disband the group. They are obviously under Orlesian control and a threat to us.”

“I believe the large Breach in the sky is the real threat,” Alistair disagreed. “Is Beta all right?”

“She was wound around that Tevinter Magister that she keeps by her side,” Teagan sneered. “I have no doubt they are lovers.”

Alistair blanched. What was he supposed to do with that knowledge? He wanted to challenge the other man to a duel. He was sure that no one, much less a Tevinter Magister, was worthy of Elisabeta. But she was a strong, smart, beautiful woman and he was a married man. He had married out of duty to his country and now he was ready to hang it all and chase after her. What kind of man would that make him, though? Not one that deserved a woman like her. Maybe one who deserved a wife like Anora. He tried to reprimand himself for the last thought, but couldn’t.

“Well, her taste hasn’t improved much then.” He turned to Anora. “Let’s go home. Teagan, try to take better care of your castle from now on.”
Elisabeta gets advice from the Lady of the Lake and then plays cards.

The small lake’s rippling water reflected the clouds that covered the Hinterlands. Beside it, on the docks, Elisabeta sat cross-legged with a basket in her lap. The basket was filled with blood lotus. “I don’t want more swords,” she tossed one of the flowers in the lake. “I just came to talk,” another flower followed. “I need someone to talk to, but… I can’t talk to my companions. Not even Varric, who I know is my friend. I… I am still trying to sort out my own feelings.”

The water stirred and a barn swallow flew down to sit beside her.

“I guess I can talk to both of you,” she nodded to the bird. “I’m not sure where to start; when I returned from the dead, while I was in the Abyss, before I died, when my family was massacred? During the Fifth Blight, I was one of the only two Grey Wardens to survive the Battle of Ostagar. We’d been betrayed by Loghain. Alistair and I were rescued by Flemeth, The Flemeth, the Legendary Witch of the Wilds. She sent us off to build an army to face the archdemon with. She insisted her daughter, Morrigan, go with us. During the time we were gathering allies, we… I… fell in love. I thought he… Alistair loved me, too. Now I don’t know if he did. Before a Landsmeet in Denerim, we found another Grey Warden. He was an Orlesian Warden named Riordan. He gave us some bad news.”

The swallow cocked its head at her and hopped closer.

“I guess I should get back to the Landsmeet. No, before that. I found the Temple of Sacred Ashes and used a pinch of the Ashes of Andraste to cure Arl Eamon. When I did, he declared that Alistair must be the next king. He was right about that. Alistair was the bastard son of King Maric, after all. He was the last of the Theirin bloodline, I guess he still is. He and Anora don’t have any children, believe me, I asked around about that. Then again, I guess he could have produced a bastard child of his own with someone. He refused to with Morrigan, but I’m getting ahead of myself. Eamon was not only insistent that Alistair must take the throne, but he wanted him to wed Anora to secure it. It was one way to ensure that the Landsmeet went in our favor.” She tossed another flower into the lake.

“You didn’t need Anora’s aid to sway the bannorn to your side,” the Lady of the Lake emerged from the water. “Perhaps if you were not a Cousland, you may have, but you outranked her. Her father may have held the title of teyrn, but he was born a farmer.”

“Wow, you are well informed,” Elisabeta was impressed.

“Oh, you’d be surprised,” the spirit assured her. “Continue, though. I can just listen if you’d like. Gawain,” she greeted the swallow.

“I could use some sage advice,” Elisabeta assured her. “Eamon wanted Alistair to marry Anora, but I wasn’t going for that. I declared that we would rule together. He, Alistair that is, seemed thrilled at the prospect. He even rushed us to Soldier’s Peak where he had my engagement ring made. I gave him my father’s ring. When we returned to Redcliffe, though, we got some bad news from
“He told you that the only way for an archdemon to die is for a Grey Warden to die with it,” the Lady supplied.

“Morrigan was waiting in my room that night,” Elisabeta continued. “She told me that the Warden’s fate was worse than death, that the archdemon and Warden’s souls were both destroyed.”

“A soul can not be destroyed,” the Lady declared. “It is not temporal; it is energy and will go on no matter what.”

“Which is how I ended up in the Abyss for ten years, she was right that the Warden’s soul didn’t go to the Maker’s side. I guess that the Abyss was the only way to make sure the Old Gods didn’t come back,” she reasoned. “It would have been so easy to get lost in that place. It is just unending darkness. The darkness isn’t all of it, though. It… it is an oppression that makes you want to forget who you are. You wonder, lost. Not just lost as in you can’t find your way to something, you lose you, who you are. I clung to my memories, refusing to lose myself. There was a bit of the pain, but mostly it was the memories of who and what I cherished the most that I held onto. I clung to every memory I had of that man, everything I felt for him. He was the best part of me, him and my family. Yet when Morrigan told me of the dark ritual and how she could ensure we both lived, I… I considered it. I would let her do that just to keep him safe and I didn’t want either of us to be destroyed like that. He refused. He hated her and… he claimed he couldn’t betray me like that,” he let out a bitter laugh.

“Yet you feel he has betrayed you,” the Lady supplied.

“Oh, yes,” Elisabeta agreed. “As we marched to Denerim from Redcliffe, I made him promise me something. I made him promise that he wouldn’t marry Anora. I admit part of it was that I absolutely abhor the woman. The other part was that I thought she’d just make him miserable. I realize now that he’d had no doubt that he would be making that final kill. He is faster and stronger than I am. I doubt he’d factor in one of us being much closer to the archdemon. Still, he made the promise and I made the kill. He…” She let out a little breath as she realized she was on the verge of crying again. “I’m almost certain Eamon started pressuring him immediately to just marry Anora.”

“He’s the one who gave into the pressuring, though,” the Lady understood better than Elisabeta realized.

“He did,” Elisabeta nodded. “He’s hers now.”

“Is he?” The Lady questioned that. “She certainly must believe so, but do you and does he?”

“I… he… they’re married,” Elisabeta tossed another flower into the water and then laid one beside the swallow.

“And you?” The lady prompted. “Do you fight to get back what she and Eamon stole from you or do you find another?”

“That’s the question,” Elisabeta agreed. “I’m determined to move on, but… For example, Cullen is a good man and I like spending time with him, not that there seems to be more there. Well, maybe there is. Or I could make a political marriage as he did.”

“Because that has made so many people happy,” the Lady crossed her arms. “No, it has not. If it did, this land would not have run red with blood so long ago; staining the soil permanently and giving the town and castle their name.”
“What?” Elisabeta hadn’t heard this story. “There was a battle?”

“More than that,” the Lady assured her. “You’ve already noted that there is something wrong with this area. It seems cursed to you, does it not? The land and the Guerrins.”

“I… sort of… just declared a family feud upon the Guerrins,” Elisabeta admitted.

“Good for you,” the Lady nodded. “They are part of the curse upon this land. Both a cause and a result. They aren’t the rightful heirs to this land, but descendants of one of Tiranon’s bastards. Go to the Keep where Lornan was exiled. You will find the evidence against them. The truth of who they really are. Under the Keep is where you will find some of the truth about who the original Guerrins really were.”

“You’ll help me against them?” Elisabeta was surprised.

“I am a spirit of Valor, Rowan was the last to bear the name Guerrin who showed any,” the Lady declared. “I like most of yours and will counsel you to fight against the cowardice of your heart.”

“The cowardice of my heart?” Elisabeta repeated.

“Your heart has known what it wants, yet you are too afraid to seize it,” the Lady explained. “You would even consider a political union rather than fight to recover what you lost. When Howe seized your family’s castle, did you think of marrying an arl or bann and settling for their lands instead?”

“No, I avenged my family and was going to retake our lands,” she asserted.

“Even after you returned from the worst of the lands of the dead, you were still determined to take back your family’s lands,” the Lady could see the valiant path. “You found, however, that it was back where it belonged. So why would you leave something you love just as much in the hands of another?”

“Well…” Elisabeta was a bit flummoxed. The spirit had a point. “Alistair chose to be in her hands. In the end, it was his choice to make.”

“Look,” the Lady’s voice was soft, but her words firm and a bit harsh; which reminded Elisabeta of Wynne. “Love is love, not a suicide pact. If you want him back, take him back, but being angry because he continued living is just plain stupid.”

“I don’t know if I want him back,” Elisabeta objected. “That’s what I need to figure out. I just threw my engagement ring, the one he gave me at him.”

“Then your answer is easy,” the Lady smiled. “Do you want the ring back or do you want someone else’s.” She sank back into the lake.

The swallow looked up at her, head cocked. He then picked up the blood lotus in his beak and flew off

“Damn,” she knew the answer, but that didn’t mean she had to like it.

Fiona sat back in a large, comfortable chair in the Gull and Lantern when Elisabeta returned to Redcliffe. “We’re ready to leave when you are,” Fiona announced when she saw the other
woman. She studied Elisabeta for a few moments. “What…” She shook her head. “Never mind.”

Bella came running out from behind the bar. “Thank you!” She embraced Elisabeta. “When you returned to us I knew… I knew you’d save us again.”

“That seems to be my job,” Elisabeta agreed.

“And you’re so good at it, Tempest,” Varric commented from a nearby table. “I don’t suppose you play Wicked Grace, do you? I was going to start a game with Hero and Sparkler.”

“I do play,” she sat down across from him. “I hope you don’t cheat like your friend, Isabela does.”

“Isabela cheats?” Varric scowled, thinking of all of the times the pirate had beaten him at cards. “How do you know she cheats? Also, she’s more Hawke’s friend than mine.”

“I beat her at cards once. It seems I cheat better than she does,” Elisabeta revealed. “She agreed to teach me to duel because of it.”

“So are we going to get this game started?” Dorian pulled a chair up to their table. “I’m anxious to win all of your money; I have a feeling that living in the south means good fashion will cost me more.”

“Here in Ferelden, we like our fashion practical,” Elisabeta explained. “We like to be able to look good, but still rip the hearts from our enemies. Orlesians, on the other hand, try to outdo each other in ridiculousness. If it’s shiny or overly pretentious, they have to wear it. Have you seen some of those noble women try to even run in those shoes of theirs? And they would have no chance against a rabid bunny.

“A rabid bunny?” Blackwall pulled a chair up to the table.

“It seems that Orlesians are in danger from them,” Dorian explained. “The bunnies of Thedas are apparently also fashion critics, as they should be.”

“Are you in or out, Hero,” Varric began to shuffle the cards.

“I have another mission in the Hinterlands,” Elisabeta studied her cards.

“Please, Tempest, let’s just go back to Haven first,” Varric begged.

“Do you want me to find evidence of wrongdoings by the Guerrins without you?” She fluttered her eyelashes over her cards at him. “Think of all the secrets we might uncover. We’ll go back to Haven, though. I don’t want Fiona facing off against Cullen, the ex-Templar, by herself.”

“It would be really bad if the Iron Lady has unfrozen,” Varric agreed. “My sources say that she and Fiona never got along.”

“I may have… reinforced… the spell on her,” Elisabeta admitted. “Dorian has been teaching me to channel my magic and, well, I know she isn’t a weapon, but I sort of… channeled some ice magic into the Vivienne statue before I left Haven.” She looked at her companions. “If anyone tells Josephine, I’ll make sure Leliana pins their small clothes to the chanter’s board.”

“Speaking of channeling,” Dorian picked up his mug and handed it to Elisabeta. She bit her lip and then touched it with her index finger. The mug frosted over. “Very nice.”
“Isn’t it wrong to use magic for personal gain?” Blackwall scowled. Dorian laughed in response.

As Elisabeta and the Free Mages headed to Haven, news of her encounter with the king reached Highever. She’d sent a personal message to her brother after all.

“She’s declared a feud against the Guerrins,” Fergus reported to his wife over dinner.

River grinned and lifted her goblet. “They have been trying to wheedle some of the power from Ferelden’s teyrs and Eamon thinks he is secretly ruling Ferelden with no one noticing. We have been powerless to move against them. Good for Lissa.”

“That’s my pup,” he agreed.

River looked at Eleanor. “Darling, you may see how Fereldens play the game and why Orlesians are short-sighted.”
Elisabeta returns to Haven with the Free Mages. Not all of her advisers are happy.

Elisabeta could hear the Inquisition’s leaders arguing as she walked into Haven’s chantry. “It is not a matter for debate,” Cullen was insisting. “There will be abominations among the mages and we must be prepared.”

“If we rescind the offer of an alliance, it makes the Inquisition appear incompetent at best and tyrannical at worse,” Josephine countered.

Cullen turned on Elisabeta as she walked in. “What were you doing? Turning mages loose with no oversight.”

“Yes, because Templar oversight has always worked so well,” Elisabeta snarked. “They turn to blood magic to win their freedom, all because the men and women in dresses are sick of being oppressed by the men and women in skirts.”

“With the veil broken, the threat of possession…” Cullen trailed off, letting the implication speak for itself.

“I’ve fought through plenty of rifts and have had only Dorian to teach me to use this newfound magic,” Elisabeta shrugged. “I haven’t been possessed once.”

“Why didn’t you insist on going with her?” Cullen questioned Cassandra.

“Even if I was there, I doubt things would have been different,” Cassandra assured him. “Lissa does what she wants, but has proven she knows what she is doing in such situations. She has built an army before. Besides, while I may not be thrilled about the situation, I approve of it. We need the Free Mages by our side.”

“The voice of pragmatism speaks,” Dorian stepped forward, from where he’d hidden in the shadows behind Elisabeta. He set a wine glass on the head of the ice statue of Vivienne; he found her double horned headwear to be perfect for holding such things. “And here I was beginning to enjoy the more circular arguments.”

“Closing the Breach is all that matters,” Cassandra declared.

“That much magic means a lot of lyrium,” Elisabeta observed. “I have contacts, but King Balen is a personal… friend.”

“If that is what you want to call it,” Leliana smirked. “I would call him more of a grateful acquaintance who’d better remember his debts.”

“We should take talk of the Breach to the war room,” Cullen suggested. He turned to Elisabeta. “Join us; you’re the one who will have to close that thing, after all.”

“And here I was hoping to sit out the assault on the Breach, go for a walk or take a nap
perhaps,” she objected.

He grinned at her. “What is it they say? No rest for the wicked.”

“Speaking of wicked,” Josephine glared at Elisabeta. “I have a few things I need to talk to you about. What is this I’m hearing about you yelling at the King of Ferelden? Did you really punch Anora?”

“I did, I really did,” Elisabeta freely admitted. “You have to understand, though, her face really, really needed punching. There was that whole throwing of the Free Mages out of Ferelden and the fact that she is a viperous bitch.”

“I need to speak with Lissa privately,” Leliana apologized to Josephine. She led her friend out of the chantry building.

Josephine stared at the Vivienne ice statue. At least with all of the Free Mages in Haven, there should be someone who could do something about her.

Elisabeta followed Leliana through the main gates of the village and to the cabin in the woods that Zevran had taken for his own.

“So our beautiful death goddess has returned,” Zevran embraced Elisabeta. “I hear you had a run in with our own blushing former choir boy and his viper of a wife.”

“I did,” she confirmed.

“I could kill that ogress for you,” Zevran offered. “You just have to say the word or convince Leliana that the Inquisition wouldn’t suffer as a result of… an accident per se… befalling the woman when I just happen to be in the area.”

“You can’t just assassinate her,” Leliana insisted. “Not if Alistair is around, I don’t want him to be accused of arranging it; even if he did marry the harpy. Besides, Josephine would have a fit.”

She switched to an Antivan accent. “Niceness before knives, Leliana.”

“What happened when you saw him with that… perra?” Zevran wondered. “I left after he married her, as I had explained. After that betrayal, I couldn’t stay. It didn’t matter that I suspected that Anora planned to assassinate Alistair herself, so she could sit on the throne unopposed as she had wanted to in the first place. She only tolerated him, to begin with, because he is a Theirin.”

“I suspect that Eamon has been the one keeping her from having a knife plunged into Alistair’s back,” Leliana added. “Even with you declaring some war against the Guerrins, I doubt Eamon would turn on Alistair. He and Anora have some unholy alliance, but I doubt he would support her if she killed Alistair outright. He cares too much about the Theirin bloodline and knows he would be the next under her knife. Alistair is a strong king in his own right though. He’d do you proud, Lissa. If Eamon were to die, he’d be fine, but Anora would lose a strong influence over her husband.”

“She might take a page from my countrymen’s leaders and kill them both,” Zevran warned. “The only thing that has kept her from doing so is that she has no child of the royal blood to keep her in power. Her sterility is likely a blessing for Alistair, although if it is he who can not reproduce it may also be a bit of a curse. Still, he has named Eleanor Cousland as his heir. Anora would have to
take out Fergus and River Cousland as well to take control of her. With a feud going, she may try to send assassins to Castle Cousland to kill Fergus and his family first. She would then frame Eamon.”

Elisabeta’s heart froze and a cold wave of ice spread through her veins. In her anger and rage at Eamon and Teagan, she may have endangered her family. “Zevran…”

“Don’t worry, my sweet dagger,” he assured her. “I will bring these concerns to Josephine and we shall come up with a plan to protect those you love. Perhaps I will have to go myself. I’ve never seen your home. Alas, that would mean not getting to see my Antivan Melagrano every morning.”

“Wait, are you serious about Josie?” Leliana’s eyes widened and a little smile spread across her pretty face. “I thought you were just flirting.”

“Oh, I am flirting,” he assured her. “She is an interesting mix of Antivan cold processing and a passion to see right done, there is also an underlying need for adventure. She needs more feats of daring to keep her entertained and jeopardy to keep life interesting. You can see that need brimming under her lovely olive skin and those dark fawn eyes.”

“Oh,” Leliana tapped her fingers against the dagger hidden on her upper thigh. “Keep flirting with by all means, then. You aren’t going to Castle Cousland; Anora knows what you look like. I’ll send my spies to blend in and protect the family. Don’t worry, Lissa, no one will get near your family.”

“Thank you,” Elisabeta closed her eyes. “I… the Guerrins make me so angry; they have been trying to maneuver themselves behind the throne. And I’m furious that Anora has the very things I wanted in life… even… the one person I…” She stopped, but then felt compelled to continue. “And she doesn’t even appreciate what she has. She thinks the throne should be hers because her daddy said so. And she isn’t capable of loving someone else the way Alistair should be loved. The way…”

“The way you and he loved each other. We all saw how much you two loved each other,” Zevran sighed and brought both hands to his heart. “I still have scorch marks from being between the looks you two used to give each other from opposite ends of the camp.”

“You still love him, don’t you,” Leliana added. “You wouldn’t be so angry if you didn’t. You wouldn’t have thrown your ring at him. You loved that ring; you loved it more than you should have and you did so because he gave it to you.”

“I would be a fool to still love him,” Elisabeta didn’t want to admit just how much she did, she might break. NO! She shouted at herself. She could not let herself… admit… how she felt. There was no reason to, he’d made his choice. The words of the Lady in the Lake came to her, though. The man she loved was in the hands of another. Still, he’d put himself in those hands. “I disliked the Guerrins before, but now I despise Eamon for pushing Alistair into…” She shook her head. “I need to go back to the Hinterlands. I have been led to believe that there was once a fortress there that would reveal secrets the Guerrins rather not see the light of day.”

“I could just send scouts,” Leliana offered.

“No, I want to do this myself,” Elisabeta insisted.

“Who do you plan to take with you?” Leliana wondered.

“Dorian, of course, I’m still learning to use my magic,” Elisabeta thought for a minute.
“Varric, he hates the Hinterlands, but he’s great at ferreting out things others would rather keep hidden. I’ll take Bull for the same reason.”

“Meanwhile, you might want to find a way to smooth Cullen’s feathers, he’s still fretting about all of the mages. Josephine’s also trying to write a letter of apology to the Ferelden Crown for the *callous way you addressed their majesties and your uncivilized actions,*” Leliana informed her.

“They exiled the mages!” Elisabet’s face turned red just thinking about it, Alistair had seen what they went through. “He saw the results of their oppression when Kinloch Hold had an uprising, the mages declaring they would rather turn to blood magic than remain under the control of the Templars. He traveled with Wynne and Morrigan. He heard about Wynne’s baby being taken from her, he’s heard of Templars who force themselves on the mage’s under their control, he knows of the bullying and inhumanity. They must have heard of what led to the rebellion at Kirkwall. I was dead at the time and I’ve heard about mages who had passed their Harrowings being made Tranquil. They don’t deserve an apology. No one is apologizing to my ex and his hag. Teagan left his people and abandoned a fortress on Ferelden’s borders to a Tevinter Magister.”

“You’re going to give Josephine the vapors if you keep referring to the heads of a nation like that,” Leliana warned.

“Are you sure I shouldn’t call Celene the Head Invasion Frippery Frog in front of her?” Elisabet raised an eyebrow. “Don’t send her to a Landsmeet, she’d have an apoplexy. I still would prefer that any apologies she sends on behalf of the Inquisition don’t include one from me, I’ll let her know. Perhaps we can send Cassandra with flowers and a fruit basket to explain to them that the Inquisition is not responsible for the acts of the crazy Herald of Andraste.”

“Your act of allying the Free Mages was that of an agent of the Inquisition and we will not step back from your authority to do so,” Leliana insisted. “You protected the citizens of Redcliffe and expelled a magister from a Ferelden Castle. I will not allow your position and power to be diminished in order to assuage the hurt feelings of those who allowed chaos to rein in their lands. I’ll talk to her. You can go check on our new allies.”

Josephine approached the head of the Free Mages as they settled in. “Fiona? Grand Enchanter Fiona?”

“Yes?” Fiona gave her a little smile. “May I help you?”

“Yes,” Josephine took a deep breath. “An… incident… occurred and a member of the Inquisition was frozen by a rebounded spell. I need for you to… fix… her.”

“Show me,” Fiona nodded. She followed Josephine into the chantry building and to the Frozen Vivienne. She threw her head back and laughed. “Tell me that someone has at least sketched this scene.”

“Sera insisted on it, as did Dorian,” Josephine’s teeth ground against each other.

“I can’t fix her, I don’t think anyone can,” Fiona declared. “I can unfreeze her, though. Would you have someone bring me a chair, please?”

“Why do you need a chair?” Josephine wondered, but went and had one brought.
“Thank you,” Fiona sat down, crossing her ankles primly. Then she smirked once again before getting to work. “The mage who reinforced these spells has quite the potential. I believe the first spell was Madame de Idiote’s own, however.”

“Yes, it was… deflected back on her,” Josephine recalled.

Fiona slowly pulled away the extra reinforcements on the spell and then snapped.

Vivienne blinked up at her for a second, still splayed on the stone floor. “Fiona, my dear, did they compel you to come and see me? Are you done having a temper tantrum and smacking at Templars ineffectively like a testy kitten?”

“The Free Mages are now the allies of the Inquisition,” Fiona’s smile was belittling. “Josephine, our new ally’s ambassador, asked me to unfreeze you as a favor. It seems you’ve been an even more official Chantry decoration for the last couple of months. People didn’t just say you were a useless decoration, you really were. I hear there is a Tevinter Altus who will miss having his favorite coaster around.”
Plotting With Friends

Chapter Summary

The Ferelden royal couple plots against each other's best interests.

“It’s nice having you around again, your majesty,” Gareth, the Ostwick Ambassador, lounged in comfortable, armed chair with deep, soft red cushions in the music room that Alistair had designated in the Denerim Palace. There was a large harp in the middle of the room, with a soft crimson cushion behind it. There was also a lute, a large hammer and dulcimer, an organistrum, and a zampogna. There had once been a large and a small bagpipe there, but Anora had destroyed them after Alistair named Eleanor his heir. She had said some choice things about the Couslands as she did so. There was a raised dais in one corner where a band could set up. On the walls hung a tapestry that depicted a fairy with pipes playing to a dragon. Red and gold banners were on the other walls, set between the large iron sconces.

Alistair sat behind a large harp, as Simon Tabor taught him to play. Master Tabor was sought out among all of the noble houses of Ferelden to teach their children to play instruments.

“I was wondering when you were going to learn to play that thing by your bed, Al,” Gareth commented. “Isn’t this one new?” He waved at the harp that Alistair was settled behind.

“It is easier to learn on a large harp than that little lap harp he keeps in his private rooms,” Simon had seen the lap harp and insisted that Alistair get a larger one since he knew the king could afford one.

“You’ve been thinking about her again, haven’t you?” Four years before, Gareth and Alistair had gone drinking. Truth be told, they went drinking often. On that particular night, however, Alistair had told Gareth about the woman he’d loved and lost. He had told him of how they had met and how much he’d come to love her. He also told of the chain of decisions and events that had led to the horrible day he’d held her lifeless body in his arms as others cheered. By the end, both heavily inebriated men had been crying.

“I saw her,” Alistair admitted. “She was at Redcliffe Castle when I went to expel the Tevinter Magister from Ferelden… only she’d already taken care of him. Of course, she had, I should have expected it.”

“Alistair…” Gareth sat up straight and then leaned towards his friend. “She really is this Herald of Andraste. She is… alive, it isn’t just someone claiming to be her?”

“I told you that Fergus had already confirmed that for me,” Alistair reminded him. “I would have had no doubt after this meeting, that’s for sure. She yelled at us for being bad rulers, punched Anora, and threw her engagement ring at me. Oh, she also apparently declared a feud against the Guerrins.”

“But… she was dead,” Gareth was having a hard time wrapping his head around that.

“I was there when she died,” Alistair confirmed. “I…” He swallowed hard. “I lit her funeral pyre myself. It is her, though. She’s back… and I’m married to someone else.”
“Someone she punched,” Gareth couldn’t help the smile that spread across his face. There was no love lost between him and Anora. He knew she’d used her body to influence the previous ambassador and she’d tried with him when they had been negotiating a trade deal.

“Someone I promised her I wouldn’t marry,” Alistair stared at the harp. “I did betray her and I have no idea how to make it up to her.” Simon softly gave him instructions and he followed, playing a simple children’s song as he thought.

“Is that why you are learning to play the harp, finally?” Gareth wondered.

“She used to play it and sing to me when I had nightmares,” Alistair’s cheeks pinked. “I… we both had horrible nightmares during the Blight.”

“If you could pick any outcome for this scenario, what would it be?” Gareth listened to the little tune. His friend had been practicing, that was evident. He had a feeling that it had something to do with the return of a certain woman to Thedas. She was on his mind that was for sure.

“If I could pick out any outcome?” Alistair kept playing and smiled dreamily. “Anora would drop dead from her cold heart having not beaten since birth and Elisabeta would forgive me and tell me that she loves me again.”

“Has she told you she doesn’t love you anymore?” Gareth pushed.

“She threw her engagement ring at me,” Alistair stopped playing and reached under his shirt, pulling out the ring that was still attached to a leather cord.

“So she still feels something,” Gareth nodded. “How did she have the ring again, by the way? Was she resurrected with it?”

“I gave our engagement rings to Fergus,” Alistair began playing again. “He probably gave them to her. I asked him to give them to one of his children. I thought Eleanor and her husband could wear them someday, so they would at least be on the left hands of the rulers of Ferelden as they were once intended to be.”

“You are more sentimental than I thought,” Gareth grinned at that. “For a man who is uncomfortable about his ties to his own family, you get very maudlin and rosewater about your Beta.”

Alistair couldn’t deny that he would always have a romantic soft spot for Elisabeta. He fully realized that in the ten years he’d been without her, his feelings for her hadn’t diminished. He would love her for all eternity. “Fergus must have given them to her.”

“And she took them,” Gareth added. “She didn’t leave them in Highever or sell them.”

“My engagement ring, the one I wore, used to be her fathers,” Alistair objected. “Of course she wouldn’t sell it.”

“And the one you now have around your neck, like a love token, she kept it,” Gareth continued on. “She had it on her when she saw you.”

“She had both rings on a chain around her neck,” Alistair admitted.

“She was wearing them?” Simon spoke up.

“Interesting,” Gareth nodded. “And very telling. Have you ever met her, Ser Simon?”
“I taught her music, as well,” Simon admitted. “I’ve known her since she was a little girl. She also plays the bagpipes and has a lovely singing voice.”

“Apparently, she used to sing to our king here,” Gareth’s voice became teasing. “She’d sing him to sleep.” Then the teasing edge disappeared. “I’ve never had a woman who would sing me to sleep or sit and play beautiful music while I relaxed from a nightmare.”

“I don’t have one anymore,” Alistair pointed out. “Maker, I do miss her.”

“Then get her back,” Gareth pressed.

“I’d rather be married to her than Anora,” Simon muttered under his breath.

“But I am married to Anora,” Alistair protested. “Wishing cannot make it otherwise.”

“Win your love’s affections back and then worry about the harpy Eamon convinced you to chain to yourself,” Gareth insisted. “Send the ring back to her. No, it’s too soon to return the ring. We must try something else first. As soon as you are done with your music lesson, we’re going to the market.”

“We’ll finish later,” Simon stood. “Let’s go now.”

“What are those men doing?” Anora watched her reluctant husband sneak past her with his buddy, Gareth, and an old music teacher.

“Do we care?” Megan, the Ambassador from Starkhaven and one of Anora’s closest confidants, snorted. “Unless they are going to finally rid of us their unwanted presence. You could finally start calling the shots in Ferelden again if you could just get rid of Alistair.”

“If I did, Eamon would make sure that my part in things was revealed,” Anora sighed. “I’ve had to answer to his demands since he arranged for me to get my throne back. However, now that the Bitch of Andraste has declared a personal feud against his family, he might begin to see things my way. My Tender Teagan told me all about it in the letter he sent from Redcliffe. Her soldiers are still there, intimidating him and his men.”

“At least Eamon may be more likely to turn a blind eye to your activities,” Megan agreed. “I have some… friends… from Tevinter that might be able to help you there. I will put out some feelers.”

“Do so,” Anora agreed. “I’m tired of having to answer to that buffoon, especially now that the woman he wanted to put on my throne is back. See if they can’t get rid of that idiot from Ostwick as well.”

“Gladly,” Megan growled. “Ostwick and Kirkwall are getting obvious favoritism from the Crown and Starkhaven shouldn’t be putting up with it.”

“It would help if your prince didn’t put an embargo on our goods,” Anora wasn’t happy about that.

“You were helping the Rebel Mages,” Megan reminded her. “What was Prince Sebastian supposed to do, pat you on the back?”
“We exiled them,” Anora pointed out. “Tell him to lift the bans.”

“You might have exiled them, but they are in Haven with the Inquisition. Haven is in Ferelden,” Megan wondered why few seemed to remember that fact.
Morning Suprises

Chapter Summary

A package arrives from Denerim, but trouble is brewing elsewhere.

Elisabeta realized that she was biting at the bit to get to the Hinterlands and find the old Guerrin fortress. She was extremely curious about what hidden secrets were within. She started her day by weaving through the throng of the increasing Haven population, with Calenhad at her side. Her visit was to Leliana.

“There you are,” Leliana beamed at her. Josephine sat under the spymaster’s tent, chewing her bottom lip.

“Were we supposed to meet here?” Elisabeta looked from one woman to the other. “I thought we were meeting in the war room in a few hours to discuss my departure to the Hinterlands tomorrow.”

“I still disagree with you using Inquisition sources on a personal vendetta,” Josephine had already expressed her displeasure at Elisabeta following a course that might add to further strain between the Inquisition and Ferelden. “I also think you should stay and take care of the Breach first.”

“I thought you guys wanted to plan that out without me,” Elisabeta rolled her eyes. “Cullen was so happy putting his little men on a map of the area and his little mage dolls and marching them around, while Cassandra told him to rearrange them. Alistair…” She trailed off. She’d been thinking how happy Alistair would look doing something similar. It had made her want to make a scale model of the Denerim Palace and little dolls of soldiers so he could coordinate the defense of his home. Why did she want to make him presents, even if they would bring a smile to his face? She thought for a moment about his smile and found herself comparing it to Cullen’s. Cullen’s was sexy and made her heart flutter. Alistair’s, on the other hand, was sweet and innocent. At least it had been, she wondered how it might have changed in the more than ten years since she’d seen him smile. He had looked confused and sad when she saw him in Highever and he definitely never smiled when she saw him in Redcliffe. No, he’d scowled and yelled at Fiona for trying to protect her people.

“We have another concern now,” Leliana interrupted her thoughts. “She held up a package. “This came for you from Denerim. I… it says it is from the king, I was afraid the queen might have sent something. Perhaps one of her venomous cousins or a poisonous needle that would prick out. It seems legitimate, though.”

Elisabeta looked over to Josephine. “What are you doing here, then?”

“I have an interest in the interactions between the Herald of Andraste and Ferelden’s Crown,” Josephine insisted.

“I told you, Josie, when Alistair and Lissa are interacting, they aren’t the Herald or the Ferelden Crown,” Leliana’s exasperation was evident in her voice. “This likely has nothing to do with Ferelden.”
Elisabeta took the package and opened it. In the package was a roll of vellum and a gold circlet. Green painted vines and bold red metal roses wound around the circlet base. It was delicate and made with a loving hand. Roses. Alistair was sending her tiny roses and jewelry. She couldn’t help the little smile that lit her face. She opened the letter.

*My Dearest Beta,*

*Please know that I thank the Maker every day that He has returned us to you, just as I curse Him every night for not stopping me from betraying the woman who will always hold my heart. I am sorrier than you can ever know. I admit that I could have handled things in Redcliffe better and it is evident that I did not lose only the one person in Thedas I valued the most, I lost my greatest adviser. I told you once that you were the brightest spot in the darkness of the Blight. Even without a Blight, my world is darker without you. Please, accept this token of my affection and know that you are still the one bright spot in the darkness of my world. Even though we are no longer together, you are the greatest light in my life; just knowing you are out there means so much.*

*I will always love you,*

*Alistair*

“Damn him!” She sat down on the ground, holding the paper and circlet. How was she going to move on when he was declaring his undying love and sending her presents? It wasn’t any mere present, it was sweet and sentimental.

“What’s going on?” Cassandra ran in. “I just heard Lissa. What has happened?”

“It seems that a certain king is sending her tokens of affection,” Leliana took the paper out of Elisabeta’s hand and read it. “Affection indeed,” she handed the letter to Cassandra.

Cassandra quickly read it, while Elisabeta studied the circlet. “How roman… interesting.”

Elisabeta put the circlet on her head, almost without thinking and snatched the letter back. “This is between Alistair and me.”

“Of course, Beta,” Cassandra purposely used the nickname.

“As the Inquisition’s ambassador, I should be privy to all communications between you and the heads of our allies,” Josephine held out her hand to take the paper.

Elisabeta held it to her chest. “This is private.” She stood to leave.

“I wanted to discuss the Hint…” Cassandra began but was interrupted as Cullen came rushing in.

“Oh, good, Cassandra, you are… Lissa, good you’re both here,” his hand was gripping his sword hilt so tightly that it was turning blue. “We have trouble in the Fallow Mire. Avvar have seized one of our patrols. They sent a messenger to Scout Harding. The messenger said someone calling the Son of Korth, a chieftain’s son, has them and will only release them if the Herald of Andraste comes and faces them.”

“I was going back to the Hinterlands,” Elisabeta protested. “I guess I can swing by the Fallow Mire on my way there.”

“You can’t put off closing the Breach that long,” Cassandra objected. “You can go back to the Hinterlands after we take care of that Breach.”
Elisabeta knew she was right, but that didn’t mean she had to like it. “Fine. I have to go save our men. Make sure that the soldiers and mages are ready when I come back.”

“I’m going with you,” Cassandra insisted.

“We’ll be ready, Herald,” Cullen assured her.

“I’ll go grab Dorian and Varric,” Elisabeta exited the tent.

“Why not Sola or Sera?” Cassandra wondered. “Not that I want Sera, either, but Varric is going to gripe about the Wilderness.”

“They both are,” Elisabeta went to get the dwarf. “I wonder which one will out gripe the other.”

“Nice circlet, Lissa,” Dorian sauntered up to her. “When did Seggrit get nice jewelry? Or is Harritt making you very lovely pieces now?”

“It’s from Alistair,” she admitted.

“Oh, do tell,” Dorian grinned. “Was there a note with it? Was it a naughty note?”

“We’ll talk when we’re away from the others,” she assured him, still holding the letter close to her chest.
Fallow Mire Friends and Fiends

Chapter Summary

Elisabeta fights through the Fallow Mire to save Inquisition soldiers. She finds a new friend while there.

“He told you that you are the light of his left and he will always love you?” Dorian rode beside Elisabeta on their way to the Fallow Mire.

“He did,” she confirmed.

“I’ve never had a nation’s ruler send me trinkets, much less sworn their undying love to me,” Dorian sighed melodramatically. “I don’t know what to tell you. He did still marry that harpy he promised not to. That does put his word into question.”

“That circlet was an awfully nice bauble for someone who doesn’t still love you,” Varric dissented. “I have friends who have made some pretty bad mistakes. That doesn’t mean they’re not trustworthy or unlovable. It just means they occasionally do stupid things.”

She laughed bitterly. “That does sound like Alistair.”

“You seem awfully quiet, Seeker,” Varric turned to Cassandra. “Do you have anything to say about Tempest’s little conundrum?”

“He is a married man and there are others who hold… affection for you,” Cassandra revealed. “However, he thought you were lost to him and if… well, never mind that. The letter was so full of passion and… I’m not one to give advice on matters of the heart.”

“What matters of the heart?” Scout Harding was grinning at the group as they rode up to her. “Is this about the circlet that King Alistair sent to you, Lady Elisabeta?”

“How did you know about that?” Elisabeta wondered if everyone knew.

“I’m not the head of the Inquisition’s scouts because I’m their best archer,” she smirked. “Welcome to the Fallow Mires, I hope you like rain. It hasn’t stopped since I’ve arrived. Now we have more of a mess that I hope you can fix. Our missing patrols are being held hostage by Avvar. The barbarians have come down from the mountains.”

“How did they end up in a bog?” Elisabeta wondered. “Did they want a change of scenery this badly? Is this their spring vacationing spot?”

“That’s the thing…” Harding hesitated. “Their leader… he wants to fight you, because you’re the Herald of Andraste.”

“Because I’m the Herald?” Elisabeta snorted. “Why doesn’t he just ask for my autograph?”

“He thinks reading is for wusses,” Harding explained. “I doubt he can sign his own name. The leader calls himself the Hand of Korth and believes he is the chosen of their mountain god… who is called Korth. I hope you don’t mind the undead. You fought them when you saved
“Redcliffe during the Blight.”

“They have never been my favorite,” she admitted. She turned to Dorian. “It’s a good thing I brought you.”

“You expect my necromancy to fight those creatures?” He shrugged. “I’ve never tried to take control of the walking dead, but I probably could if I tried.”

“I actually meant your fire magic, but the other part sounds good,” she thought about it. “Morrigan used to set them on fire. They’d run into each other and spread the flames. You could have them wobbling about, holding swords and combating the other skeletons. Either works”

“We could even make bets on who would win,” Varric suggested. “We could somehow mark them to who is who.”

Cassandra made a disgusted noise. “Let’s go find our men.”

The first thing they found were plague victims, though. They were lying on makeshift pallets with the remnants of worn blankets over them.

“The South’s healers are obviously a thing to be envied,” Dorian snarked.

“How have this many dead been left just to rot?” Elisabeta wondered after they found more bodies left in a cabin, which she looted. “The bog seems to be full of them. How long ago did the plague take place? This area should have fallen under the Teyrn of Gwaren. I admit that I let Alistair kill the last teyrn, but he should have replaced him… unless he let Anora inherit the title. She is a pretty incompetent leader. That’s what happened, isn’t it?”

“I don’t keep up on Ferelden politics,” Dorian admitted.

“I’ll find out for you, Tempest,” Varric swore. “What about the Chantry, though, Seeker?” He addressed Cassandra. “Shouldn’t they have been here, giving last rites and seeing to the funeral pyres?”

“There doesn’t seem to have been any local Chantry presence,” she observed.

“Oh, come on now,” Varric taunted. “The Chantry is everywhere, even harassing poor dwarves while their crazed Seekers stab innocent books.”

As they continued on they found beacons that drew the undead and terror demons out of the moors, making them easier to find. When they camped for the night, they found two notes. One was from one of the patrols, expressing concern that Elisabeta was in danger. The other was from an apostate mage who was hiding out in the bog.

*I tried to help, but I was too late. By the time I came to the Fallow Mire, the plague had spread like wildfire. There were few survivors left and they were delirious, burning with fever. There was a woman here who was trying to harvest demons and spirits when I came. She, too, succumbed to the fever, but not before her notes gave me great insights. Another mage had followed her, to find her secrets, but they were crazed and attacked. I had to defend myself and now I have the blood of my fellow mage on my hands, along with the blood of so many others. Now, I hope to find solace. I hope to find the quiet from the songs and the voice. Thedas will do better if I stay here, but there is no one left to help.*

Varric shook his head. “That handwriting looks like… someone who desperately wanted some alone time.”
“I miss my lap harp,” Elisabeta murmured as she rinsed out her little wooden bowl. Cassandra had cooked lamb and carrot stew. It reminded her of Alistair’s lamb and pea soup, a uniform mushy grey thing.

“Those horrid whiny bags you insist on playing seem more apropos to this environment, anyway,” Dorian sniffed.

Elisabeta did indeed pull out her bagpipes and began playing. As she did so, Varric and Dorian put their heads together over a ledger. She overheard some of what they were saying.

“No,” Dorian insisted. “She may not realize he is courting her, but he thinks he is. Watch him when they are together, he’s smitten. She just doesn’t seem to realize it. I would give him really long odds, though.”

“I don’t even know if she realizes he’s a man,” Varric replied. “She’s too busy being courted by Curly and a King.”

“What about the Bull,” Dorian muttered. “I think he has a soft spot for her.”

“I think he has a hard spot for you and everyone else in Haven,” Varric countered.

Elisabeta stopped playing and looked over at the pair. “What are you two doing?”

“Nothing!” They chimed together.

That attracted Cassandra’s attention. As Elisabeta began playing another haunting tune, the seeker looked down at the ledger between the two men. “How many pools are there and what are these odds? Why are all of the leaders of the Inquisition, and the king of Ferelden, on there when I am not? There is even Iron Bull and Blackwall. What is this?”

“It is a simple business ledger,” Varric assured her. “You aren’t in it, because… you’re… business doesn’t go that way.”

“What?” Cassandra was confused.

Elisabeta continued to play, wondering what the men were up to.

The second day in the Fallow Mire brought more beacons and undead. It also brought a couple of strange standing stones. “I wonder what these are from,” Elisabeta mused, looking around. “You know what the Inquisition needs, Cassandra?”

“A stronger military and more infrastructures around Haven?” Cassandra suggested.

“Well, yes,” Elisabeta agreed. “We also need an archeological team. Who put these stones up and why? Now that the Temple of Sacred Ashes has been destroyed, we should find out what was under there before the cultists came. We need to know more about who the cultists were. Why doesn’t Ferelden have a university to rival that in Orlais? They have historians and archeologists, but we seem to be lacking.”

“Yes, well… you can talk to your king about… never mind,” Cassandra flinched, remembering the state of affairs between Andraste’s Herald and Ferelden’s rulers.

They continued to explore the area around the stones and found a crack in a circular rock formation
that led to more marsh, but there was dry land beyond. There was a camp on that dry land and an apostate mage in robes facing them, staff at ready. Elisabeta let her magic loose to form a ring of frost on Kindness, but didn’t attack.

Cassandra moved forward, sword drawn and the apostate moved his staff, ready for an arcane bolt. “Wait,” Elisabeta commanded. “Are you the healer whose notes I’ve read? The one who came to help?”

“What if I am?” The voice was male and Ferelden. “I’m a dangerous mage, you should attack.”

“I’m a dangerous mage,” Dorian countered from behind Elisabeta. “You don’t want me to attack.”

“Men! Are we going to play a game of who has the bigger staff?” Elisabeta rolled her eyes. “Look, I worked with Morrigan during the Fifth Blight, you can’t be worse than her.”

“You don’t know how…” The mage was cut off.

“Anders!” Varric holstered Bianca and strolled forward. “Is that you under those robes?”

“Varric? What are you doing here?” Anders wanted to know.

“A group of Avvar abducted an Inquisition patrol, we’re going to rescue them,” Varric explained.

“Anders?” Cassandra repeated the name. “The mage who blew up the Kirkwall Chantry?”

Elisabeta sheathed her swords. “Are you, him!” She strolled forward, quicker than the mage could follow and gripped his robes. “You are a healer aren’t you?” She spoke quickly, her voice rising in excitement.

“Yes, well, I was,” he blinked at her.

She tightened her grip and pulled him forward a little. “You helped Hawke in her battle against the crazy Kirkwall Templars, right? You can fight and heal in the combat field?”

“I… yes, I…” He tried to step away, but then stopped and searched her eyes. “Has the plague addled you? I’m a dangerous mage who blew up a church building. People are scared of me.”

“Pfsh,” she let out a ladylike snort. “I’ve killed an archdemon, you don’t frighten me.”

“I have a Fade spirit in me who seeks Justice and encourages me to make rash decisions,” he further protested.

“Okay, so I won’t let you decide on who should become the ruler of Orzammar or Ferelden then,” was her answer. “Orlais is still up in the air. The rash decision could be funny and good for Ferelden. I doubt they would want either of us picking their ruler, though.”

“Let me decide…” Anders took a step back. “So you aren’t just saying that you aren’t going to kill me?”

“Kill you?” Desperation burned in her eyes. “Of course I’m not going to kill you.”

“What about all of the people he killed in the Kirkwall Chantry?” Cassandra protested. “He must be brought to justice.”

“I was conscripted to the Grey Wardens,” Anders admitted. “I ran from Amaranthine.”

“If there were still Howes there, I don’t blame you,” Elisabeta confided. “Wait, you’re a Grey Warden? See, Cassandra, we can’t judge him. The Wardens are the only ones who can and they have disappeared.” She turned back to Anders. “Do you know where they are?” He just shook his head. “Dang, first they all get themselves killed in Ferelden and then when I return from the dead, they all disappear except the one who likes to blow up church buildings. Actually, your pyrotechnic abilities may come in handy, but I really need a healer on my team.”

“Return from the dead? Killed an archdemon?” Anders’ eyes widened. “Are you…”

“Elisabeta Cousland, at your service,” she curtsied. “Now I need your service. You are joining the Inquisition. I’m a former Grey Warden, so is Fiona. As we are the only people around who have gone through the Joining, besides the King of Ferelden, you must join us.”

“Do we get matching robes?” Anders wondered. “Wouldn’t that be special, the ex-Grey Warden Society?”

“We should,” she agreed.

“What about Blackwall?” Cassandra wondered. “He is still a Grey Warden.”

“So he claims,” Elisabeta looked sideways at Anders and lowered her voice. “He doesn’t seem to know what the Joining entails and became confused when I talked about the Taint. I still plan to hit him with more questions to see if he knows anything. Perhaps you can see if he feels like a Warden to you.”

“Varric?” Anders looked at his friend.

“It’s good to see you again, Blondie,” Varric grinned. “Welcome to the team. I got nicked by an arrow earlier. Could you see to it?”

“Very well,” Anders sighed. “I am sick of this swamp, I’ll go with you. It seems that Varric needs me.”

“Elisabeta,” Cassandra was exasperated. “You can’t just recruit the mage who blew up Kirkwall’s Chantry and helped start the Mage-Templar war.”

“Josephine recruited Vivienne,” Elisabeta pointed out. “I don’t see a difference. Wait, yes I do. Anders is actually helpful.”

“They say you have a Spirit of Justice in you,” Dorian sidled up to Anders as he packed up his camp.

“He was more like Vengeance there for a bit,” Anders admitted. “The… the apostate who was here before’s notes really did help in teaching me to wrestle full control back from him.”

“I’d like to help you more with… control,” Dorian wiggled his eyebrows. “I find this all so fascinating.”

“Dorian is an Altus from Tevinter,” Elisabeta explained.

“I hope you don’t run into Fenris,” Anders murmured to Varric.

“Wouldn’t that be interesting,” Varric agreed.
“So how did you become a Grey Warden?” Elisabeta wanted to know as they continued towards the castle.

“I was conscripted,” Ander’s voice was terse.

“So was I,” Elisabeta confided. “I told Duncan I had no interest in becoming a Warden. Then he tried to pressure me into becoming one in exchange for his help getting me out of my family’s castle when Howe’s forces besieged it. I still told him no, that’s when he conscripted me.”

“I had been captured by Templars near Amaranthine,” Anders confided. “When the castle was taken by darkspawn, I managed to survive and escape; but my guards were all killed.”

“I haven’t found that Templars do particularly well against darkspawn myself,” Elisabeta confided. She turned to Varric. “Didn’t you say that your friend Aveline was married to a Templar who was killed near Lothering during the Blight?”

“Yes, Ser Wesley,” Varric confirmed.

“As I fried the last trio of darkspawn who had killed my Templar guards, Elyon Andras burst into the room. He was an elven Orlesian Warden who had been sent by Weisshaupt. He was impressed that I still lived.”

“They sent an Orlesian?” Elisabeta’s eyes narrowed. “Does Weisshaupt have no shame… or sense? The Orlesian Wardens couldn’t seem to show up in Ferelden when there was a Blight going on, but the moment the Blight is over, they’re traipsing in; the stinky cheese crumpet masked invasion monkeys.”

“King Alistair came out to meet him,” Anders explained. “He had met up with the rest of the Templars who were hunting me. The Templar Commander tried to arrest me. The king strongly suggested that Elyon conscript me, which he did.”

“It was Alistair’s idea?” She could just see him protecting the apostate mage who’d fought off a horde of darkspawn. He would always champion someone seeking freedom. The thought of seeing him outmaneuver the Templars brought a small smile to her face. Damn him.

“It was,” Anders confirmed. “Boy the Templar Commander was angry about that. It made me kind of like him.”

Twilight had fallen when they made it to the castle. The undead milled about, aimlessly in front of it. Elisabeta unsheathed Excalibur and Kindness, unleashing her magic to coat Kindness in flames. She slashed at the undead, easily blending into the plentiful shadows.

Cassandra batted one walking dead back with her shield, as she beheaded another. “There are too many to fight all of them. We must get to the castle.”

Varric shot bolt after bolt at the oncoming undead. “That’s easier said than done. Why did we leave the horses at camp again?”

“We didn’t want them getting hurt by these creatures,” Dorian reminded him. “Lissa is very fond of Rowan.” He took control of one of the dead and redirected it against its former comrades. Then he threw a firewall up in front of a new group that was trying to join the fray.
Elisabeta cut a swath through the creatures and rushed through the gates, spyng a small group of Avvar who were standing in front of a fire, bows ready. She dive-rolled and came up behind them. She beheaded the one who thought themselves safely in the back. Bianca sent one of her bolts between the eyes of another, while Dorian and Anders sent arcane bolts into the Avvar warriors.

“I kind of missed this,” Anders admitted.

“Of course you have, no mage should be sulking in a swamp no matter how radical he got,” Dorian insisted. “Believe me, I’ve seen worse than blowing up a Grand Cleric.”

“Dorian,” Cassandra hissed.

“So have I,” Elisabeta confirmed as she dispatched another Avvar. “I’ve seen abominations running through the halls of Kinloch Keep, I’ve seen the dwarves of Orzammar bury axes into each other over political disagreements, and I’ve heard of a Dalish Keeper summoning a curse on not just a clan of humans but also their decedents because they had raped and murdered his children. If the Denerim Palace had been blown up, would the Chantry have even blinked? I know they did nothing when the inhabitants of Castle Cousland were massacred by the Howes.”

“The Grand Cleric was killed,” Cassandra countered.

“She was part of my target,” Anders revealed.

“Was she any more important than Sister Maerie? Did she deserve to die any less? It sounds like she earned her fate, unlike the priestess who served in my family’s chapel,” Elisabeta snapped out. “I saw Sister Maerie’s body, she’d been impaled by a dagger and her legs were… I suspect some of Howe’s men had violated her. The Chantry never said boo to Howe. What did this grand cleric do when the Qunari attacked? Did she help defend the city or was she hiding in the chantry’s basement? She supposedly had a holy army at her disposal, where were they?”

“Knight Commander Meredith led the Templars against the qunari,” Varric informed her.

“Boy she was mad when Hawke stole her glory and defeated the Arishok,” Anders added as he brought his staff across the head of the last Avvar, and then followed up the blow with a jab from the bottom of his stave. “Later we realized she had indeed gone mad.”

“Did the grand cleric send her thoughts and prayers then?” Elisabeta snarked. “What did she do about the crazy Knight Commander?”

“She refused to get involved in the disputes between Meredith and Orsino,” Varric explained.

“Mages were being abused in the Gallows and she refused to lift a finger to help them,” Anders’s teeth were gritted.

“That is no reason to kill her!” Cassandra insisted.

“Are you sure?” Elisabeta began exploring the castle instead of heading to where Korth was waiting. She found a locked door that she easily opened. She began exploring the room and was surprised at what she found. Her finds included a book that had belonged to the Grey Wardens and several pieces of weapons and armor. “I think this used to be a Grey Warden outpost. I’d never heard of one here, but there used to be a fort in the Korcari wilds, so it’s possible. If we ever find the Ferelden Wardens perhaps we can return it to them.”

“Blackwall would have liked to be here for this,” Cassandra commented. “He has mentioned that he would like to find the history of the Wardens.”
“Oh? When we return to Haven ask him why he didn’t learn their history in the Grey Warden University?” Elisabeta’s voice was sweet.

“Oh…” Anders began, but caught the look Elisabeta shot him. “Indeed.”

Elisabeta eventually led her team further into the ruins where a rather large and smelly Avvar Warrior waited for her.

“Fight me So-Called Herald of Andraste!” He yelled.

“My parents named me Elisabeta!” She shouted back. “You might have known that if you picked up a book, you half-witted druffalo dropping!”

“I am the Hand of Korth!” He attacked her.

She easily dodged the attack, moving to trip his balance. “OK Hand of Korth, that’s the Mountain Father, isn’t it?” she feinted and struck him with Excalibur. “I’ll send your hand to a mountain after I kill you. Which one would you like me to send it to?” She performed a whirlwind move, followed by a cripple. He lurched.

Cassandra charged into his opening and buried her sword into his back. Excalibur and Kindness flashed across his neck, Kindness searing what used to be his throat as Elisabeta finished him off. “Let’s get our men and get out of here.
Chapter Summary

Elisabeta returns to Haven with Anders and Blackwall.

“What in the name of Andraste’s bloody nickers is he doing here?” Cullen glared at Anders as Elisabeta’s group road in.

“He helped save our men and he’s a healer,” Elisabeta informed him. “I have recruited him to the Inquisition. I, finally, have a healer on my team and it’s about bloody time.”

“Do you want to explain to Hawke why you tried to hurt his best buddy, Curly?” Varric warned. “You’d have the Hero turned Herald and the Champion after you.”

Cullen continued to scowl at Anders. “I’ll be watching you, if you take one step out of line, I’ll be waiting.”

“You are not arresting my healer,” Elisabeta insisted. “Anyone who wants to arrest or challenge Anders has to face me first.”

“You were there, Cassandra,” Cullen turned to the Seeker. “How did you let her recruit the mage who destroyed the Kirkwall Chantry?”

“I couldn’t stop her,” Cassandra huffed. “And she does need a healer on the team. My shoulder feels better than it has in weeks. It seems are Herald is in support of his actions against the Chantry.”

“What was Meredith’s relationship like with Grand Cleric Elthina?” Elisabeta already had her suspicions.

“They had a friendly relationship, very friendly” Cullen was confused. “Why?”

“I’ll have Leliana look into a suspicion,” she shrugged. “Your men will be back by nightfall. We can take care of the Breach tomorrow morning.”

Cullen nodded and marched stiffly off. He passed Josephine who was strolling to the stables.

“Tell me you didn’t,” Josephine ordered. “Tell me you did not recruit the mage who blew up Kirkwall’s Chantry.”

“He goes by Anders,” Elisabeta informed her. “You recruited the Orlesian Humping Chantry Loyalist and her followers, who I have yet to see. So I believe I have the right to also recruit whoever I want if there is a need for them.”

“Lissa, did you…” Leliana now joined them. She stopped when she saw Anders. “You did. Well, if we wanted a symbol to hold up that we support the Free Mages, this is it.” She sidled beside him. “I’ll support you and the symbol to the Inquisition, but if you blow up another building without my permission, I’ll put a dagger between your ribs and no one will know it was me. I’ll apologize to Lissa for it after the fact.” She then smoothly turned to Josephine and slipped an arm around her shoulders. “We can twist this to our allies so they see the benefit. We truly support freedom for...
mages and have even taken on the mage who first dared to stand up to his oppressors and declare freedom for his people.”

Anders nodded and glanced at Elisabeta. “This is actually a warmer welcome than I expected. Could I have someone who isn’t homicidal show me to my cabin?”

“You can bunk with me, Blondie,” Varric offered. “I’ll keep you safe… and make sure you aren’t blowing things up without permission.”

“I’m going to get permission?” Anders wondered.

“I’m sure I’ll need something blown up,” Elisabeta was confident. “Someone called the Elder One is planning to assassinate Empress Celene. I would love to blow up some buildings in Orlais. Perhaps a palace or one of those markets that sell those atrocious masks.”

“Let’s go, Blondie, before you give her ideas,” Varric insisted. “Knowing Tempest, she’ll come up with a whole list of buildings she wants to see destroyed and then Ruffles will tell her that the Inquisition can’t just go around destroying the dwellings of her enemies and it will turn into a big ado.”

“Actually, a bit of pyrotechnics might be fun,” Dorian mused as he slid gracefully off of his horse. “We appear to have made a big entrance again. It seems the members of the Southern Chantry are rather uptight about their buildings being blown up.”

“Where else will they hide while the rest of us save their asses?” Elisabeta wondered. “I swear more of them hide there than hide in their cellars.”

“Let’s go have a drink and toast the latest scandal you’ve caused,” Dorian suggested. “This might beat punching the Queen of Ferelden.”

“It isn’t as satisfying, though,” Elisabeta pouted. “Still, let’s go drink.”

The tavern was buzzing with news of Elisabeta’s newest recruit as the pair walked in and found a table.

“Hey boss,” Iron Bull sat across from her, he winked at Dorian who became a bit flustered. “Did I hear correctly that you’ve added an abomination to your team?”

“Why not?” She shrugged. “I had one on my team during the Blight. She was also an excellent healer. It seems that healing ability and spirit possession go hand in hand.”

“That would be interesting to study,” Dorian commented as Flissa came by with his and Elisabeta’s usual drinks. She jumped as Bull smacked her bum playfully.

“Bull, don’t please,” Elisabeta sipped her mulled wine.

“Oh, she likes it,” Bull assured her. “She really likes to be spanked if you know what I mean.”

“That was not an image I needed in my mind,” Dorian protested. He smirked at Elisabeta. “I don’t see the appeal, even if the rear in question is as lovely as yours.”

“Oh, I could show you the appeal,” Iron Bull assured him. “Why don’t you and the boss join me
tonight and I’ll show you just what the allure is.”

“At least that is more direct than Zevran offering a massage,” Elisabeta took a long drink. “If he offers to give you a massage, by the way, make sure you question him about what it entails. He revealed his hand after I told him that if he gave me one, Alistair and Wynne would both be in the tent as well. He was all right with the idea until Alistair assured him that he’d be there to make sure that Zevran didn’t try anything… improper and told him exactly what would happen if he tried it.”

“Really?” Bull mused. “He’s being so gentlemanly with Josie right now.”

“That is strange,” Elisabeta agreed.

Sera strolled up to the table. “Now you’re recruiting more scary mages? Tell Possessed Chantry Demolisher that he better warn me if he is going to bust out his demon.”

“I’ll let him know,” Elisabeta assured her. “Join us,” she motioned to a chair.

“Fine,” Sera sat down and took a long drag of Bull’s drink and then choked. “That’s good stuff, it’ll put chest on your hair.”

“You don’t mind that he blew up a chantry building?” Bull was surprised.

“Nah,” Sera shrugged. “They were oppressing his people and all. He took a stand, good for him.”

Elisabeta left the tavern, with Sera passed out and Dorian and Iron Bull discussing the peculiarities of the Southern Chantry. At least the men had their cultured horror at some of the strange customs in common.

“Ah, there you are,” Blackwall approached her. “I’ve been meaning to thank you.”

“For recruiting Anders?” He would be the first one. Well, Varric was happy to see his friend again and in good mental state, but he was trying to not let on too much.

“Um… you really recruited the mage who blew up the Kirkwall Chantry?” Blackwall’s surprise was obvious. “No, I wanted to thank you for bringing back the Grey Warden artifacts that you found in the Fallow Mires. Our history needs to be uncovered and preserved, but you aren’t a Grey Warden and didn’t have to care for such things.”

“Of course I care about history.” Did he think her a barbarian or Chasind? “You really admire the Wardens. Tell me about them.”

“What do you want to know, my lady?” He smiled at her.

She was still shocked that he hadn’t figured out her connection to the Grey Wardens and the previous Blight. “Tell me about their Joining. I’ve heard that to join the Grey Wardens one must go through a ritual called the Joining.”

“Well, that’s secret now, isn’t it,” he hedged. “I… If you join, you will find out about it.”

“Oh,” she sat on a nearby crate and crossed her ankles. What she was going to ask next was sensitive, to her. She wanted to gauge whether he knew. If he did, then she’d believe he was really a Grey Warden. “How do you kill an archdemon? The stories say that only a Grey Warden can do
“Not really,” he insisted. “That is all there is to it. But an archdemon isn’t easy to take down and it takes a great number of Wardens to get it to the point where a Grey Warden can deliver a killing blow… with their sword.”

“You’re sure that’s all there is to it? Weren’t there only two Wardens when the last archdemon was killed?” She bit her bottom lip. She hoped she looked coy. She was trying not to cry. For a moment she found herself back on the roof of Fort Drakon, knowing that either Alistair or her life, and soul, would have to be sacrificed and praying to the Maker that she could protect the one person she loved the most in the world. This fool was claiming to be a Grey Warden, but had no idea just what a sacrifice it could be. He talked of their honor, glory, and sacrifice, but she doubted he understood just what it could entail.

“Trust me,” he assured her. She trusted the abomination she’d just recruited more. “Have I told you how much I admire you?” He was obviously trying to change the subject.

“Admire me?” She wondered if he was insane. Perhaps he had taken to many blows on the head and now lived in some alternate reality.

“You’re unlike any woman I’ve ever met,” he confessed. “I enjoy your company. You’ve proven yourself to be an honorable woman, principled. You have the world at your fret, myself included.”

Whoa, this was a bit too much. She wondered if he’d been drinking by himself while she’d been up at the tavern. “So you take your cue from everyone else?” Hopefully, that would discourage him. “What if they despised me?”

“If that were to happen, I would reject the world for its lack of good taste,” he declared. “Perhaps we could continue as we are, us against them. Now, we should get back to our duties before I get carried away.”

It was too late for that. “I think I need to go talk to Zevran.” She needed him to tell her if Blackwall had been hit by some type of potion and how to get him to back off. His talk about just the two of them against the world also reminded her too much of someone else, another Grey Warden; a real Grey Warden that was. She remembered being the last two facing off against insurmountable odds, together in every way that mattered. She needed Zevran to make her laugh and get thoughts of that Grey Warden out of her head as well.
Irony and Fate

Chapter Summary

The Herald of Andraste closes the Breach

Elisabeta looked around at her companions before they began their march up to the Breach. “This should be pretty easy. We’ll walk back to the Breach, I’ll pour energy into it and if all goes well, it will close. The worst case scenario is that the Breach will somehow rebound and destroy me.”

“You’ll be fine,” Cassandra’s voice was flat and unamused.

“Right, that’s what Alistair told me before the Battle of Denerim,” she pointed out. “You’ll be fine, Beta. Riordan will make the final kill. Everything will be fine, better than fine. We will get married, rule Ferelden together, and try for a baby, we’ll try and try and try some more.”

“You were at the Battle of Denerim?” Blackwall sounded a bit nervous.

“I was,” Elisabeta confirmed. “So was Leliana. Were you Anders?”

“No, I was taking a vacation from Kinloch Hold during that time,” he explained. “I decided to take a tour of Ferelden while we were on our way to fight the darkspawn at Ostagar.”

“Then you fell in with a group dedicated to fighting darkspawn,” Varric chuckled. “That’s irony for you.”

“Let’s get to the temple,” Elisabeta turned to leave. She was interrupted by the head of the Loyal Mages storming towards her.

Her double hennin was slightly askew as she stopped in front of her. “Why was I not invited to go to the temple as well? You have those rebels up there already and your inner circle is going with you, all of them. I should be going as well. I am going.”

“Anders whispered.

“She was the grand enchanter over one of the Orlesian circles, but abandoned her people to spread her legs for some duke who couldn’t be faithful to his wife,” Elisabeta answered at full volume. “They had a baby, the duke and his wife that is, they named her Calienne. Calienne was married to a duke who goes by the name Gaspard. Thus I’m sure the duke and duchess loved each other enough to have intercourse. That means she’s a home-wrecking grand enchanter who abandoned her people and likes the chantry… including Templars.”

Anders shivered in mock horror. “And they call me evil.”

“I know,” Elisabeta tsked.

“Very funny Herald,” Vivienne sniffed, ladylike. “When you are done with your little amateur skit, we can get going.”

“What is this we?” Elisabeta lifted her chin. “You work for Josephine and are not part of my inner
“I brought you the loyal mages,” Vivienne objected. “I am the Court Enchanter.”

Elisabeta turned to Cassandra. “Do we have a court enchanter? Do we even have anything that would count as a court?”

“You don’t even have a leader,” Bull interjected. “You need one.”

“No, we do not have a court,” Cassandra assured her. “As Bull pointed out, we do not have a leader yet. Nor do we have a place to hold court.”

Elisabeta turned back to Vivienne. “So you can’t be our Court Enchanter. We don’t have a court, and even if we did, Dorian called dibs. We like him better, anyway. He has better taste in hats.”

“That’s right, Madame Cagna,” Dorian lifted his nose into the air. “I am her enchanter, while our Anders is her healer. She doesn’t need more.” He made a shooing motion with his hands. “So shoo. We’re going to go close the Breach.”

“Do I have to remind you that I have Empress Celene’s ear and can make life very difficult for you, especially in Orlais?” Vivienne threatened.

“She’s right,” Cassandra cautioned. “We still need to stop Celene from being assassinated and it will be much harder without her cooperation.”

“Oh, you have Celene’s ear?” Elisabeta rested her thumb on her chin for a moment, as if thinking. “When I met you, you were in the home of Duke Bastien DeGhislain. I even understand that you have been letting him… caboodle you for years. Bastien DeGhislain is the father of Duke Gaspard’s dearly departed wife, Calienne. Gaspard is leading an army against Celene even as we speak and that is besides Calienne’s personal history with Celene. Are you sure you really have the empress’ ear?”

“I do,” Vivienne pulled out a fan and began vigorously moving it. Elisabeta quietly noted the tell. Orlesians weren’t as subtle as they thought, no wonder they wore masks. “And who uses a term like caboodling?”

“The king of Ferelden for one,” Leliana giggled to Josephine, who was trying to look dignified when she obviously wanted to start throttling people.

“I’ll tell you what,” Elisabeta glanced back at Solas. “I have a mage for healing, and one for offense. I even have a useless one already. I’ll let you and Solas fight for the position of the useless mage. You can decide which one of you will be unable to heal, or tell me about ancient elves, or…”

“I can tell you anything you want about ancient elves,” Solas objected.

“Really?” Elisabeta was surprised. “I thought you hated the Dalish and you avoid cities. What do you know of your own people?”

“I have studied them in the Fade,” his voice was impatient. “I have seen the history of Thedas.”

“Really?” She mused. “We must talk later. We’ll discuss this after I close the Breach. Perhaps when we see what those loyal mages you promised Josephine can do. Where are they now by the way?”

“They are…” Vivienne began.
“The Free Mages are waiting for us,” Anders glared at Vivienne. “We need to get going.”

“Vivienne, tell Josephine we have left. Leliana’s scouts from the temple will keep her appraised,” Elisabeta turned on her heel and walked her group away.

“I will do no such thing,” Vivienne lifted her chin and followed. “I am going with you.”

“Whatever,” Elisabeta rolled her eyes and considered punching the mage again. She was too busy to dwell on such things at the moment. As they made their way through the valley, she glanced at Solas. “What parts of history have you seen in the Fade?”

“The spirits like to dwell near sites of great emotion and great violence,” he began.

“So they couldn’t tell me why Alistair decided to marry Anora?” She tried not to let her disappointment show.

“What about the battle of Ostagar?” Blackwall wondered. “Did you see Loghain betray the Wardens and quit the field?”

“I saw the Hero of Ferelden and the future king light the beacon, only to have the teyrn abandon the field,” Solas declared. “I have also seen the battle from the point of view of Loghain’s soldiers and watched the darkspawn overwhelm the field. He saved his people.”

Elisabeta whirled on him. “He left the king to die! All of the Grey Wardens were killed except the two in The Tower of Ishal!”

“Were you there?” Solas challenged.

“Yes, I was, you scroffa bat,” Elisabeta thought he was as blind as a bat and he had the ears of one. “Do you not realize who…?” She stopped; Blackwall seemed very interested in her rant. She was fairly sure he was no Grey Warden, but Leliana had yet to figure out who he really was. “Yes, I was there. Loghain betrayed the king and ran with his forked tail between his legs. He then declared himself regent and tried to rule the country himself. Ferelden would have been overrun with darkspawn and Orlais would now be under siege if he had his way.” She turned to Blackwall, gauging his reaction to what she said next. “That is why Duncan died.”

“Which is very sad,” Blackwall nodded sagely.

Fiona was waiting for them when they arrived at the temple. “My men are in place.” She spied Vivienne. “Oh, did you decide to air out the riff-raff today?”

“Fiona, my dear,” Vivienne drawled. “You’re looking… worn today.”

“Yes, well, when you lead a real army of mages, it can be stressful,” Fiona admitted. “Where are your loyal mages or are they all still just imaginary?” She didn’t wait for an answer, but turned to Anders. “You’re Anders, aren’t you? The Anders, the mage who blew up the Kirkwall chantry and shouted that there could be no peace while our people were enslaved?”

“I am,” he admitted. He was obviously taken aback at being welcomed by his fellow mages with open arms. “You’re Fiona? Didn’t you declare that the Divine could go fuck herself when you were at the White Spire for the vote?”
“I did,” she grinned, causing Vivienne to hiss and Cassandra to make a disgusted sound. Varric didn’t hide his little chuckle. “It’s wonderful to meet you.”

“And you,” he bowed low. “I thank you for taking up the cause for our people.”

“I’m glad introductions are in place,” Elisabeta nodded. “Feel free to take Vivienne if you think you can use her.”

“Oh, no, we’re good without her,” Fiona assured her. The look she shot Vivienne said that her help would have been useless.

“Great, so I get stuck with her,” Elisabeta muttered as she made her way to the center of the temple, so she could place herself directly under the Breach. Her companions were fanned out behind her and Fiona took her place behind them.

The grand enchantress turned to her people. “Concentrate your magic on Lady Cousland. Aid her in using the Mark to close the rift!” She turned her back on the mages, facing the Breach, and struck her stave into the ground. The other mages, who lined the exposed areas of the Temple of Sacred of Ashes, followed suit.

Elisabeta walked under the Breach. She lifted a hand to protect her eyes from the green light. Strangely, that light was reassuring. She had spent so much time in the dark that the Breach was a constant reminder that she was back in a land with light. Still, that light threatened her world and she had to vanquish it. She lifted her left hand and aimed the Mark at the center of the rift, pouring energy into it. When she thought she had nothing left, the magic Andraste had imbued her with flared to life. It was further fueled by the magic from the mages behind her. She poured more and more energy into the rift. She had kept herself and her sanity through ten years in the Abyss, no tear in the sky would beat her. She continued on until there was an explosion, it knocked her companions and the mages back.

Cassandra was the first to make it back to her feet. Then Fiona followed. Fiona stood over Vivienne and grinned. “Wow, there is something besides a rich and powerful man that can knock you off of your feet.”

Cassandra made her way to Elisabeta who was standing, leaning on Excalibur. Elisabeta turned to her and smiled.
Chapter Summary

Haven’s celebrations are cut short.

With Calenhad at her feet, Elisabeta watched as the citizens of Haven celebrated. She hadn’t seen such an impromptu celebration in years. It was greater than that in Redcliffe when she’d eliminated the undead. She hadn’t been there to celebrate the destruction of the archdemon. She’d heard that Eamon had led a large celebration, even as Alistair had remained curled around her body; pleading to the Maker to give her back and cursing himself for refusing Morrigan’s offer. Leliana had stood guard over them both, as had Zevran.

She now stood guard over the people of Haven. She couldn’t help the feeling that something was coming. Trouble was on the horizon and this was but the quiet before the storm.

Cassandra slowly approached her. “Solas reports that the Breach is closed. The sky is scarred, but quiet.”

“It’s too quiet,” Elisabeta murmured.

“The musicians are playing, I wouldn’t call this quiet,” Varric stepped up to her side. “Why don’t you go and join them or ask Curly to dance?”

“Who would keep Calenhad company?” She laid a hand on the dog’s head. “Besides, Cullen is busy with his men and I wouldn’t want to ruin his fun. I hear he plans to calibrate the trebuchets again tonight. You know how much he likes doing that.”

Varric laughed. “That’s true. We could have Curly watch Calenhad and then dance ourselves,” he offered.

She smiled at him, considering. “I like that idea. Can I ask you about the woman you loved who married another?” She fluttered her eyelashes. “You’ve hinted that you understand some of my broken heart.”

“I’ll let you ask, but I won’t promise that I will answer,” he compromised.

“All right,” she agreed. She took a step towards the celebrating villagers when bells began ringing through the village, no they began from outside of the villages. The soldiers started to run.

Cullen was in the middle of the dashing soldiers. “Forces approaching, to arms!”

The villagers began to panic, throwing their hands up as if to ward off their attackers or running to their cottages.

“What the…?” Cassandra began. “We must get to the gate,” she unsheathed her sword and ran.

At least one person in Haven wasn’t panicking and Elisabeta was grateful for it. “So it looks like our celebratory drinks are on hold,” Varric observed.
Elisabeta gave him a nod and ran after Cassandra. “Cullen,” the Seeker was addressing the Commander when she caught up to them.

“There is one watch guard reporting,” he informed them. “It’s a massive force, the bulk is over the mountains.”

“Under what banner?” Josephine joined them.

“None,” was Cullen’s reply.

“None?” Josephine’s voice held her disbelief.

Elisabeta gazed at the gate. It had been put in after the cultists had been eliminated, but it was far from sturdy. She saw it begin to shake and belatedly realized that someone was pounding on it.

“I can’t come in unless you open it,” a voice announced from the other side. It took a moment for those inside Haven to realize he was speaking to the gate and expected it to open for him.

Elisabeta rushed to the gate and one of the guards opened it for her. She saw a soldier approaching. The armor looked familiar. It took her a few moments to realize that it was the armor she’d seen the Venatori wearing in the dark future. It had to be the Elder One who came now. Then the soldier arched his back and cried out. When he fell to the ground from the dagger wound in his back, he revealed a slight figure wearing a large hat that covered most of their face.

When the figure looked up, they revealed the features of a man who was barely past boyhood. “I’m Cole. I came to warn you, to help. People are coming to hurt you. You probably already noticed.”

“They wouldn’t be the first who came to hurt me,” Elisabeta agreed. “Who are they this time? What is happening.”

“The Templars come to kill you,” Cole announced.

“Templars?” Cullen held out his left hand to force Cole away from Elisabeta. “Is this the Orders response to our talks with the mages, attacking blindly?”

“Did you think they were going to wait for a Rite of Annulment?” Elisabeta snarked.

“The Red Templars went to the Elder One,” Cole continued. “You know him, he knows you. You took his mages.” Cole pointed up the mountain to where a man in silver and blood silver stood on a cliff, overlooking his army. “There.”

As she watched, a large creature approached from behind the man, glaring down at the city of Haven. Elisabeta was now positive that she was no longer a Grey Warden and the taint was gone. Something about the creature screamed darkspawn, but she couldn’t sense him. “The last time I looked, we were still in Ferelden and there is no slavery in Ferelden. They were never his mages.”

“He’s very angry that you took them,” Cole insisted, backing from the creature and its army.

Elisabeta turned to those standing near the gate. “Mages, those are Templars, Red Templars, in that army that approaches. You no longer have a need to fear them. It is they who should fear you. It is time to stand up to those who chose to try and force you to stay in bondage. Hold nothing back. Show them why they feared you in the first place!” She heard Anders cheer from the
“Get out there and hit them with everything you’ve got,” Cullen instructed. He turned to those preparing to fight. “That is Sampson, he was a Templar and will not make this easy. Inquisition, with the Herald, for your lives, for all of us!”

Elisabeta directed her group as they defended the gate. A scout ran up to her. “The Templars are going for the trebuchets!”

“We’re going to need those,” Elisabeta sighed. She turned to her team. “With me!” She cut down a Templar with red shards of lyrium coming out of his skin as she ran to the first trebuchet. There were more of the cursed men attacking the trebuchet. She coated kindness with ice and then lashed out with both Kindness and Excalibur, easily felling two of the attackers.

Varric unleashed bolts from Bianca on the invaders as Sera rolled in, letting two arrows loose.

“Is this their answer to losing the war?” Cassandra wondered as she lunged at one of the men, cutting into his armor.

“Some people can’t handle losing,” Dorian set a stream of flames from him to a nearby wall, flaying the attackers between them.

“So they went to that creature up there? It reminds me of a darkspawn,” she narrowed her eyes at Blackwall. “What do you think, Blackwall?”

Anders had opened his mouth to speak, but then closed it, realizing what she was doing.

“I didn’t get a good look at it,” Blackwall slashed at another Templar. “I can’t be sure.”

“Can’t be sure?” Now Anders spoke up. “I can sense him down here and when I used the mage in the Fallow Mire’s notes to suppress Justice, it caused psychic deafness that may not let me hear the Calling. You should have sensed him before the army got over the mountain.”

“I had a lot to drink tonight,” Blackwall continued to fight as he tried to excuse himself.

Anders turned to Varric. “He felt familiar, like in the Vimmark Mountains.”

“It can’t be him, Blondie,” Varric insisted. “He’s dead.”

“Who’s dead?” Elisabeta wondered as she finished off the last of those trying to take the trebuchet.

“We’re good, but the other trebuchet should have fired,” the chief operator reported. “Check on it.” The operator signaled to her men and the trebuchet fired, hitting the mountain and raining rocks and snows on the invading army.

“We’ll take care of it,” Elisabeta ran east towards the silent weapon.

“It was someone who tried to cause trouble for Hawke and his brother,” Varric explained. “But we killed him.”

“He was definitely dead,” Anders agreed.
Sure enough, the Inquisition soldiers around the second trebuchet lay lifeless around the weapon. The red Templars who had just committed the slaughter did not recognize the danger they were in as Elisabeta’s team quickly slaughtered them. First, she went to the large stone sitting in the weapon’s basket and called on her magic, setting a small flame that would grow as she sent it through the air. She then grabbed the controls to the trebuchet and launched it. The flaming boulder hit the top of the mountain and brought down an avalanche. She could spot several bodies being flung in the air as they tried to flee from the snow roaring down upon them.

The soldiers around the Herald of Andraste cheered and she looked back at them, giving them a small, tentative smile. When she turned to look back at the mountain she heard the roar. She jumped from the trebuchet before it went up in flames. A scarred dragon soared overhead.

“Oh, that’s just messed up,” Iron Bull growled.

“Everyone to the gate,” Elisabeta commanded, running towards it herself with her swords still drawn. As she ran, she took another look at the dragon. Its wings and hide were dark and almost appeared to have holes in them. The color reminded her of another dragon, as did the way it flew. NO! Her mind screamed. It couldn’t be, not again. It reminded her of the archdemon. Part of her wanted to shut down and hide. The other part refused to let another archdemon conquer her world when she’d sacrificed so much to take down its predecessor.

“Lissa,” Anders caught up to her. “It’s… that creature is tainted.”

“Shit,” she closed her eyes. “Not another one.”

“It isn’t trying to talk to me like others say the archdemon did,” he continued. “I’m not sure what it is.”

“It’s trouble, that’s what it is,” Cassandra insisted.

Elisabeta was never more grateful that she was no longer a Grey Warden. They stopped to help Harritt gather his supplies and raced towards Haven’s gates.

“Move it! Move it!” Cullen was motioning the remaining soldiers, workers, and villagers through before he had one of his men slam the gate shut. “We’ll gather in the chantry, it’s the only building that has a chance of standing up against that… thing!”

“The cultists used to have living quarters in the mountains between the temple and the gauntlet,” Elisabeta revealed. “See if Leliana knows a way to them, they will hold out better.”

Cullen nodded. “Save who you can and join us there.”

“Of course I’m the one who has to save the villagers yet again,” Elisabeta muttered as she led her team forward. She easily sliced through the oncoming Red Templars. Flames bounced off of Kindness, biting into steel, and none could stand up to Excalibur’s strong, sharp blade.

“Here I am helping to slaughter Templars,” Anders grinned as he used a telekinetic blast on a group of oncoming foe. “Have I thanked you for this yet, Lissa? Many of the Templars have become the monsters they secretly were and you’re letting me kill them with impunity. If so many innocents weren’t struggling for their lives right now, this would be a beautiful day.”
“I’m glad to help,” She cut down another Templar.

“He’s right, boss, this is mayhem!” Iron Bull swung his sword, chopping a Templar that was turning into an even larger brute in half.

She sent Cassandra with Anders, Iron Bull, and Sera into the burning tavern to revive those caught inside, while she led the rest of the team to Adon’s shop. They found the apothecary and Minaeve both unconscious. “This is no place to sleep,” she hauled the mage to her feet. “Where are your Tranquil?”

“They stayed in the chantry to work,” Minaeve coughed. She weaved on her feet, but stayed upright. The apothecary wobbled beside her.

“Let’s go,” Elisabeta commanded. She glanced back to see Blackwall and Varric helping the pair along.

It only took a couple of feet before she came face to face with the other half of the group and those they’d saved. As they continued on, though, they found a small group of requisition officers fighting a contingent of Red Templars that was four times their size. Elisabeta thought about abandoning them for a moment, realizing the quartermaster was probably among them. She had no desire to break a sweat saving anyone loyal to Loghain. She wasn’t sure she could justify letting the others die, though.

Before she could even make a decision, Cassandra was letting out a battle cry and charging in.

“I could accidentally hit Threnn with a fireball if you would like,” Dorian offered.

“How did you know…?” She shook her head. “No, although, if it were truly an accident, I wouldn’t mind.” By then Blackwall and Iron Bull had joined the battle, as had Solas. She sighed and began dispatching Red Templar after Red Templar until there were none left living in the immediate area. “To the chantry!” She commanded, leading the retreat.
Wannabe's and Chosen Ones

Chapter Summary

Elisabeta and Corypheus face off for the Frist Time

The doors of the chantry were flung open for the gathering villagers. Roderick, of all people, stood near the doors urging the people on. “Move! Keep moving! Come on! Keep going! The chantry is your shelter.” As Elisabeta passed him, stunned at his change in heart, he collapsed against Cole.

Cole supported him, bringing him further into the chantry. “He tried to stop a Templar. The blade went deep, he’s going to die,” Cole’s voice was matter of fact.

“What a charming boy,” Roderick continued to lean against him.

“Lissa,” Cullen ran to her, with Calenhad at his heels and Leliana close behind. “Our position is not good, that dragon stole back any time you might have earned us.”

“I’ve seen an archdemon,” Cole revealed. “I was in the Fade, but it looked like that.”

“I don’t care what it looks like, it cut a path for that army,” Cullen’s voice was firm. “They’ll kill everyone in Haven.”

“It isn’t an archdemon,” Anders stepped forward. “Lissa and I discussed it. It is tainted, but it doesn’t feel like an archdemon.”

“I’ve seen one before,” she confirmed. “Anders can hear it, but it isn’t what is emitting a Calling.”

“Something is, though,” Anders warned. “It also feels… familiar.”

“This isn’t the time to worry about such things,” Cullen insisted. “That army is about to wipe all of us out.”

“The Elder One doesn’t care about the village,” Cole insisted. “He only wants the Herald.”

“That’s popularity for you,” Elisabeta sighed. “Maybe he was a friend of the archdemon’s. If it saves the village, he can have me. I just want a guarantee that I’ll go to the Maker’s side this time.”

“It won’t save anyone,” Cole warned. “He wants to kill you, nobody else matters, but he’ll crush them, kill them anyway. I don’t like him.”

“He reminds me of Loghain,” Elisabeta commented.

“You don’t like…” Cullen threw up his hands. “Lissa, there are no tactics to make this survivable. The only thing that slowed them was the avalanche. We could turn the remaining trebuchets, cause one last slide.”

“We’re overrun,” she countered. “To hit our opponents, we’d have to bury Haven.”
“We’d die,” Cullen agreed. “But we would decide how. Many don’t get that choice.”

“Wow, aren’t we defeatist,” Elisabeta turned to Leliana. “Did the Chantry destroy the cultists’ secret tunnels when they slaughtered those that remained?”

“No,” she assured her. “I… may not have told those who were behind the Exalted March about all of the ways through, and out of, the village.”

“Good,” it was good to know her friend hadn’t fully condoned the slaughter of the children and those who might have been innocents within the cult. “Lead the Inquisition member through there now.”

“I will,” Leliana nodded. “I don’t want to do this again. I…”

“We have little choice,” Elisabeta insisted.

“What about you?” Cullen began, but Elisabeta turned, not seeing the pained expression on his face. “Perhaps you will surprise it, find a way.”

Calenhad wined.

“I will find a way back to you,” Elisabeta promised.

Calenhad barked twice, sharply.

“I know I said that last time and didn’t come back,” she conceded. “I… it had to be Alistair or me, that time. I will do a better job of not dying, I promise.”

Cullen went to his soldiers. “Inquisition, follow Sister Nightingale through the chantry. Move!”

Cole passed her, supporting Roderick. “Herald,” Roderick addressed her. “If you are meant for this, if the Inquisition is meant for this, I pray for you.”

“Andraste didn’t bring me back for shits and giggles,” she assured him.

She watched as soldiers filed pass her and Cullen walked up. “They’ll load the trebuchets. Keep the Elder One’s attention until we’re above the tree line. If we are to have a chance, if you are to have a chance, let that thing hear you.”

“I’ve never had a problem with that,” Elisabeta assured him. “Cassandra, Iron Bull, Varric, and Anders with me,” she commanded. She noticed Dorian looking at her pointedly, all of her companions were. “And Dorian. The rest of you help Leliana and Cullen get everyone to safety. Calenhad, make sure Leliana doesn’t try to double back for me. I’m counting on you to take care of her.” Her old, faithful Mabari barked in response.

“What about me?” Zevran stepped to Leliana’s side. “Am I supposed to just let you step into mortal peril without me again? I remember what happened last time.”

“So do I,” she admitted. “Once I release that final trebuchet, though, there will be a limited amount of time to get out. I want you waiting by the tunnels to make sure those who are going out there with me make it out of Haven.”

“And you, my deadly goddess?” He raised an eyebrow.

“Andraste is with me,” she assured him. “I’ll find a way.” Or she wouldn’t. She wondered
idly what would happen this time. Would she get another funeral pyre or be buried in Haven? Would she be mourned? Would Alistair still cry over her? Would Leliana’s faith be shaken yet again?

When they stepped out, Dorian grinned. “We need to be noticed? That happens to be a specialty of mine.

The group moved together, Warrior Spirits sent by the Maker to avenge the people of Haven. Although, as they cut through the Red Templars, spilling their red tainted blood as offerings to Andraste on the land of those who once thought themselves Her chosen people, they did stop in their own homes to grab supplies and items they weren’t willing to leave behind. Elisabeta was embarrassed that that included a gold circlet with winding roses.

They cleared a path to the trebuchets leaving the remains of those foolish enough to ally with a false god and continued to the last of their catapults. The soldiers who had loaded it, lay dead about its base.

“This is for Calvin, Colart, Woodrow, Ubaldo, and Bob,” Cassandra named the Inquisition soldiers as she cut down their killers. As she quickly beheaded a knight, Elisabeta was impressed that Cassandra had known all of their names. When they’d cleared the area out, more came. Dorian set fire mines around her, so Elisabeta could aim the trebuchet. It had to be done manually. Then the largest Templar they had ever seen came rumbling in.

“Did he drink an entire wine cellar full of red lyrium?” Dorian wondered as he sent a fireball at him.

Iron Bull yelled and leaped at the creature, sword already swinging. He’d been hurt earlier and almost lost the use of his arm, but Anders had healed him. Thank the Maker for Anders, because they didn’t have enough healing potions for the battle they’d just faced.

“Bianca wants to tell you what she thinks of Templars,” Varric commented as he unleashed a bolt. “And of red lyrium. Let me tell you about what it did to my brother,” another bolt followed.

“At least your brother still looks better than him,” Anders healed Cassandra as she wobbled on her feet.

Elisabeta continued to aim the trebuchet as her friends took out the behemoth Templar. As the Templar fell and the trebuchet was aimed, the tainted dragon returned, spewing its red acid. “Move, everybody move!” She shouted.

Her friends ran for the tunnels as she was knocked off of her feet by yet another blast. She lay stunned for a moment. When she sat up she noticed a large form emerging from nearby flames. It was the ugly darkspawnish creature that she and Cullen had spied earlier. She backed up towards the gate, then felt the ground rumble beneath her feet. She turned to see the tainted dragon land and lumber towards her. She unsheathed Excalibur. She’d taken out an archdemon, she was willing to take on this creature, even if she didn’t have an army backing her this time.

“Enough!” The creature’s master commanded. She realized that the darspawnish Elder Whatever was the master. He tried to throw some sort of magic at her. “Pretender, you toy with forces beyond your ken no more.

“The name is Elisabeta, Elisabeta Cousland, not Pretender,” she corrected him. “What are you? You remind me of a darkspawn, but are unlike any I’ve ever seen. Why are you doing this? Shouldn’t you be off hunting for an old god to infect?”
“Mortals ask for truth they can not have. It is beyond what you are, what I was,” he declared. “Know me, know what you pretend to be. Exalt the Elder One, the will that is Corypheus” He extended an arm. “You will kneel.”

“Kneel?” She laughed bitterly. “I have been restored to life by Andraste and the Maker. I am the daughter of the most powerful noble house of Ferelden. I kneel before no one, much less a darkspawn. Now say it with me Elder Cory-I don’t care, daaarkspaaawwn.”

“I am not a darkspawn,” he insisted. “I am Corypheus, the Elder One, and you will kneel.”

“That’s not happening,” she lifted her chin.

He lifted his hand and revealed a large round ball. “I’m here for the anchor. The process of removing it begins now.” His other hand shot out and the Mark on Elisabeta’s hand began to glow.

She held her wrist as her left hand began to vibrate. “I can still kill you with my right hand, incapacitating me won’t help.”

“It is your fault, Herald,” he declared. “You interrupted a ritual years in the planning. Instead of dying you stole it!”

“Oh, Desdemona, who interrupted your ritual, did die,” Elisabeta informed him, glaring. “Andraste traded our lives. She took the mage to the Maker’s Side and gave you me instead. Think about it! Why would she send me instead? Do you not realize that I am a weapon of the Maker’s hand sent to stop you? Look on me and fear.”

“I admit… while you two have many similarities, there are some… differences,” he conceded. “You may somehow be someone else, yet that isn’t possible. I’m sure the trip into the Fade just lightened your hair a bit and… changed your eye color some. However, there is no Maker so he could not have brought you back to life. Yet you stand here before me with your insane story and your stolen Mark, the Anchor. What you use to close the rifts, I crafted to assault the very Heaven.” He closed his fist.

The pain from the Mark caused Elisabeta’s legs to buckle, but she didn’t give in. No1t even when the dragon began circling her. The tainted dragon gave her a scare, not for her life, but for that of others. “Where are the Grey Wardens? You are a darkspawn, aren’t you; one that is somehow intelligent? What did you do with them?”

Corypheus would not have his monologue interrupted, though. “And you use the anchor to undo my work. The gall.”

“What was it that you meant to do with this thing,” she held up her left hand. She had to keep him talking. If the dragon just ate her now, she wouldn’t be able to help those escaping from Haven.

“It is meant to bring certainty where there is none,” he vague things up for her. “For you the certainty that I would always come for it.” He strolled to her, grabbing her by the left wrist and lifting her off of her feet so they were face to face. “I once breached the Fade in the name of another, to serve the old gods of the empire in person. I found only chaos and corruption. There were dead whispers, for a thousand years I was confused. No more. I have gathered the will to return under no name but my own, to champion withered Tevinter, and correct this Blighted world. Beg that I succeed, for I have seen the Throne of the Gods and it was empty.” He threw her against the trebuchet. “The Anchor is permanent, you have spoilt it with your stumbling.”
Elisabeta realized that she was still holding Excalibur. It truly was a great sword. “Yes, this is a Blighted world. You and your magister buddies caused that, you nitwit.”

“So be it,” Corypheus just continued on with his long monologue. “I will begin again. I will find another way to give this world the nation and God it requires.”

Elisabeta’s eyes widened as she saw a flare fly into the sky, far above the tree line. They were safe. They had made it.

“And you,” he still continued on. “I will not suffer an unknowing rival. You must die.”

“I’ve already died and I am back,” she reminded him. “I told you that, but you don’t listen. You just keep on and on with your monologue. You are like a villain in one of Varric Tethras’ stories, telling the hero his plans and not letting anyone stop him. You are a fool, do you think I’ve let you just go on yammering because I like the sound of your voice? Ha!” She kicked the trebuchet’s control with her foot.

Corypheus and his dragon both stopped to watch the large, heavy rock fly into the mountain. It wasn’t just any rock though. As it exploded, glitter filled the air, it got everywhere, scratching his poor dragon’s iris and cascading pink and blue glitter onto his hood. Then the snow that had been laying on the peak began rumbling down, gathering and growing. The avalanche was heading straight for Haven. They turned to see Elisabeta running. The dragon turned and scooped Corypheus into his claws.

Elisabeta ran from the oncoming snow. She stumbled and tripped over a loose board and then crashed through rotting wood as snow blanketed Haven.
Finding Skyhold

Chapter Summary

The Inquisition moves from Haven to a new home.

Darkness, darkness was pressing from everywhere. NO, her mind screamed. Not again! No, she could hear water dripping and her back ached. She hurt too much to be dead again. A light pierced the darkness and a figure stood before her, holding out a hand.

Elisabeta took the hand and let the woman in front of her help her to her feet. “I know you.”

“Of course you do, little one,” the woman’s voice was gentle. “Don’t worry, all is well. Desdemona is safely by her Maker’s side, but her sister needs to join the fight. You will find her in the keep in the Hinterlands. Also, the viper and the weasel are plotting against your paladin. Well, he was yours. He still is in many ways, your knight in shining armor.

“Can you clarify that a bit?” Elisabeta had a horrible feeling that she knew exactly what the woman, Andraste, was talking about.

“You’ll find out,” Andraste assured her.

“What about the Tevinter Magister, turned darkspawn, who thinks he’s a god?” Elisabeta knew she hadn’t seen the last of him. He would come at her again and she had to stop him from destroying Thedas.

“You’ve dealt with would-be gods before,” Andraste reminded her. “You’ll be fine. Go find your friends.”

Elisabeta made her way to her feet and looked around. She’d fallen into a cellar. She noticed that there were underground tunnels that ran under the town. She encountered a trio of demons meandering in one of the caves but quickly dispatched them. She found that whatever Corypheus had done to the Mark… or anchor… whatever the thing on her hand was… it could now open up a small rift and pull demons through. That was… interesting. She wondered where they went. Did they go back into the Fade or into the Abyss? Did they all go to a specific place in the Fade? Was there some Fade building where they were all wondering around confused?

She made her way from the tunnel… and into a blizzard. Sweet Maker, could she not get a break? She lifted a hand and tried to shield her face as she struggled through the frigid cold and ice of the Frostback Mountains. She found a camp, but the embers of the fire had long gone cold. Had no one stayed back to see if there would be any survivors? She continued on. The only other choice was to curl up and die. She found a second camp. This time, the embers were still warm. She continued on, but her legs began to buckle. “Andraste,” she whispered. “If you want me to take out this false god for you, I’ll need your help.”

As she fell, she heard shouting. “There she is!” She saw Calenhad leading Cassandra and Cullen’s blurry forms before she passed out.
Elisabeta moaned as she came to. She was lying on a cot and everything hurt. Her head hurt, but she could hear the Inquisition’s heads arguing nearby. Calenhad was curled up at her feet. Beside her were Anders and Mother Gisselle. She reached up and took Ander’s hand. “Thank you. I don’t know how I would have survived that if Thedas’ most talented healer hadn’t been here?” The shouting had finally stopped and the Inquisition Leaders had gone back to their respective corners.

“What about me?” Mother Gisselle objected. “Or the Seeker and Commander who carried you to camp?”

“I’m sure your thoughts and prayers were very helpful,” Elisabeta patted her hand. “What were the others fighting about?”

“This time?” Gisselle shook her head. Then she went on about faith and uncertainty. Elisabeta wasn’t sure what she was talking about, something about her coming back to life yet again, and just let the woman ramble. She tried not to laugh when Anders started to make faces at her behind Gisselle’s back.

Then Gisselle freaked her out and began to sing to her. She hadn’t had anyone sing to her since Alistair did more than ten years ago. Worse, everyone else joined in, the entire camp with the exception of Solas surrounded her as they sang to her. She cringed back and tried to step behind Anders. He put a comforting arm around her. It was awe inspiring to be sung to by so many people, but also terrifying. She knew the song, it was about staying the course through the night. She supposed there was some significance to it.

When the singing was done, Solas signaled to her, as if he wanted to talk to her. She reluctantly trudged out to him. He led her to a lamp post and lit it. She blinked at the lamp post, what was doing in the middle of the Frostback Mountains? She hadn’t seen the ruins of a village nearby. The Inquisition needed some archeologists who could begin digging around the area in an effort to solve the mystery.

“A wise woman,” Solas declared. “One who knows how to unite a cause.”

“Who is?” Elisabeta looked back at the camp.

“Mother Gisselle,” Solas shook his head. “I wanted to talk to you about Corypheus, though. The orb he carries is of ancient elven design.”

“How do you know that?” Elisabeta challenged. “You weren’t there when I faced him. How do you know what the orb looked like or what type of magic it used?” She eyed him with suspicion. Was he another Morrigan, waiting to reveal that he knew more than he was letting on?

“I… saw it in the Fade,” he proclaimed. “I saw part of your battle… and the orb.”

“Right,” she narrowed her eyes and shook her head. “You just happened to see it. I’m supposed to believe that? Do you know anything that you didn’t learn in the Fade? Also, how do you know that it’s Elven? I mean, what if the spirits in that part of the Fade are wrong? You said yourself that ‘it’s all true,’ depending on the way you look at it. So, maybe the spirits only thought it was Elven, but it really wasn’t. It could really be some Qunari artifact that they found and claimed. You tried to claim that Loghain’s desertion wasn’t intended to ensure King Cailan and the Wardens were all killed, that the field was overrun. I’m the Warden who lit that beacon, I was there, not just seeing it in the Fade.”
“You were the Warden who…?” He cut himself off and went back to his topic. “I was just afraid that people were going to blame the elves when word of the orb’s origin got out,” he explained.

“How would anyone know?” She wondered. “I still say it could be Qunari for all we know. Do you think he has a team of archeologists and historians studying his orb for him and they’re going to publish a paper in the Dirty Dowager when they’re done?”

“I guess we’ll worry about that later,” he waved off her non-concern. “There is a place here in the Frostbacks that you must lead the Inquisition to, one that will be defensible. One where the Inquisition can grow. It is called Skyhold and has lain empty for far too long. Lead them there. Go to the north and you will find it.”

“To the north?” She wondered what was there. “Fine,” she nodded. “I’ll let Leliana and Cullen know that we will head out in the morning. It’s as good of a direction as any.”

Elisabeta Cousland: the daughter of Teyrn Bryce Cousland, Hero of Ferelden, and Herald of Andraste, led the Inquisition’s members along the Frostback Mountains, with her mabari hound trotting by her side. They waded through the snow and the cold in search of their new home.

After four days of slow travel, turrets and battlements came into view. Then a castle rose from the horizon. It stood proudly atop the mountains, reaching for the sky. “It’s perfect,” she declared.
As the Inquisition began to move into Skyhold, Cassandra approached Elisabeta. “We need to speak to you for a moment,” Cassandra explained. “Come with me.”

“If you are wanting to know where your rooms are, I think we should use the requisition officers to ascertain exactly how many rooms there are in this fortress and of what type.” She looked around. “I grew up in a castle, but this one is huge.”

“Yes, it is,” Cassandra agreed. “Don’t worry about the room situation, that isn’t what this is about.”

“Did you get her?” Leliana rushed to them. “Come on, Cassandra. You have to be more persuasive. You’re coming with us,” she grabbed Elisabeta’s hand and pulled her to where Josephine and Cullen waited. They moved through large crowds of people carrying boxes and crates.

“They arrive daily through every settlement in the region,” Cassandra commented. “Skyhold is becoming a pilgrimage.” They continued on. “If word has reached these people, it will have reached the Elder One. We have the walls and numbers to put up a fight here, but this threat is far beyond the war we anticipated. But we now know what it was that allowed you to stand against Corypheus, what drew him to you.”

“I’ll see you in a bit,” Leliana rushed forward and waited.

“Well, there’s the Mark and the fact that Andraste resurrected me,” Elisabeta commented. “Those are both thorns in his side. “I’m also a former Grey Warden and I killed an archdemon that one time.”

“The anchor has power, as does your faith,” Cassandra conceded. “But those aren’t why you’re still standing here.” She continued walking towards the interior of the castle’s courtyard. “Your decisions let us heal the sky. Your determination brought us out of Haven. You are the creature’s rival because of what you did and we know it, all of us.” They began walking up the stairs. “The Inquisition requires a leader.”

As they walked up the stairs, Elisabeta noticed Leliana holding Excalibur in her hands. “When did she take my sword? That sneaky thief,” she shook her head in admiration.

“The Inquisition requires the leader who has already been leading it,” Cassandra continued, not commenting on Leliana’s quick fingers.

Elisabeta looked down at the courtyard as she began to hear the crowd bellow’s noise increase. They were gathering around her. This was worse than when Alistair had made her the head of Ferelden’s armies right before the Battle of Denerim. At least then it was par for the course. It was worse than when she found herself leading the war against the Blight after all but one other Grey Warden had been killed. She’d once thought her life would consist of running a teyrn and raising an
heir. She noticed Cullen and Josephine gazing up at her as well, their faces expectant. Damn them.

“You,” Cassandra declared.

“It’s unanimous?” She blinked in confusion. “I am a Ferelden, I recruited Anders to the Inquisition. I regularly insult the loyal mages and most of Orlais. I punched the Queen of Ferelden.” Were they all crazy?

“All of these people have their lives because of you,” Cassandra pointed out. “They will follow.”

“That’s… not exactly comforting,” Elisabeta looked down at them. Calenhad sat at Cullen’s feet and gave her a single bark. Zevran emerged from the crowd and gave her a thumb’s up.

“I will not lie,” Cassandra conceded. “Handing this much power to anyone is troubling, but I have to believe this is meant to be. There would be no Inquisition without you. How it will serve, how you will lead, that must be yours to decide.”

Elisabeta stared at her own sword. Trust Leliana and Cassandra to turn it into a symbol of the Inquisition’s power. She wondered how much Cassandra had revealed about where she’d gotten the sword and the things the Lady of the Lake had said. Poor Iron Bull, it seemed that watery tarts handing out scimitars were now how governments were formed. She took her sword back.

“Andraste brought me back because she loves all of Thedas, even if she does love Ferelden the most.”

“And the Hero of Ferelden shall lead us,” Leliana smiled.

Cassandra shouted the crowd. “Have the people been told?”

“They have,” Josephine confirmed, she smiled despite having heard Elisabeta’s comment. “And soon the world.”

“Commander,” Cassandra continued. “Will they follow?”

“Inquisition,” Cullen stepped in front of the crowd. “Will you follow?”

“Yea!” The people pumped their fists.

“Will you fight?” He added.

The people continued to cheer. Elisabeta looked down on them, wondering if they had lost their Maker loving minds.

Cullen continued to rouse the crowd. “Will we fight? Will we triumph?” The people continued to cheer after every question. He pulled out his sword. “Your leader, your Herald, Your Inquisitor!” He pointed the sword at her, as the cheers grew even louder.

Elisabeta saw Cullen’s signal and raised her own sword into the air. The people continued to cheer, while Cassandra and Leliana tried to remain dignified. They both acted like they wanted to do little dances. Then Josephine cheered and immediately looked embarrassed at doing something so undignified. Well, that was that. She was now the Inquisitor.
Elisabeta has her first full day at Skyhold and talks to a couple of friends.

On her first full day in her new home, after being made Inquisitor, Elisabeta began wandering through Skyhold. The main hall was full of junk and debris. Repairs were needed everywhere, but the foundations were good. She found the new forge off of the main hall, set in a room that looked over a cliff. “How is everything?” She glanced at Harritt before her gaze went back to the view.

“This is much better than what I had in Haven,” she could see him struggling not to smile. “We saved most of my tools and… well, I hate what happened, but I really look forward to working in here.”

Elisabeta smiled. “I’m glad.”

She continued on. She encountered Sera, who was going off about Andraste and gods. She reminded her friend that she’d seen Andraste herself more than once.

Then Blackwall insisted on talking to her. He led her up to the walls of Skyhold, she noticed boxes piled up in front of what would one day be. “We were unprepared in Haven.”

“No kidding, genius,” Elisabeta looked out at the view. “I once destroyed a large portion of the people of Haven, killed their leaders, and their dragon with just Leliana, my boyfriend, and an elderly mage who was possessed. I could have told anyone that Haven wasn’t the most defensible village around. Did anyone ask me, though? No. At first, it was you killed the Divine, then it was go here, go there, close the rifts, and get us allies.”

“Well, yes,” Blackwall coughed. “Still, it almost cost us… you. I can’t let that happen again. I won’t let it happen again.”

“How are you planning on stopping it?” She wondered. “You are a Grey Warden recruiter. Are you secretly an expert strategist? Do you have experience fortifying areas?”

“It shouldn’t have let you sacrifice yourself like that,” he declared. “I won’t run while you stay behind again. This won’t happen again.”

“I’m not having you sacrifice yourself for me,” she threw up her hands. “Corypheus didn’t even want you.”

“You can’t talk that way,” he insisted. “We can’t…”

“What way?” She was confused. “I don’t trade my life for my friends. I wouldn’t let Sera sacrifice herself in vain either nor would I let Dorian. Especially not Dorian or Varric. I thought we were friends or at least potential. Then again… there is that deep dark secret your hiding.”

“What secret?” He seemed to be the confused one now.

“Let me demonstrate…” Her eyes widened and assumed what she thought was an innocent
“Where were you during the Blight?”

“I was in Ferelden,” he stated matter of factly. He didn’t see the fist heading for his face until it slammed into him.

“Bull shit!” She went to hit him again, but he jumped back. “There were only two of us left in Ferelden. The Orlesian Wardens abandoned us! If anyone besides Riordan the Incompetent was there I wouldn’t have had to sacrifice myself. I did so because it was me or Alistair. Don’t tell me about sacrificing or not. Don’t claim to be some Warden Hero. For a year it was just Alistair and me against a horde of darkspawn and a bloody archdemon! If all that it took to kill one of those creatures was a Grey Warden sword, I wouldn’t have spent a decade in the Abyss, clinging to my most precious memories so I didn’t lose myself. I wouldn’t… I wouldn’t have had to return to find the man I love married to someone else. I wouldn’t have to live without…” She broke off, shaking her head. Maker, was she codependent on her ex-fiancée? “I wouldn’t have found myself in this mess. I don’t know who you are, but you aren’t a Grey Warden. I know, because I was one.”

She stormed off, but didn’t get far before she heard another voice. “Darkness and despair. How is she supposed to go on without him?” It was Cole, how did he know how she’d felt? Then he continued. “She doesn’t want to breathe while he does not. She takes his knife and pierces herself.”

“Cole? She tentatively walked up to him.

“She was only a teenager,” he looked at Elisabeta. “She had her whole life ahead of her. Being a widow wasn’t that bad.”

“Who?” She had never known someone who killed themselves when they became widowed.

He looked at her. “Your darkness is deeper, your sorrow sharper, but you continue on. You would not set your weapon down and declare defeat. You don’t want to continue on without him, but you will, because people need you.” He looked down at the courtyard. Below, the healers and surgeons were working on the wounded from Haven. “The healer is wary of me, he has been tricked by a spirit before. He likes me, though. The witch, she wants me gone.”

“Morrigan?” Elisabeta momentarily wondered if the Witch of the Wilds had somehow shown up at the castle.

“No, the horned witch, the one who promised many and has produced almost none,” he explained in his own style. “She wants me gone, she means to force you.”

“Oh, you men Vivienne,” Elisabeta realized. “Don’t worry about her, I want her gone and she won’t leave. If she gets to stay, then so do you.”

“I want to help,” he stated. He looked down at a soldier. He slowly walked to the stairs and down to where the healers were working. “Haven, so many soldiers fought to protect the pilgrims so they could escape. Choking fear, can’t think from the medicine, but the cuts wrack me with every heartbeat. Hot white pain, everything burns. I can’t, I can’t, I’m going to… I’m dying, I’m…dead.” A nearby soldier rolled over, indeed he was dead.

“I’m glad to see you’re settling in,” she quipped. “Here I thought you’d have trouble making friends.”

Cole slowly walked to another soldier. “Every breath slower, like lying in a warm bath, sliding away. The smell of my daughter’s hair when I kiss her goodnight.” He paused a moment. “Gone.” The soldier’s head slumped as he died. “Cracked brown pain, dry, scraping. Thirsty.” He went to
yet another soldier. “Here.”

“Thank you,” the soldier gratefully drank.

“It’s all right,” Cole assured Elisabeta. “She won’t remember me.”

“Why not?” Elisabeta wondered. There was no reason to forget someone giving you water. “Are you using your powers as a spirit to help people?”

“Yes,” Cole admitted. “I used to think I was a ghost. I didn’t know. I made mistakes… but I made friends, too. Then a Templar proved I wasn’t real. I lost my friends. I lost everything. I learned to become more like what I am. It made me different, but stronger. I can feel more. I can help.”

“If you’re willing, the Inquisition can use your help,” Elisabeta admitted. “For starters Anders,” she indicated the healer. “Still has a spirit in him, a spirit who isn’t as friendly and helpful as you.”

“I… he’s suppressed him, so… I might be able to try,” Cole agreed. “I will talk to him.” He became distracted again. “There is someone…” He wondered to a new person. “Hurts. It hurts, someone make it stop hurting. Maker, please…” He drew out a dagger. “The healers have done all that they can, it will take him hours to die. Every moment will be agony. He wants mercy. Help.”

“The pain is what lets us know we are still alive,” she objected. “I’m not going to let him just give up. Life is too precious to give up on, I would know better than many. I’ll have Anders look at him, he’s good.”

Elisabeta nodded and continued on. She was intercepted by Vivienne, Solas, and Cassandra.

“You can’t keep that thing like a puppy, Solas,” Vivienne was insisting.

Elisabeta’s expression brightened. “Puppy? Did you get a puppy, Solas? Calenhad is with Zevran, no doubt asleep, but he’d love to meet a new friend.”

“I mean that demon he wants to let stay around,” Vivienne’s voice was disdainful. “That creature has to go.”

“She wants to force Cole to leave Skyhold,” Solas explained.

“She has no say on who lives in Skyhold,” Elisabeta countered. “She’s leaving before Cole is.” She stared at Vivienne, the questionable hennin she had on her head did make her looked like some horned villainous or demoness. Perhaps she secretly desired to be a desire demon. “I recruit who I want to.” She strolled off to find Iron Bull. She wanted to see if he’d send the Chargers back to recover any belongings left. She’d heard a little boy crying for his stuffed nug. She wondered if her harp had survived.

Cole sensed another soul in pain. He wondered towards it and found Anders. The healer was leaning over a soldier. His eyes were closed and he was using his magic to sense and heal injuries.

“You saved as many as you could,” Cole told him. “You made a difference.”

“I’m trying to save as many as I can,” Anders assured him.

“Not here, Kirkwall,” Cole clarified. “You saved as many from Tranquility as you could. You were
helpless to stop them and you want vengeance. Justice must have mercy, too, though. It is your enemy who is now having their minds altered. They are no longer them. You must find compassion for them, too.”
The Ferelden Crown learns of Haven.

“This is ridiculous!” Alistair proclaimed as he glowered at a map of Ferelden. “How did an army march through our borders to attack a village in the Frostback Mountains? A village in Ferelden!”

“I’ve sent out runners to check on our forts and checkpoints,” Eamon assured him.

“I’ll check them myself,” Anora offered.

“That’s a wonderful idea, I always like it when you leave,” Alistair approved. He was panicked. Not only had an army attacked a Ferelden village, no matter who was occupying it, but Elisabeta had also been in Haven when it was attacked. He had no idea if she’d survived or not. His dreams for the last few nights were filled with images of her death. It was a mix of the last battle of the Fifth Blight and everything he could imagine happening to her in Haven. He could see her lifeless body every time he closed his eyes, blood matted that light golden red hair. Her sea green eyes were staring at him, lifeless. In every dream, he tried to run to her, but was held back, usually by Eamon or Anora. He’d woken screaming her name each time. He wanted to rush to Haven and look through the carnage for her body. “While you do that, I’ll survey the damage to Haven. I’ll take John and a handful of soldiers with me.”

“You should say here, your majesty,” Eamon insisted. “We don’t know if the people who invaded Haven are still there. Send out scouts first.”

“It wouldn’t hurt to take a trip to Haven,” Gareth protested. “I’ve sent word to Ostwick to see what they know. They received word from the Inquisition already. They have set up a new base in the Frostback Mountains in an ancient castle called Skyhold.” He looked pointedly at Anora and Eamon. “Hasn’t Ferelden received word yet?”

“There might have been a message delivered about that… yes,” Anora bristled.

“Why wasn’t I given the message directly?” Alistair’s voice was tense and raised. He couldn’t believe it. Both Anora and Eamon squirmed under his baleful gaze. Had they been trying to subvert his authority?

“I…” Eamon began.

“We are equal partners,” Anora lifted her chin.

“No, we aren’t,” Alistair was done with that. If there had been a word about Elisabeta and they were keeping it from him… He again wondered what Eamon’s motivations were in pressing a marriage to Anora. “I am the king. I am the one with royal blood here. I may not have wanted it, but that is a destiny I couldn’t escape.”

“The Inquisition is setting base in a fortified, hard to reach the castle,” Eamon grit his teeth before adding the next part. “They have made Elisabeta Cousland Inquisitor.”
“She’s all right?” Alistair hugged Gareth. He ignored the looks that Eamon and Anora shot at him. He then hugged Jon, the head of his personal guards. Jon patted his back awkwardly.

“Would you express such relief if I were the one whose life was in danger?” Anora’s voice was acid.

“No,” Alistair admitted. “I wouldn’t. I’m sorry, but you’ve always known how I feel. I… you’re a good political partner. I’d be sad if you died, but…” He let his voice trail off.

“Your majesty,” Eamon shifted uncomfortably. “Do I have to remind you that Lady Cousland has declared a feud upon the Guerrins?”

“I’m not a Guerrin,” he answered without thinking. “Give her time to calm down and see reason. She knows you’re good people, she was just… upset. Very upset. I’d be more worried if Fergus follows suit, which he may.”

“It sounds like she has valid reasons for disliking your family, Eamon,” Gareth shrugged. “Such feuds are common in Navarra and Orlais. It’s just part of the game, Ostwick doesn’t expect the Crown to get involved in such squabbles.”

“Your Duke has enough squabbles with his own family,” Eamon countered.

“True,” Gareth admitted. “It’s sad to realize that those who should have had your back, and loved you, are out for their own self-interest. The next thing you know, you’re married to a woman who does not make you happy and who your dearly departed fiancée didn’t want you to. That makes it hard to form an affectionate bond and her disagreeable personality doesn’t help.”

“Disagreeable personality?” Anora hissed.

“That is what the last Viscount of Kirkwall called it,” Gareth waved her concern off. “The ambassador from Tevinter just compared it to bedding a wyvern. Funny how he used the word ‘bedding.’”

“Isn’t it?” Alistair wondered if there were any ambassadors his wife hadn’t slept with.

“Anyway,” Gareth continued his story. “Then the dead fiancée somehow comes back to life and this hypothetical person is still strapped with the unpleasant political marriage that he was pressured into.”

“Are you going somewhere with this?” Eamon wondered.

“Yes, it seems to me, an outsider that you managed to manipulate your king into marrying a woman he will never love. I would think, not being part of this kingdom, that you had too much influence over the king. He loves you, as you are more of a father to him than his own was. However, to this outside observer, it would seem that you are taking advantage of that situation. Your former arldom was taken over by a magister and Red Templars reportedly destroyed one of Ferelden’s cities. Then you failed to inform the king about the fate of the people who had been attacked, even though they are the only ones with a chance to put our world back in order.”

“Especially when some of those people were his friends,” Alistair thought of Leliana and Zevran. “And one is the woman he loves.”

“I am the woman you love!” Anora shrilled.

Alistair looked at her for a moment and then began to chuckle, then he leaned over the map as his laughter grew. He turned to Gareth. “We have to go to the Dead Darkspawn Tavern tonight and tell
“The Duke has also related to me that Bann Trevelyan’s youngest daughter, the twin of the one who died at the temple, is in the Hinterlands. King Marcus of Nevarra is working with her. He has suggested that a contingent of soldiers be sent to protect them from any of these Red Templars or Venatori. However, he would prefer that they not know they were there. It seems that their entire group thinks they can take care of themselves.”

Alistair looked at his other advisers, who had been silent throughout the exchanges. “Do we have the manpower?”

“We can divert some of the soldiers that you left in Redcliffe,” Elfstanna, the Bann of Waking Sea, suggested. “The Inquisition still has a force at the crossroads and camps all over the area. They can be diverted.”

“Agreed,” the Bann of Edgehill nodded. “Teagan can find other ways to rebuild his lands. The rest of us also need help with so many rifts opening and demons running amok. I am sending a representative to Skyhold to see how we can help.”

“I have sent one as well,” Elfstanna confirmed. “I plan to go myself, soon, though. The Inquisitor is my cousin after all. I want to… well, I want to make sure she really survived this time.” She glanced over at Alistair. “I can not believe that no one told you Lissa was all right. They all know that…” She shook her head. “They know.”

“It’s Inquisitor Cousland now,” the Arl of Denerim spoke up. “Hopefully, she really can do something about this Corypheus that led the attack on Haven. They say he is the one who killed the Divine.”

“Lissa definitely didn’t,” Elfstanna commented. “I can’t believe anyone would have thought she did, especially since she’d been dead at the time.”

“I don’t like having that army they’re building so close to Ferelden,” Eamon dissented. “Nor do I like them being in the Hinterlands.”

“Then tell Teagan to stop being a useless git, and take care of his own lands,” Elfstanna declared. “I’ve had Venatori tearing up the coast and the Blades of Hassan have moved in. I also have sightings of a giant and a dragon. Do you see me whining about it, though? No. And I’m happy that the Inquisitor got the Blades of Hassan in order and working for the locals instead of against them.”

“I’ll take care of scouting the western border areas where the Red Templars were sighted and check on the damage at Haven,” Anora crossed her arms. “I do care about my people.”
“Be careful of Orlais,” Alistair cautioned.

“I’m glad you care that much,” she sniffed and motioned to Megan. The two women left together.

“Not really. I’d just hate to fight a war because you stupidly got yourself killed. Meanwhile, I will be sending word to the other banns and arls. You will all have your own people staying vigilant for these Red Templars and Venatori. We will not have this Corypheus attacking any more town or villages in Ferelden.” Alistair studied the map. “Perhaps I should check out these checkpoints myself. I can summon Fergus to play regen while I do so.”

“I think it best you stay near the capital, for now, your majesty,” Edgehill dissented. “I am getting strange reports out of Crestwood and I have a feeling we will be reporting more of these strange Templars and cults soon.”

“Very well,” Alistair nodded. “In the meantime, I will send greetings to Skyhold and offer a hand of friendship.” He glanced at Gareth. “I should offer a token of peace and… affection… to the Inquisitor as well, would you care to help me pick it out?”

“I’d be delighted,” Gareth bowed.

“We are off then to the market,” Alistair bowed to his advisers and left.

Anora looked back at the war room as she walked along the hall with Megan. “He is likely going to extend a hand of friendship to the Inquisition and their Inquisitor, even though they have an army parked at our border and include the rebel mages who we kicked out of Ferelden.”

“Frankly, your majesty, he is probably going to go off and buy her a ‘Congratulations on becoming Inquisitor’ present,” Megan made a disgusted face. “Your husband is obviously smitten by this Elisabeta. Prince Sebastian was even considering courting her until she recruited Anders into her inner circle.”

“She is the daughter of a teyrn,” Anora conceded. “So she would be an appropriate wife for your prince. Alistair is more than just smitten, though. He is bewitched by her; even after all of this time separated from her and married to me, she is the one who holds sway over him. She’s a threat to me… I mean to Ferelden.”

“I have a… friend… who should be able to help you with your little problem,” Megan confided. “She will help you. She can meet us at the ruins of the Temple of Sacred Ashes. She has her own ambitions for Orlais. You’ll like her.”

“Orlais? I don’t know if I want to ally with…” She stopped as Alistair and Gareth walked by.

“I was thinking of replacing something she would have had to leave behind in Haven,” Alistair was saying.

“That is good for a personal gift,” Gareth agreed. “If you want an alliance, you might send a second message with another gift.”

“Do you have any ideas?” Alistair inquired.

“I’ll meet your friend,” Anora declared through gritted teeth.
Elisabeta’s exploration of Skyhold continued for days and increased as more rubbish was moved away from door entrances. Her rooms were better than what she had had as the daughter of a teyrn in her father’s castle. The room was spacious and sported two separate balconies. There was a place to set up a work area, a private sitting area, and a sleeping area. The windows were large and stained glass. A large marble fireplace sat between two large doors leading out onto one of the balconies. It even sported a story railed catwalk. She planned to put a little reading area up there, as soon as she figured out how to get up there. A bed would have to come first, though.

She wandered back out into the main hall. There was still debris everywhere. The workers hadn’t even been able to start working as they were laboring to make the living areas inhabitable. Her advisers met her.

“We are not ready to meet with dignitaries yet,” Josephine bemoaned. “We must be before guests begin to arrive. We’ve become a pilgrimage.”

“This castle is supposed to be the Inquisition’s fortress,” Cullen pointed out. “Perhaps letting whoever shows up on our doorstep in is not the best idea.”

“I agree with Cullen,” Elisabeta said. “I’ve seen what happens when you let an enemy and his forces into your castle.”

“We’ll have to think of a way to check everyone who comes in and make sure they are who they claim to be,” Leliana reasoned.

“Rendon Howe was who he claimed to be,” she countered. “Corypheus told me straight out who he was. I doubt we’ll be able to look at someone and say yes, you are the person who plans to assassinate Empress Celene. We aren’t going to be able to just look at someone and say Ah, you are obviously a spy for Corypheus, not unless they have red lyrium coming out of their skin or wearing a sign that says I’m a member of the Venatori, ask me how.”

“That would be helpful,” Cullen agreed.

“Yes, well, I’ll have my scouts be vigilant,” Leliana assured her.

“We can’t have your spies going through the belongings of our nobles or questioning their staff,” Josephine insisted. “It would be insulting to them.”

“Sure we can,” Cullen disagreed. “If they want to come into the Inquisition’s stronghold, they will have to follow procedures.”

“It all depends, Josie,” Leliana started, “On whether or not they know their belongings are being searched. There are ways to keep them from finding out.”
“It is my castle, so my rules,” Elisabeta insisted.

“Agreed,” Leliana nodded.

“Um, sorry to interrupt,” Varric coughed gently. “With all of the inspirational talk… and singing, I became inspired. I know someone who could help. They’ve had a run in with Corypheus before. I, well, I sent them a letter and they want to talk to you.”

“Great, bring them here,” Elisabeta encouraged him.

“Well, the thing is, their appearance might cause a bit of a stir,” Varric shuffled nervously. “It’s best if you meet him in secret.”

“In secret?” Elisabeta frowned at him. “It’s a good thing I trust you so much, otherwise I would think this was a trap.”

“It isn’t a trap, he just needs to avoid certain people,” Varric explained. “Come with me.”

Elisabeta followed Varric out of the hall. As she left, she heard Leliana speaking to her companions. “I know one thing, if Varric brought who I think he did, Cassandra’s going to be furious.”

As Varric led Elisabeta to a spot near battlements, just off of one of the castle’s many towers. A man waited for them. He was handsome with thick black hair and a close-cropped black beard. His dark blue eyes beamed at her from a well-sculpted face. “Well, hello, there.”

“Tempest, meet Griffon Hawke: The Champion of Kirkwall,” Varric did the introductions. “Hawke, this is Elisabeta Cousland: The Inquisitor and Hero of Ferelden.”

“I see your titles are as impressive as mine,” Hawke struck a pose.

Elisabeta laughed. “Don’t remind me. Varric thinks you can help me with my present problem.”

“Oh, I’ve encountered Corypheus before,” Griffon leaned against the stone wall. “Several dwarfs, a Carta in fact, tried to abduct me and my brother Carver. They broke into my estate, as well as the Grey Warden Keep where Carver was stationed. We found out where they came from, it was a hidden Grey Warden fortress in the Vimmark Mountains. They kept several demons and darkspawn imprisoned there.”

“Imprisoned?” Elisabeta didn’t like the sound of that. “Why would they not kill them?”

“You tell me, aren’t you the Grey Warden?” He pointed out.

“I was,” she admitted. “I came back… changed. I was never really a Grey Warden. I mean, I was conscripted and put through the Joining. However, the next day was the Battle of Ostagar. Alistair and I were the only Wardens left in Ferelden. We only saw one Warden from Orlais and we had to rescue him from the Arl of Denerim’s estate. He lived long enough to give us bad news and to die at the worst possible time. I died at the end of the Blight.”

“So I heard,” he admitted. “Yet here you are, in front of me, alive and well.”

“My life is a gift from Andraste,” she explained.
“Who brought Corypheus back then?” Griffon wondered. “Because I killed him.”

“He didn’t look dead,” Elisabeta insisted. “Well, he is definitely corrupted, but he was talking and moving around.”

“So I heard,” Hawke crossed his arms. “I was sure he was dead. I kill a lot of people, so I know. The funny thing is, he didn’t seem to understand that he was a darkspawn when I met him. He thought he was still a Priest of Dumat and that he’d just returned from the Fade.”

“He still doesn’t get that he’s a darkspawn,” Elisabeta confirmed. “Only now he thinks he’s a god.”

“The other strange thing is that the Grey Wardens are hearing the Calling,” Hawke revealed. “I sent Carver north so he was outside of Corypheus’ realm of influence.”

“Anders hasn’t mentioned hearing the Calling,” Elisabeta couldn’t remember him saying anything. “Justice might be protecting him from it.”

“Anders is here?” Hawke obviously hadn’t heard.

“I meant to tell you, Hawke,” Varric fidgeted. “Anders is part of the Inquisition.”

“I haven’t seen him since…” He began.

“Since Meredith turned into a giant red lyrium statue and I left with the other mages,” Anders slowly walked down the steps near them, towards Hawke. “Hello, Griffon. You’ll have to forgive me for this,” he grabbed Hawke’s face between his hands and brought their mouth’s together. The kiss was long and deep.

When the pair finally released each other, Hawke’s eyes were wide and his face was flushed. “I… well…” He reached out and grabbed Anders’ head to bring his mouth back to his.

“Do you feel like you’re superfluous at this point?” Elisabeta asked Varric as the two men’s passionate embrace continued.

“I’m confused, but intrigued,” Varric responded.

The two men broke apart again. “Why didn’t you tell me?” Hawke stroked Anders’ cheek.

“I tried, but you kept defending Fenris and you had feelings for him. I didn’t want to…” He stumbled. “Then you were with Isabela. I… we shouldn’t… you’re still with her, aren’t you?”

Griffon kissed Anders’ cheek. “She’s a free spirit and off on her ship right now… being spirited freely. I think she might be a bit too free. I’m pretty sure of it. I don’t think I would ever be able to get a permanent commitment from her, I’m not a big boat.”

“You are too me,” Anders wiggled his eyebrows, ignoring Varric’s groan of disgust.

“Perhaps we should explore our… ships… while we are both here,” Hawke gave him another kiss, this one short and pert. He turned to Elisabeta. “Sorry, I’m sure if you saw your Alistair again, you’d be… distracted… too.”

“She yelled and threw her engagement ring at him,” Varric informed him before Elisabeta had to say anything.

“Oh,” Hawke flinched. “I met King Alistair a few years ago and Varric was forward enough to ask him about you.”
“It was research for my book,” Varric defended himself. “I had heard… rumors… that Tempest and the King had been an item.”

“He acknowledged that you had been,” Hawke confirmed. “He… the way he spoke of you, it was obvious that he still loved you and missed you dearly.”

“He’s married to someone else,” she couldn’t help but wonder what Alistair had said about her.

“Yes, that came up,” Hawke recalled. “He was less enthusiastic in his description of his relationship with Anora. The words ‘harpy’ and ‘wyvern’ were used. I believe their marriage is a cold, political union. The poor man.”

“That was his decision,” she declared, although the thought of Alistair being trapped in such unhappiness made her yearn to go rescue him. That wasn’t her place now, though. She reminded herself yet again that she had decided to move on from him, no matter how her heart yearned to be with him.

“That’s between you two, sea eyes,” Hawke shrugged. “I have a Grey Warden friend who is hiding in Crestwood. I need you to meet me there.”

“I will,” she promised. She would schedule the trip for after her return to the Hinterlands.

“Good,” Hawke slipped his arm around Anders. “I think I need a… tour… of Skyhold.” The pair walked away.

Varric watched after them. “I don’t think it’s Skyhold they’re planning to tour. How… I didn’t see this. I mean Anders kept telling Hawke why they couldn’t be together and he never tried to dissuade him from being Isabela.”

“That looked like dissuasion to me,” Elisabeta shook her head. She felt sorry for Isabela, wherever she was.

As she hurried to the new war room, Elisabeta heard some of the people already gathered in the hall murmuring about rumors of Hawke’s visit. How did they know? What were the snooty Orlesian nobles even doing in her hall? She would have to talk to Josephine about it. Had Skyhold become some hang out for the Masked Marauder Monkeys? She had to get control of her castle.

Her advisers were waiting when she walked into the room. It was a good sized room and a large table sat in the middle. On the table were maps of Ferelden and Orlais. There were tokens for each adviser on the map.

“Is Hawke really here?” Leliana asked in greeting.

“He is,” Elisabeta confirmed.

“Cassandra is going to have kittens,” Cullen swore. “You might want to take Varric to the Hinterlands with you. If you leave them behind, she’s going to either kill him or nail him to the walls of Skyhold as a warning to anyone who would dare lie to her again.”

“He’s coming with me,” she confirmed. “I may have to leave Anders behind. He and Hawke are becoming… reacquainted.”
“What about Isabela?” Cullen wanted to know.

“She likes big boats more, apparently,” Elisabeta shrugged. “Don’t ask me what that means. Didn’t ask, don’t want to know.”

“Are we going to discuss the Inquisition or gossip about Griffin Hawke?” Josephine’s voice bellied her interest in the subject.

“How is Zevran lately?” Leliana’s voice was deceptively sweet. “I noticed a bouquet of lilies on your desk. I also noticed Zevran hanging out in your office yesterday. I believe there was even a… massage… a shoulder massage involved.”

Elisabeta had to turn away for a moment to contain her laughter. Zevran had once offered her a massage and it turned out that he didn’t mean an innocent rubbing of her muscles. When she turned back, she hoped her face was blank when she turned back. “He did learn his massage techniques from the whores of Antiva. I’m sure he’s very good at it.” She had the satisfaction of seeing Josephine’s face turning red. “Is there a way you can do something about all of the Masked Marauder Monkeys hanging out in the hall by the time I get back, Josephine?”

“The what?” Josephine had obviously never heard that term.

“I believe she means the Orlesian nobles that have started showing up,” there was a chuckle in Cullen’s voice. “It would be nice to not have so many of them underfoot.”

“We can’t just kick them out!” Josephine was scandalized. “We need the support of the Orlesian Nobles. We are on the border of Orlais and Ferelden now. Either country can make things hard for us. I’m not going to get rid of them. We want them here.”

“You want them here,” Elisabeta corrected. “I don’t. I don’t trust them and their conversation is so frivolous that I want to avenge my grandfather’s death on every single one of them.”

“Your grandfather’s death?” Josephine repeated.

“He was killed in the Orlesian Invasion,” Elisabeta revealed. “He was formally executed by those maniacs.”

“Sweet Maker,” Josephine moaned. “We still can’t send away our noble allies.”

“Allies?” Elisabeta snorted. “They’re just families pawning off their more irritating relatives on us or hoping we can help their masking wearing spawn to find another mask wearing spawn to wed. There is a reason those stinky cheese munchers wear masks you know.”

Elisabeta turned to Cullen and said in a pseudo whisper. “They’re really ugly.”

“Well, in other news,” Josephine obviously wanted to change the subject. “Bann Teagan is demanding the Inquisition pay for him rebuild Redcliffe after our allies destroyed the Hinterlands and parts of the town.”

“Why don’t we just send people to do the labor?” Cullen suggested. “It would be cheaper and would show that the Inquisition is willing to help its allies.”

“I declared a feud between the Couslands and Guerrins,” Elisabeta reminded them. “We could just tell him to stuff it.”

“I could have him killed,” Leliana suggested.
“That’s a possibility,” Elisabeta agreed.

“No, it isn’t,” Josephine’s voice was firm. “We are not solving every problem by killing someone. The Inquisitor will keep her personal feuds separate from Inquisition business.”

“Spoilsport,” Leliana muttered as Elisabeta said, “No, I won’t.”

“Lissa,” Cullen sighed. “It would look bad if you just killed Teagan after he demanded help.

“We could make it look like an accident,” Leliana mused. “I know Zevran could do it. He’s still itching to go to Denerim and kill Queen Anora.”

“What!” Josephine shrieked.

“Don’t worry, Josie,” Leliana assured her. “He wouldn’t be gone long. He’d be back before you could miss his warm kisses and sweet caresses.”

“We don’t… we aren’t…” Josephine stumbled. “We just can’t have an assassin going around killing all of the Inquisitor’s enemies.”

“You just said that Inquisition business and my personal business are two separate things,” Elisabeta pointed out. “Make up your mind. Meanwhile, we will send the men, but make sure they glower disapprovingly at Teagan from time to time.”

“Our next order of business is this,” Josephine produced a letter. There was a note on the top. Josephine, darling, you should take care of this, V. Josephine opened the letter and began to read.

My dearest Vivienne,

You cannot have heard the shocking allegations against the Inquisition, or surely you would never have been seen with them. Allow me, as a friend, to open your eyes. People are saying that Divine Justinia is, indeed, alive, but that the Inquisition—her closest advisors and most trusted servants—have orchestrated all this chaos on her orders. That it was Seeker Pentaghast and Sister Nightingale who sabotaged the Conclave in order to eliminate the opposition within the Chantry, and cut off the heads of the mage rebellion and Templars in a single stroke. To save your own reputation, you must escape this acquaintance immediately.

With deepest concern,

Vicomtesse Elodie de Morreau

“We have Fiona right here,” Elisabeta shook her head. “Orlesians are dumber than I thought.”

“We need the support of the nobles to combat these rumors,” Josephine insisted. “I can arrange a few key visits.”

“You want me to go visit nobles in Orlais?” Elisabeta’s eyes widened. “I am off to the Hinterlands in two days and then I need to go to Crestwood. I don’t have time for silly visits.”

“Our ability to prove the Divine’s death would just be used against us,” Leliana reasoned. “We should find the source of this rumor and kill them.”

“That’s reasonable,” Elisabeta nodded. “You can let Cullen punch them before you kill them.”
“That is tempting,” Cullen agreed. “We could also escort them to Haven, obviously we didn’t arrange for the destruction of the city we were living in, and to the Temple of Sacred Ashes. They can admire the big hole in the ground.”

“Speaking of Haven,” Elisabeth brought up a new topic. “I want to send the Chargers back there to check for survivors and personal belongings that survived the attack.”

“Send Mother Gisselle with them,” Leliana suggested. “She can give last rites to any bodies they find.”

“Very well,” Elisabeth nodded. “Are we done here for today? I want to explore the dungeons and basements of Skyhold.”

“You don’t have time,” Josephine shook her head. “I have a designer from Val Royeaux coming tomorrow to design your dress for your portrait tomorrow. Plus, your wardrobe for Empress Celene’s peace talks. It is a weeklong celebration. It includes a joust and melee and will end with a ball. I am under the understanding that the heads of all of Thedas’ nations are invited. We should be able to get an invitation, as well. I have a lead on that, he’ll be here tomorrow.”

“Oooh,” Leliana grinned. “I hope they have time to outfit all of us.”

“What portrait?” Elisabeth hadn’t agreed to any portrait. She had had her portrait done a few years before her parent’s death, but not since. “I will sit through one as soon as I’m back from the Hinterlands, but I don’t see why I need a Mask Accessory designer to make my clothes.”

“A what?” Josephine flinched as soon as she asked. “No don’t answer…”

“Oh, you know the Orlesian nobles,” Elisabeth answered and affected an Orlesian accent. “I must only purchase clothes that go with this ridiculous mask I love so much. It represents my position and my place in the House of LePeu. Only the most outrageous designs and shiny things can truly match this thing on my face. I refuse to let the Inquisition be part of Orlais.”

“We’ll talk when he gets here,” Josephine waved a hand. “I have a few things in mind and Leliana will help.”

“Leliana, I’m trusting you,” Elisabeth retreated while she could. “Don’t let her go crazy while I’m in the Hinterlands.”
Anora followed Megan through the ruins of Haven to the remains of the Temple of Sacred Ashes. “Will this friend really be able to help me with my problems?”

“Not only can I take care of your troublesome marital companion, but this annoying Inquisitor whom I hear is a thorn in your side,” the newcomer had close-cropped blonde hair that Anora thought was very unladylike. She was obviously an Orlesian by her accent, though, so she supposed she couldn’t expect better of her. She wore all leather under a fur-lined cloak. The woman shivered as if she’d never been in snow before. Really, how had Orlais ever invaded Ferelden?

“And who might you be?” Anora wanted to know.

“I am someone who wants your help in exchange,” the Orlesian shrugged, she let the cloak fall open to frame her voluptuous frame. “I, too, have people who stand in the way of what I want. I have found a new master who will help me, though. He can help you, too. You can call me Ria. Why don’t we get to know each other better,” she ran a hand along Anora’s shoulder. “And we can discuss my plan. Megan knows the way of my friends. The Venatori have another plan to implement with her. Come pretty thing, it is time for the nobles of Thedas to take what is theirs from those who have held them back.”
Letters and Propositions

Chapter Summary

A guest has a proposition for Elisabeta and she gets a look at some interesting letters.

Elisabeta was annoyed to find even more Orlesians in the hall when she emerged from her rooms. She had tossed and turned so badly from her nightmares the night before that Calenhad had jumped on her twice to wake her up. Now she had other concerns than gossiping Orlesians.

She’d discovered a second library under Josephine’s office, along with storage rooms and a room that was large enough to house an entire army. She wanted to clean it out and then would have more magical lessons with Dorian.

“There you are, Inquisitor,” Mother Gisselle rushed to her. “I must speak with you about your Tevinter companion.”

“I know Dorian flirts, but he really isn’t trying to compromise you,” Elisabeta assured her. “From what I hear, he’s trying to compromise me. Most of the gossip is about Hawke and Anders, though. It seems the two weren’t as discreet yesterday as they thought they were.”

“Um, no…” Gisselle was confused. “Griffon Hawke, the Champion of Kirkwall is here?”

“He’ll leave for Crestwood soon, but he and Anders are having quite the reunion,” she wished she’d been able to have such a reunion with the man she loved.

“Well, anyway, I have received a letter from Tevinter,” Gisselle explained. “It is from Dorian’s father, here,” she handed the letter to Elisabeta. “They want you to get Dorian to a secret meeting with a retainer in Redcliff.”

Elisabeta read the letter. It did seem to be from Dorian’s father, but Dorian never talked about his parents. “They want the meeting to be secret from Dorian until he gets there? I am not going to start lying to my friends. I thought you knew me better than that, Gisselle.”

“I’m sure you’ll do the right thing,” Gisselle walked off.

Elisabeta shook her head and stepped towards the second-floor library, where she suspected Dorian was. It was the Inquisition’s library and not nearly as dusty as the basement floor one.

“Inquisitor!” Josephine stopped her before she’d taken two steps. “I need to speak with you immediately.”

“Can it wait?” Elisabeta considered just walking away, anyway, but it wouldn’t do to ruffle the ambassador’s feathers any more than she already was.

“If it could, I would have sent a messenger,” Josephine explained. “As it is, I was about to, but then we received a very high ranking visitor.”

“It had better not be another useless Orlesian,” she followed Josephine to her office.
“I am far from… useless, my lady,” the dark-haired masked man stood as they entered. He looked familiar. Elisabeta was sure she’d seem him somewhere.

“Inquisitor Cousland, might I introduce Duke Gaspard DeChalons?” Josephine introduced them. “He arrived this morning with a couple… propositions, which will greatly help out the Inquisition. I beg you to hear him out… and don’t punch him, please.”

“All right,” Elisabeta sat down. “What is it that you propose?” She became distracted for a moment by a tapestry covering something in the far corner of the room. She wondered what they were, but tried to focus her attention on Gaspard.

“Lady Cousland, it is Lady, for you are the daughter of a teyrn, a rank equal to my own,” Gaspard began.

“That is correct,” she confirmed.

“The first offer I have come to make is to get you into the celebrations for Celene’s peace talks,” he declared. “The heads of state have been invited, but the Inquisition is not quite yet in a position to declare itself a state. I might be able to help with that. I am inviting you, and your Inquisition to the talks as my personal guests. Just imagine what a stir we will make when we arrive with you on my arm.”

She did have the urge to punch him, it was undeniable. However, that would indeed mess up some of the Inquisition’s plans. Leliana would scold her. She’d never been on the receiving end of one of Leliana’s scolds, but had a feeling it would be scary. They needed a way into those celebrations. “I accept your offer. It will cause quite the stir, won’t it?” She could imagine the shocked and intrigued looks on the Orlesians’ faces. It might be worth going with Gaspard for that alone.

“That it will,” he agreed. “It will be an even greater, and more delicious, if you were also on my arm as my intended bride.” He held up a hand when she opened her mouth to tell him exactly what she thought of that idea. “Hear me out. When my first wife died, you were on my list of potential mates, but your father refused my request to court you.”

“Of course he…” She began. “Wait, my parents promised I could marry for love, he shouldn’t have been denying anyone. Then again... I was what... a child and you were... older. Perhaps he thought I should grow up a bit first. What had you expected? Did you think he’d just ship me off to Orlais to live in your household until I was old enough to wed?”

“Well, he did refuse,” Gaspard affirmed. “Your age may have been mentioned… and he may have called me a few choice names. However, things have changed now. Then I had just had my throne stolen from me. Another sits where I should be and has taken things from me that I love. The same is true for you, is it not? I know that you were engaged to King Alistair before… your sabbatical from life. While you were gone from this world, he married Anora, whom you once purportedly called The Serpent of Denerim and swore to crush her head under the Mighty Boot of the Couslands. Well, that snake now sits on your throne beside the man you were betrothed to. She has everything that should be yours, while Celene has what’s mine. Together, we could take it back. I don’t mean with your Inquisition, I mean you and me as a partnership.”

Elisabeta sat back for a moment. Despite Gaspard being an Orlesian, one who looked towards Ferelden with greedy eyes, he painted a very pretty picture. They could help each other take back what was taken from them. Together they could rule both Orlais and Ferelden. The Couslands were the next in line to the throne, behind the Theirin, despite what the MacTirs thought. There was one major problem, no two. One was that she wouldn’t allow any army of Gaspard’s to set foot in
her land. The other was that she would never try to take the Throne of Ferelden from the man she’d placed on it. It wasn’t the throne that she had wanted, it was the man she’d put on that throne. “I…”

“No, don’t answer yet,” Gaspard insisted, putting a finger to her lips. “Think about it for a while. You can give me your answer when we are in Halamshiral together. Just think of all that could be if you were at my side. Think of the child we could have, the child who could unite Orlais and Ferelden and bring permanent peace to our people.” He lifted her hand and kissed it. “I will have one of Josephine’s serving girls show me to my room. He strode to the door and out.

A united Orlais and Ferelden; Elisabeta could just imagine what Gaspard envisioned. It would be an Orlesian style government in power in Ferelden once again. A thought came to her. What if she were to marry Gaspard and have a child with him, then kill him. She could raise the child as a Ferelden and change Orlais. Too bad she wasn’t Orlesian enough to go through with such a plot. She wasn’t the type who would marry for power and then kill her husband. As for letting Gaspard bed her… well, there was something attractively dark and sinister in him and he wasn’t bad to look at. No, Alistair was bedding a viper; she didn’t think they both should do so. There was something just too tragic about it. Perhaps she could give the idea to Varric and let him use it to write some great tragedy.

“Oh, good, you’re still in here,” Josephine came back into the room. “Gaspard isn’t the only thing that came for you this morning.”

“Don’t tell me that Celene is here to propose marriage, too,” Elisabeta sighed dramatically.

“Propose marriage?” Josephine became excited. “Is that what the Grand Duke wanted? I was hoping he was just here to help us, but marriage… that’s perfect! I have to go tell Leliana!”

Elisabeta stood. “Josephine, I’m not marr…” Josephine was gone. She sat back down with a groan. Then she started going through the papers on Josephine’s desk. She noticed familiar handwriting on more than one of them. Curiously, she pulled out the paper with Zevran’s scribbling. It was a dirty love letter, she realized.

My little apricot, my heart, and loins, ache every day for your affections. I look at you and see the moon hanging above Antiva City, glorious and distant. Yet, it calls out for me to touch; to touch it as I have you in my dreams. In those dreams, I am able to kiss your pert nose and rounded bosoms, as I did while we sought warmth and comfort on the way to Skyhold. I am able to nibble up those smooth, taut legs…”

Dang, Alistair’s love letters had been better than this. Elisabeta realized that she’d just seen a paper with Alistair’s handwriting under Zevran’s letter. She pulled it out.

_Ambassador Montilyet,

I sent to the Inquisition the gift of these tapestries in a token of friendship from Ferelden. I’m afraid that our last meeting didn’t go well. I was upset at the mages and... well... I handled things wrong. Beta had every right to be angry with me. Not only for the way I treated the mages, but because... the rest is between her and I. I hope someday we will be able to talk again as we used to. For now, she is obviously too angry to even use a calm tone around me. Her anger is justified and I will not belittle it. I will just continue to thank the Maker for bringing her back to us, even if it wasn’t to me. Anyway, I am sending you a tapestry as a hand of friendship. Gareth is telling me that I shouldn’t be talking to you about my private matters with the Inquisitor.

She wondered who Gareth was, but kept reading.
The tapestry is for Skyhold. I have enclosed two other letters. One is for Leliana and the other for Beta. The other present that is sent with the tapestry is NOT for the Inquisition. It is for Elisabeta Cousland and is a personal gift. Don’t let anyone else touch it. Gareth says that sounds ominous, but I don’t care.

Yours in Friendship,

King Alistair Theirin

Elisabeta caught herself tracing a finger along his signature. Maker, maybe she should marry Gaspard. Alistair had made a political marriage with a viper, why shouldn’t she? If he still cared about her like he claimed, he could pay for his decision by learning what it felt on her side. Knowing the person you love not only wasn’t with you, but had chosen a cold political union with a viper. After all, she could help Gaspard to the throne and then use her position to ensure he never attacked Ferelden. She could teach her child to love her people and respect her Cousin Eleanor, if Eleanor were still queen.

“She is not marrying Gaspard,” she heard Leliana talking to someone and turned to see her walk in with Josephine.

“It would be a great match,” Josephine insisted.

“Lissa, good, you’re still here,” Leliana pointed at her friend. “Please, disillusion our overly enthusiastic ambassador. She thinks you are going to marry Grand Duke Gaspard.”

“He did propose,” Elisabeta admitted.

“I’m sure you then punched him,” Leliana said.

“I’d promised Josephine I wouldn’t,” Elisabeta made a face. “I… he didn’t give me a chance to say yes or no. He did make a compelling argument, but… then…” She shrugged. “Alistair seems happy enough bedding a viper for political reasons, why shouldn’t I?”

Leliana’s hands went to her hips. “You are not going to punish yourself for Alistair’s decisions. The Maker gave you your life back and you’re going to be happy, if I have to stab everyone in the way to your happiness and that includes Gaspard and Anora.”

“Leliana, please do not threaten the heads of state or their families,” Josephine rubbed her temples as if she had a headache.

“It wasn’t a threat, it was an offer,” Leliana corrected her. “Zevran still wants to make a little trip to Denerim to eliminate those in the way of our Deadly Goddess’ happiness,” the last part was said with an Antivan accent. She turned back to Elisabeta. “Alistair doesn’t actually bed his viper, by the way. He never has. I have sp… associates… in Denerim Palace. Alistair sleeps alone and there is a rumor that the royal marriage is unconsummated.”

“You had a letter for you,” Josephine reached in her desk and handed it to Leliana. “And one for you, Inquisitor,” she handed it to Elisabeta. “He also sent a gift to you.” She stood and ran to get to workers to help her lift up the tapestries. Under them was a beautiful, carved Highever Harp. The frame was gold with carved roses. Near the top, there was also a laurel carved.
was no doubt that the harp had commissioned especially for her.

Elisabeta stood and ran her fingers along the frame. The workmanship showed a love of the craft, a love of the gifter as well. She played a few notes. The tuned notes were pure and sweet. “It’s Exquisite.”

“There was a note for you as well,” Josephine handed it to her. “I don’t have to ask if you like it. Now what to do with these tapestries.” She laid them out. One depicted mabari playing in a field, a second was a scene from the overthrow of Orlais, a third depicted Calenhad and Teyrna Elethea Cousland attacking Amaranthine together.

“Obviously we’re going to display them,” Elisabeta thought that was obvious. “There are a lot of drafty areas in Skyhold, including one behind my throne. We will put this one behind it,” she indicated the second tapestry. “This one can go in my room,” she indicated the third one. “The mabari should be either in the great hall as well or in Cullen’s office. Let him decide. We should remind Thedas that our handsome commander is a Ferelden.”

“Handsome commander is it?” Josephine teased.’

“He is handsome, Josie,” Leliana nodded. “Why don’t you get some workers to move the harp into Lissa’s room? While we would love to listen to her play, knowing her, she would rather have it there.”

“I would,” Elisabeta agreed. “Have them set it between my sitting area and fireplace for now. I still need to go talk to Dorian. I’ll read this in the library,” she lifted the letter. She noticed the disappointed looks of her advisers when she went to read the letter elsewhere.

“Now let’s talk about where Zevran has been nibbling on you,” she heard Leliana say to Josephine as she left.
Archaeological Arrivals

Chapter Summary

Letters and past lives are discussed, just as new characters (and old) appear.

Elisabeta noted the number of Orlesians in the main hall once again as she walked through it towards the stairs that led up to the main Inquisition library. She needed to figure out a way to attract as many Ferelden nobles. She refused to let the Inquisition somehow become incorporated into Orlais. It was not part of the Evil Empire and she didn’t intend to let it become so, not on her watch.

“Inquisitor,” Solas greeted her. He had moved into the room. He had a desk set up and a bed in the loft area. Even now he was painting murals on the wall.

“Isn’t it going to be strange to have people walking in and out of your room all day?” She looked around. “It’s a large area and was obviously not meant to be a private office or bedroom. It’s the middle of a tower and everyone above can look down on you.”

“I’m comfortable here,” he continued to paint.

She shook her head and walked up the stairs. She found Dorian sitting in a plush chair set in an alcove. There was a window beside him. He could see the castle gardens below. She knew Josephine was already looking for a gardener to tend them. She had an idea of what she wanted done there and would have a word with the gardener if they were there when she returned from the Hinterlands. “Dorian, I have a letter for you.”

He closed the book he was reading and gave her a saucy grin. “Is it a naughty letter?”

She shook her head and handed it to him. “No, Josephine is the only one getting those.”

He leaned forward. “Josephine is getting naughty letters, from whom? No, wait, let me guess. It is that handsome Antivan rogue friend of yours, Zevran.”

“It is,” she looked around for a place to sit down, but couldn’t find one.

“Oh, come here,” he grabbed her by the waist and pulled her onto his lap. “What did it say?”

“I didn’t get to read the whole thing,” she admitted. “There was a lot about nibbling. He apparently really does think she’s a piece of fruit. There was also a reference to them having done the deed on the way to Skyhold, while they were huddled together at night to keep warm.”

“As people tend to just huddle together in the middle of the night,” he opened his own letter. “Alas, we had no one huddling with us.”

“We could have huddled together,” she shifted so she was more comfortable. “We would have kept our hands to ourselves.”

“Still, the most attractive man and woman in Skyhold huddled together would have been a sight to behold.” He began to read. “This is from my father.”
“That’s what Gisselle said,” Elisabeta recalled. “He sent it to her.”

“He sent a letter about me to a reverend mother?” Dorian was confused. “Why? I know my son? What he knows about me could fit into a thimble. It mentions a family retainer who is supposed to meet me there and ‘escort’ me back to Tevinter.”

“A trap?” She raised her eyebrows.

“Possibly,” he agreed. “Let’s go. If it is a trap, we’ll kill everyone and escape. You’re good at that.”

“Indeed I am,” she agreed. “We leave for the Hinterlands tomorrow. We’ll go to Redcliffe first, where this retainer waits. Then we’ll go to Winterwatch Tower to see what secrets I can discover about the Guerrins.”

“We’ll face multiple enemies and gain the upper hand on them in one trip,” he approved. He nodded at the other letter she held. “What is that?”

“King Alistair sent a personal gift and letter to me,” she explained. “I haven’t been able to read the letter yet.”

“Oh, his High Hotness is sending you presents again?” Dorian wiggled his eyebrows. “Do tell me what the handsome king sent the woman he pines for this time.”

“Pines for… I wish,” she shook her head. “He sent me a new harp, a full-sized Highever Harp. It’s beautiful.”

“You lost yours when Haven was burned, didn’t you?” He prompted.

“I did,” she confirmed.

“Well, what does he say?” He urged.

She opened the letter and read.

_My Dearest Beta,_

_I can not describe my joy in learning that you survived the attack on Haven. I am deeply ashamed that I was once again unable to keep you safe while in my kingdom. I despaired when I was no longer sure whether or not you were among the living. Even if you are not at my side, the knowledge that you walk under the same sun as I do and gaze at the same moon brings me some modicum of comfort. My already dim world would have dimmed more, for you are still my true source of light. You are my sun and moon and any attempt I have made to find that light again, produced only candles at best._

_Fergus had told me that you took your harp from Highever and I realized that it was likely destroyed in the Battle of Haven. I am sending a replacement. I still have your lap harp and will forever cherish the memory of you playing it for me and singing to me when I was beset by the nightmares of the Blight. I will also fondly recall listening to you play at night in the privacy of our tent when it was just you, me, and no bad dreams. Please accept my gift, even if I do not get to be there to hear you play. Know that I dearly wish I could be at your side again._

_Yours forever,_

_King Alistair_
“That bastard,” she laid her head on Dorian’s shoulder, letting a tear escape. She couldn’t deny her own wish to be back at his side, too.

“Would you like me to introduce you to my handsome cousin or kill Anora?” Dorian was willing to do either.

“Grand Duke Gaspard just proposed,” she confided.

“No, he won’t do for you,” Dorian tightened his arms around her. “He is too Orlesian for the Ferelden Rose and has no sense of humor. When I met King Alistair he seemed too dour for you.”

“He has a sense of humor, a strange one,” she recalled. “At least he used to. I loved his sense of humor. He’d make me giggle. I haven’t giggled since we used the Urn of Sacred Ashes on Arl Eamon.”

“No wonder you declared a feud against his family,” Dorian resolved to do something about that.

While leaving Dorian, Elisabeta noticed Fiona in another alcove; this one didn’t have a window. “Fiona,” she looked around for a chair, but didn’t find one. She shrugged and sat on the floor. “Might we speak for a moment?”

“I am your ally, so I suppose we should talk more,” Fiona agreed.

“You have mentioned that you were once a Grey Warden,” Elisabeta revealed.

“I don’t remember telling you that,” Fiona tensed.

“You don’t?” Elisabeta thought back. “You’re right, you didn’t tell me. Well, you did, but it was in the future; the dark future, that is. You mentioned that you were also once a Grey Warden, but somehow lost the taint. You also mentioned Duncan.”

“I was,” Fiona confessed. “After I realized I wasn’t, I tried to go through the Joining again, but it didn’t work.”

“You willingly went back through the Joining?” Elisabeta was shocked. “Did no one die the first time you went through it?”

“One had,” Fiona admitted. “But the other Wardens were treating me as if I had cheated death; I was no longer one of them.”

“Because you no longer had a death sentence hanging over your head?” Elisabeta guffawed. “They were jealous that you didn’t have to worry about the Calling anymore, while they did.”

“That may be the case,” Fiona conceded. “But they made me feel quite unwelcome. I was an outsider. In the end, I went back to the Circles.”

“You could have just left and made a new life for yourself,” Elisabeta suggested. “Perhaps taken up farming or joined a mercenary group.”
“I would have been an apostate and hunted down by the Templars,” Fiona reminded her. “Ask your friend Anders what that is like. I believe he was hunted down more than once before joining the Grey Wardens.”

“He told me about an incident where they tried to hunt him down after he became a Grey Warden,” Elisabeta confided. “Their Commander didn’t care that King Alistair had already reminded them that once he was conscripted into the Wardens, they were outside of the Chantry’s influence. He told them that Ferelden backed the Conscription,” she didn’t realize there was a soft smile on her face at the thought.

“I’m sorry if my actions in Redcliffe caused any strain between Ferelden’s Crown and the Inquisition,” Fiona blew out a breath. “Things seemed rather tense there.”

“You didn’t,” Elisabeta assured her. “The… tension… was the result of many things. Much of it wasn’t even related to what was happening in Redcliffe. It was… personal.”

Fiona nodded. “Have you spoken to King Alistair since? I knew his father, Maric, and I just wanted to make sure Alistair was happy and doing well.”

Elisabeta let out a little, bitter laugh. “I want him happy, too. I don’t know if all of his choices have made him so, but I do wish it for him. Why didn’t you just stay with Maric? He would have protected you from the Templars.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Fiona flushed.

“Yes, you do,” Elisabeta insisted. “Let’s talk about your friendship with Duncan. It seems that everyone knew him. You did.”

“I did,” Fiona confirmed. “We were friends.”

“When I was in the dark future in Redcliffe, you also mentioned that he took your baby to people he trusted,” she revealed. “That would be the baby you had with Maric, the one you still worry about the happiness of.”

“I…” Fiona glanced around to see if anyone else was listening.

“He gave the baby to the Guerrins,” Elisabeta continued. “Why the Guerrins? Could it be because they were Maric’s dead wife’s family and the closest thing he had to a family of his own? Duncan thought they could be trusted with Maric’s baby, the baby you had with him. They made up a bull shit story about the maid. Or more likely, one of the maids died in childbirth, the baby with her, and it was very convenient to claim your baby was hers. Maric wasn’t the father of her baby, was he?”

“I’m not aware of Maric ever sleeping with a maid,” Fiona admitted. “He wasn’t the type to do so. He couldn’t have around the time that Alistair was conceived; we were in the Deep Roads at the time. Since I obviously revealed too much in Redcliffe, in the dark future, there is no denying that I did have a baby with Maric. He wanted us to stay with him, at the palace. I hadn’t realized yet that the Joining had been undone. Even if I had, though, it would have ruined my son’s future. Even now, if anyone learned that King Alistair’s mother is an elven mage, his enemies would jump on it. Anora would use it to wrestle the Crown as her sole possession.”

Elisabeta nodded, Fiona was right about that. Alistair needed a strong queen who loved him before anyone could acknowledge who true maternal line. “Did you love Maric? Was losing him worth it?”
“I…” Fiona looked down. “I did love him and I’m not sure if it was worth it. Things might have been different if I stayed. Maybe he wouldn’t have disappeared and would still be at the head of Ferelden. That would have been good. He knew the Blight was coming, he’d… he’d been shown a vision. Cailan wouldn’t have died at Ostagar and Alistair wouldn’t be trapped in a loveless, political marriage. I didn’t want that for him either.”

“If you cared about his happiness, then you shouldn’t have let Duncan take him to Redcliffe,” Elisabeta revealed. “Isolde made his childhood a nightmare. She made sure he knew Redcliffe wasn’t his home. She had him sleeping out in the stables and I’m sure she played a large part in Eamon sending him to the Chantry to become a Templar, a mage hunter. I wonder how many mage hunters are children of mages.”

“More than we realize, considering the Chantry took our babies away if we had them in the Circle,” Fiona thought about it. “They can probably utilize lyrium better than those without magic in their line. Are you going to tell Alistair… about me?”

“It’s not something I’d put in a letter,” Elisabeta assured her. “And it isn’t like I’m going to talk to him anytime soon. But you became pregnant before the Joining was undone?”

“I was,” Fiona confirmed. “It was likely undone before I gave birth, though.”

“My Joining was undone when I was resurrected,” Elisabeta revealed. “I wonder if we could work together to find a cure. While you may have liked being a Warden, I was conscripted and now the Wardens are hearing a false Calling. A cure could help. I bet Anders would let us experiment on him, but I don’t want to lose my healer. I don’t think Blackwall is who he claims to be. Maybe we could capture some to experiment on.”

Fiona thought for a moment. “It could be a fun pastime. We’ll talk about possibilities when you return from the Hinterlands. I hear you’re going to excavate part of the Winterwatch tower.”

When she returned to the throne room, Elisabeta actually counted the Orlesian Nobles milling around and considered how to balance the number out with Fereldens or, better yet, beat the number. She would write some letters. She would also write Fergus and have him put a word in the ear of the bannorn about limiting Orlesian influence on the Inquisition.

“Is it true that you have become engaged to Grand Duke Gaspard,” Cullen interrupted her thoughts.

“What!” She turned sharply on him. “No! I mean… he asked, but I didn’t say yes.”

“You told him no? Josephine isn’t going to like that,” he didn’t sound unhappy, though.

“Not exactly…” She began, but stopped as a group of people she didn’t recognize marched in. She heard Cullen’s breath break on a quick intake. They were led by a trio. In the middle of the trio was a human woman with golden blonde curls and flashing blue eyes. There was something very familiar about her. To her left was a man who wasn’t a couple of inches under six feet, with curling chestnut hair and bow strapped to his back. On the right side was a dark-haired dwarf, who carried a large axe.

“It’s true,” the dwarf said. There was something familiar about her voice.
“Elisabeta Cousland, Inquisitor of the Inquisition, I demand answers as to what happened to my sister. I also require your aid,” the blonde declared.

“I might be able to tell you more about your sister if I knew who you were,” Elisabeta eyed them warily. At least the woman’s accent was that of a Free Marcher and not an Orlesian.

The blonde made a deep curtsy. “I am Adrianna Trevelyan, the twin sister of Desdemona Trevelyan. Word is that Andraste chose to replace your life force with hers after the explosion at the Temple of Sacred Ashes.”

That’s why she looked so familiar. Elisabeta had a flash of an almost identical looking woman who screaming, tears flowing down her face. There had been a Mark of Tranquility on her forehead. “It’s true,” she admitted. “I don’t remember what happened. I just remember she was in a lot of pain and Andraste felt it was more than she could bear.”

Adrianna nodded. “She’d been made tranquil after… an incident. She was never the same after that. It was like my twin was there, but she wasn’t. It was a shell. Still, I hope you feel guilty, because I have learned that the Winterwatch Tower is now under your control. We are archaeologists who were planning to excavate there.”

“We had read of possible ritualistic activities there that were performed by members of a now-extinct cult,” the man to Adrianna’s left informed her.

“I was planning on digging up the fort myself,” Elisabeta admitted.

“Good, then we’re all going,” the dwarf announced.

“Shale, we can’t just invite ourselves along,” the man protested. He had a Navarran accent.

“Of course we are, Gus,” Shale declared. “It has returned from the dead and we will join her cause. Think of all the sites she will visit.”

*It? Shale!* “Shale?” Now Elisabeta placed the voice, only the last time she’d heard it, it had belonged to a golem.

“It is good to see it again,” Shale declared. “When do we leave?”

“The day after tomorrow,” Elisabeta told her, still not sure what was happening. “We’ll debrief in the war room tomorrow.”

“We’ll be there,” Adrianna agreed. “Now we need somewhere to sleep, along with our little team,” she jerked a thumb back indicating those behind her.

“I’ll take care of that,” Elisabeta thought for a moment.

“Your team can bunk in the barracks with my men, Lady Trevelyan,” Cullen offered.

“I’ll find room for the rest of you,” Elisabeta knew of some that should be appropriate, if she had to, she’d be willing to boot out any Orlesian nobles for the nicer rooms. Shale was an old friend and she did owe a lot to the Trevelyans.

“We appreciate it, my lady,” Gus grinned at her, revealing a dimple. “I am Augustus Pentaghast, you may call me Gus.”

“Pentaghast, are you any relation to Cassandra,” Elisabeta wondered.
“We’re cousins,” Gus admitted. “Although, I have never slain a dragon. Have you, my lady?”

“I have slain a few,” she confessed.

“Do tell,” he urged.

“Well, the first one was in an ancient elven ruin,” she began as she went to settle in her new team members. “Shale was there.”
Chapter Summary

The Inquisition's new archaeological team settles in.

Elisabeta wondered how a trip to the Hinterlands had become such a big production. She hid her amusement as she watched Cullen. He kept gazing at Adrianna and then looking away as he blushed and rubbed the back of his neck. She thought it was adorable. Her friend was truly smitten and trying to hide it. Adrianna gave him a few sidelong glances herself. Elisabeta was going to need to talk to Dorian about what she was watching.

“It appears that Blackwall will not be joining you in the Hinterlands,” Leliana announced. “He’s disappeared.”

Josephine groaned. “Tell me you didn’t punch him.”

Elisabeta blanched. “He deserved it. He has been pretending to be a Grey Warden.”

“He was a Grey Warden!” Josephine’s voice rose with her frustration.

Anders chuckled. He was leaning against Hawke, who was leaning up against the wall near the large wooden double doors. “No, he wasn’t. I asked him about his Joining and he went on about oaths and fealty. There was nothing about drinking a potion of badness from a chalice or anyone dying. One person died at my Joining, what about yours, Lissa?”

“Two,” she answered. “One was killed by the Joining Juice, the other by Duncan when he tried to back out.”

“You mean he lied to us?” Josephine’s face fell.

Zevran patted her on the back and then slipped an arm around her. “It’s always the quiet ones. They’re quiet; because they’re afraid they’ll say the wrong thing and someone will guess the truth.”

“I have been searching to find out who he might be. Lissa already asked me to look into him,” she confided to Josephine and Cullen. “He meets descriptions of a man called Thom Rainier. Rainier was a captain in the Orlesian army who served Gaspard. He is said to be responsible for the massacre of Calier and his family. His men even killed Calier’s children.”

“It sounds like you are better off without him,” Gus commented. “I’ve heard about the incident. Any man that would kill children…” He broke off shaking his head. “Then he pretended to be someone else.”

“He was lying to us!” Cassandra growled. She looked like she needed to hit something. It was a good thing they were going back to the Hinterlands; there were plenty of bears to hit there.

“I caught on to that rather quickly,” Elisabeta admitted. “Why do you think I was trying to hide that I used to be a Grey Warden from him. I was trying to confirm my suspicions, which I did.”

“We also just received yet another missive from Ferelden,” Josephine announced. “This one is
“Again?” Elisabeta wondered if it was Anora throwing a fit about Alistair’s gifts and found she didn’t care.

“There are Venatori in the palace,” Josephine explained. “This just arrived; it was likely sent after yesterday’s missives, but traveled faster as there were no gifts attached.”

“You received gifts yesterday, what nob is trying to turn your pretty head with his baubles, Tempest?” Sera used Varric’s nickname for Elisabeta.

“King Alistair chose to replace the harp she lost at Haven,” Josephine’s voice was crisp. “He also sent some… interesting… tapestries to the Inquisition.”

“Their beautiful tapestries,” Elisabeta was offended. “I love them. Except for the one that I want hung in my room, the rest will be put on display in the throne room. I will also have sent letters to the nobles of Ferelden, inviting them to Skyhold. This is not the Orlesian Inquisition.”

“Perhaps you should write letters to the Free Marches and Navarra, so they understand that as well,” Leliana suggested to Josephine.

“We should take care of this now,” Josephine produced the letter.

_Inquisitor Elisabeta Cousland_

_I feel I should have made it to Haven before someone wiped it off of the map. OUR map. But I digress. First things first: an apology. I offered the rebel mages safe harbor in Ferelden only to have them drive my uncle out of his town, so I'll admit I wasn't in the best of moods when we last met. I just wanted everyone out of Redcliffe, and didn't care who was responsible for what. Now I wish I'd done otherwise. Isn't that always the way? I didn't want you out of Ferelden, though. You should be... well, that is between us and I'll not bring it up in an official letter. I will admit that your anger towards me in Redcliffe was much deserved and I yearn to win your goodwill back. I am here to beg your help, along with that of Leliana... and the rest of your Inquisition. Did Zevran really join, as well? I feel like you are having a reunion without me. If Calenhad and Shale show up as well, I may have to come to Skyhold and arrange a night of drinking and dancing. Not if Morrigan shows up, though. Anyway, to my problem. It is these cultists... Venatori, I think they're called? We have them in the royal palace, or so I'm told. Like rats -but with magic and nasty sneers. I don't know what they're up to, but I need to find them and drive them out. Since the Inquisition knows all about them, I'm hoping you'll help. Something something grateful something._

Wait... did you just write that? You scribes do this on purpose, don't you?

_King Alistair Theirin_

“The squishy king doesn’t know I’m here?” Shale seemed offended. “Where did he think Calenhad was? For that matter, why isn’t the resurrected hero with her squishy sweetheart anymore?”

“He married someone else,” was all Elisabeta said in response, she didn’t see the way Adrianna and Augustus looked at her in reaction to the underlying grief in her voice that she didn’t hide as well as
“We should send forces in to aid the manhunt,” Cullen declared. “Not only should we help, but we should be seen doing so.”

“I have just the agent in mind for this,” Leliana declared. “Allow me to send her to Denerim to quietly hunt down the Venatori spies.”

“I will go myself.” Elisabeta wasn’t going to trust Alistair’s life to one of Leliana’s agents. “I can leave Adrianna’s team at the fort, and then swing by Redcliffe on my way to Denerim.”

“There were skeletons recently found in a well by Denerim’s chantry, I would love to investigate it and will petition the king to do so,” Adrianna announced.

Elisabeta and Leliana exchanged a significant look between them. “Don’t you believe you should petition the Chantry instead?” Leliana asked. Elisabeta was grateful that she was not going to reveal how those bodies had gotten into that well.

“Have you ever noticed how unobservant chantry sisters are, especially those in Denerim,” Shale commented. “I doubt they’ll even notice we’re there.”

“It’s so bad you could probably throw more bodies in there and no one would notice,” Zevran agreed.

Adrianna apparently didn’t notice Elisabeta and Leliana glaring at Zevran. “Then it is the king I will petition.”

“I doubt he’d notice, either,” Elisabeta smirked. She wondered what Alistair would say to the petition. He knew how those skeletons got there. “It would distract from our investigation, though. I’d prefer he not realize all of us were there. I will have Cassandra represent us; while Iron Bull, Varric, Cole, and I uncover these Venatori.”

“We should also find out if we can excavate under Fort Drakon,” Gus added. “I’ve heard there are catacombs underneath that date back before Calenhad.”

“It’s just like a Navarran to obsess about large groups of dead people,” Sera snorted. “Hey, wait, your tag is Pentaghast, are you related to Cassandra?”

“We’re cousins,” Gus confirmed. “I have a lot of cousins; it’s hard to keep them straight. Traditionally, they are Mortalitasi and dragon hunters.”

“But now most of them are fat and lazy,” Cassandra added. “At least Gus has a productive hobby, even if he is likely just trying to avoid Uncle Marcus.”

“Do you blame me,” he flashed his dimple at her. “He thinks I’m hopping around Thedas to avoid any and every overly ambitious cousins of ours.”

“Overly ambitious?” The phrase reminded Elisabeta of Rendon Howe.

“Augustus Vladimir Henry Julian Pentaghast is the heir to King Marcus,” Cassandra revealed.

“Which we don’t tell people,” Gus reminded her.

“I guess we’re all going to Denerim then,” Elisabeta decided. “Then we’ll go to Redcliffe and the Hinterlands after. We will then be going to Crestwood.” She turned to Adrianna. “Will we be
leaving you in the Hinterlands?”

“Crestwood once had a large Thaig under it,” Shale revealed. “We would like to see if we can locate the entrance and see if there is anything still there.”

“Yeah, there is something still there,” Elisabeta responded. “There are darkspawn and demons.”

“Then it is a good thing we’ll have you there with us,” Adrianna beamed at her. “You now fight demons professionally and are a former Grey Warden.”

Cullen flinched and shuffled uncomfortably, but said nothing. Elisabeta just shook her head.

“Then it seems you are set for tomorrow,” Leliana’s voice was cheerful. “Don’t forget to write and…”

“Why was I not informed of this meeting earlier?” Vivienne strolled into the room.

“Who informed you there was even a meeting now?” Elisabeta wanted to know. She’d find whoever was whispering in the useless mage’s ear and make them suffer.

“I have learned that you are going to Denerim, Ferelden’s capital city,” Vivienne didn’t catch the irony of telling a Ferelden noble that Denerim was the capital city. “You will, no doubt be dealing with the king and queen. You need me for that. I am Empress Celene’s Court Mage and know more about noble and royal etiquette than anyone else here.”

“Do you truly believe so,” amusement dripped from Zevran’s voice.

“I’m sure you will be unable to help me with Alistair,” Elisabeta announced. “And I have been to the Palace at Denerim once or twice.”

“You’ll also need my help with your wardrobe, darling, before you stand in front of the King of Ferelden,” Vivienne declared. “You can’t go before him looking like that.”

“Oh, no she didn’t,” Dorian ran his eyes up and down Vivienne’s outfit judgmentally.

Elisabeta looked down at her own outfit. She wore a black leather bodice with a scooped neck that went high in the back, as well as long. The front ended above her knees and split to reveal her soft, royal blue leggings. She also had the blue ribbon choker with the griffon pendant around her neck. Her red-tinged golden curls were held up by the hair combs that Alistair had once given her. Then she looked over at Vivienne. “While your clothes are more practical than the ridiculous contraptions that most Orlesians drape themselves in, it is still too Orlesian for Ferelden taste. We prefer practicality in our clothing as you never know when you might have to fight off any Masked Marauder Monkeys. Also, I am the sister of Ferelden’s most powerful noble. Who are you?”

“I am the head of the Loyal Mages,” Vivienne reminded her.

“Really?” Elisabeta looked around. “And where are these loyal mages? I have yet to see them. Where were they when the Free Mages helped to close the Breach and then did their best to defend Haven? Is it really just you and your imaginary friend?”

“Darling, my friends aren’t imaginary,” Vivienne began fanning herself.

“I’m not your darling, Madame de Pyrite,” Elisabeta countered. “I am the effrayante chinne that you should be more cautious about challenging. I’ve faced dragons and archdemons, you are nothing.”
“Is this squishy mage bothering it?” Shale stepped forward.

“Vivienne, meet Madame de Pierre, she will be showing you out,” Elisabeta referred to Shale as the Stone Lady. Shale smiled at the title.

“Right this way,” Shale brandished her axe as she herded Vivienne from the room.

Elisabeta turned to Josephine. “Your assistant isn’t coming with us. I am not a stepping stool on her way to power and I don’t want her within a hundred feet of Alistair.”

“So you know the King of Ferelden,” Gus noted. “How does he like being king?”

“Let’s go have lunch and I’ll tell you everything he’s said about it,” she offered.

He nodded and they moved out.

Adrianna watched her friend leave with the Inquisitor. He liked the woman, she could tell. She glanced back at the Commander, she guessed she couldn’t blame Gus; she was quickly becoming smitten with a member of the Inquisition herself. “Would you like to go get lunch, Commander?”

“I…” He hesitated. “I need to get back to work,” he fled from the room.

Cullen’s shock at seeing Adrianna enter his office was a tray full of food was obvious. “I… uh…”

“You didn’t eat at all, did you?” She accused.

“I… well…” He stammered.

“Here,” she set down the tray and then picked up the next paper on a large pile. She read it. “I’ve already petitioned Ferelden’s Crown for more protection in the Hinterlands. I did it before I realized the Inquisition was in control of Winterwatch Tower. King Marcus worries about Gus’ safety and those bears in the Hinterlands are notorious. King Alistair is sending reinforcements. You can pull some of your men from there if you really need to set up a foothold in the Exalted Plains.”

“Um…” His hands went to the back of his neck. “That isn’t a bad idea.”

“I used to help my father run our lands,” she informed him. “After Des became a tranquil, though, he started teaching Richard, who is the heir, and I was just underfoot. I think he intentionally made me feel that way,” she confessed. “He felt that he had somehow failed Desdemona; that he didn’t make sure she was cared for better in the tower and that she was a mage in the first place. I was a constant reminder of what had happened, as we were born with the same face.”

“How could her being made Tranquil be his fault?” Cullen wondered. “I’ve seen… well, in Kirkwall, mages were made Tranquil who shouldn’t have been.”

“She chose it,” Adrianna revealed. “After what happened… well, she’d never been the
strong one, but she was very powerful and the guilt was eating her.”

Cullen looked at his reports and then at her. He leaned back. “Tell me about what happened.”
Chapter Summary

The tailors begin to prepare for the peace talks, which won't happen for many many more chapters.

Elisabeta walked back into the throne room from lunch. She hoped to get some rest before she headed out to Denerim, but found Josephine standing in front of her door, instead.

“Did you forget something?” Josephine tapped her ever-present board.

“Are we doing ritual dismemberment today?” Elisabeta pretended to think. “No, it’s not Tuesday.”

“You have a seamstress from Val Royeaux here to see you,” Josephine reminded her.

“I have no interest in seeing her,” Elisabeta stepped around the ambassador. “I’m going to go take care of some letters.”

“Mistress Ilsa is waiting for you in your room,” Josephine announced.

“She what?” Elisabeta did not like having her private space intruded upon without a by your leave. “What is she doing in…?” She broke off as a scream came from her room. She rushed through the door, followed by Josephine.

They found a masked woman in a very large hat trying to shoo Calenhad away. Calenhad had her backed into a corner. “Leave me be, foul beast!” She shouted.

“He isn’t a foul beast,” her assistant insisted. She wore no mask and had a Ferelden accent. She stroked Calenhad’s head. “Did we invade your territory, you handsome beast?”

“Yes, you did,” Elisabeta’s voice was a matter of fact. “And you’re right, he isn’t a foul beast.”

“Oh, I like your outfit, my lady,” the assistant smiled at Elisabeta.

“I’m sorry, my lady,” the assistant curtsied. “Lady Ilsa demanded to be let in so we could begin work and Lady Montilyet said it was all right, that we needed to do a lot of work before you left tomorrow so the first outfit will be ready to fit when you come back.

“My sketches are on the table,” Ilsa waved towards the table that was set in front of a love seat set between the fireplaces in the room.

“Calenhad, you can let the woman go… for now,” Elisabeta instructed. “She can’t help her horrid behavior and being so rude as to enter someone’s personal rooms without a by your leave to those who dwell there. She’s Orlesian after all.”

Calenhad growled at the word ‘Orlesian’ and then growled at Ilsa again on principle. Then he stepped away.
"As you see, the outfit I designed is perfect for your official portrait of Inquisitor," Ilsa grabbed her sketchbook and opened it. The dress sketch was awful. It had some strange floating collar that she’d never seen before. The neck had a square cut and the bodice had the Inquisition symbol embroidered on it twice. The swords both started at the bottom of the bodice and each came across one of the breasts. The skirt sported strange layers and ruffles. “I’m sure this will be all the fashion in Orlais soon. I have also, purposely, left off any designs for a chemise. This will be scandalous, sans chemise. It will be innovative. Soon, all of Orlais will go without.”

“Do I look or sound Orlesian to you?” Elisabeta folded her arms. She also wondered just how uncomfortable going without one’s chemise would be. She wanted to cover her breasts and underarms just at the thought of the chaffing.

“Well… no, your accent sounds Ferelden,” Ilsa admitted. “I wasn’t going to presume such a thing, though.”

“Oh, I’m Ferelden.” Elisabeta glared at the woman. “I am a member of the House of Couslands of Highever. We fought at Calenhad’s side. We fought with the Rebel Queen Moira. We helped to throw your countrymen out of our nation.”

“Oh,” Isla blinked. “Good for you. I am also having your blacksmith… Homer was it… make a circlet for you. Here is the sketch.” The piece was a monstrous atrocity that could be called a circlet. It was huge and bore the Inquisition’s symbol on the front.

“I have discovered that Harritt can also smith jewelry pieces. He just sent his sister the loveliest torc,” Josephine revealed.

“I’m sure he has plenty of nice pieces, that wouldn’t be one of them,” Elisabeta jabbed her finger at the drawing. “Don’t get me started on that,” she meant the sketch of the dress.

“I have a few ideas,” the assistant spoke up. “I think they would fit Lady Cousland more effectively.” She produced her own sketch pad and began drawing.

“Willa, you are merely a seamstress and my assistant. I am the artist here,” Ilsa didn’t appreciate her servant one-upping her.

“I’m the one who is going to have to wear this outfit, show me the sketch,” Elisabeta insisted.

“What do you like, my lady?” Willa was still drawing. “I like what you are wearing now, but is there something that represents you? You are the Hero of Ferelden, are you not? Perhaps we could incorporate the colors.”

“We will stick to charcoal grey and crimson,” Josephine insisted. “They are the colors of the Inquisition.”

“Since when?” Elisabeta demanded to know. “Why grey and red?”

“They show our ties to the Seekers and Templars,” Josephine explained.

“We aren’t tied to them!” Elisabeta insisted. “We allied with the mages.”

“Yes, but the groups descend from the Inquisition of Old,” Josephine’s exasperation was showing through.

“I’m sorry to go against your wishes, Lady Montilyet, and I know that Ilsa thinks I’m
stepping over my station; but those colors really will not work on Lady Cousland. The Crimson samples that Mistress Ilsa brought will clash with the natural red in Lady Cousland’s hair and the dark grey will compete with her beautiful blue-green eyes,” Willa declared. “Since the Free Mages do not have a color of their own, why don’t we use the blue, green, and white of House Cousland? That way the Inquisitor reflects where she comes from while avoiding ties to any kingdom or group. The mages likely would not appreciate anything that reminds them of a connection to the Templars or Seekers and Orlais and Ferelden would both be rather upset at any reference to their rival kingdom.”

“I like her,” Elisabeta declared. “I’m making her Mistress of my Wardrobe and she and I will work together on my clothes from now on.”

“She works for me!” Ilsa protested.

“Not anymore,” Elisabeta smirked. She glanced at Willa. “You may call me Lissa. Now let’s hear those ideas. Josephine, why don’t you take Ilsa to meet all of those random Orlesian nobles that we have wandering around, they’ll love her.”

“I would like you to know that I only came here as a favor to Madame de Fer,” Ilsa bristled. “She will be most disappointed that you have treated me like this.”

“It’s better than she treats Vivienne,” Josephine gently took Ilsa’s arm. “Let’s go see Vivienne. I’m sure she still appreciates your art. I’ll talk to the Inquisitor later,” the last part was a threat to Elisabeta.

When they were gone, Elisabeta turned to Willa. “So talk to me about what you have in mind.”
Elisabeta leads a team to Denerim where they will investigate the Venatori threat in the palace.

Elisabeta tried to settle the butterflies in her stomach as she rode toward Denerim. She reminded herself for the seventh time that she wouldn’t be seeing Alistair or anyone else she knew, for that matter.

“What had Iron Lady’s knickers in such a twist?” Varric prompted as they rode through Gherlon’s Pass.

“Oh, a couple of things,” Elisabeta smirked at the memory of Vivienne’s ineffective rage when they’d left. She had tried to join them whether they wanted her to or not, but Hawke had put a binding spell on her and then told Elisabeta that he would meet her in Crestwood. “She was not happy that I dismissed her designer buddy whom she’d arranged to come to Skyhold. Like I would let an Orlesian dress me,” she snorted.

“I don’t think she understands Fereldans,” Iron Bull confided. “She admires Orlais so much that she pretends she is one. She can not wrap that mind of hers around the idea that there is an entire nation of people who abhor them.”

“The Iron Bitch isn’t Orlesian?” Sera was surprised.

“She’s from the Free Marches,” Iron Bull explained. “She put in for a transfer to Orlais.”

Elisabeta knew that Iron Bull was really a spy, but she was momentarily impressed at how much he had uncovered. “How do you…”

“I’m not as impressive as you think,” Iron Bull grinned at her. “Leliana uncovered most of that information when Vivienne joined the Inquisition. I swear she has files on every single member, from the scullery maids to you, Lissa.”

“She already knew all of my secrets,” Elisabeta admitted. “Viv the Bitch also seems to want to be my liaison to the Ferelden throne. She thinks she can navigate the Ferelden Court and Bannorn better than I can.”

“Aren’t you the sister of Ferelden’s most powerful Teyrn?” Adrianna recalled. “You know the king and queen personally, don’t you.”

“I am and I do,” she confirmed.

“Even the Qun knows of a connection between Ferelden’s King and its Hero,” the Iron Bull confirmed. “There is an Arishok who tells a story about how the Hero of Ferelden sacrificed herself for her king and country. He talks of how the king was about to do his duty and put his country above all else, but the Hero could not bear to see him die and sacrificed herself instead. He uses it as an example of how we all must be devoted to the Qun as the King and Hero were to Ferelden.”
“They think I sacrificed myself for the idea of Ferelden?” Elisabeta rolled her eyes. “Who is this Arishok?”

“He was a special one, no horns which we believe means that someone is meant for greatness,” Iron Bull explained. “He claims to have been in Ferelden during the Blight.”

“You didn’t sacrifice yourself for Ferelden?” Gus’ eyebrows rose. “Why did you make the killing blow then?”

“It was Alistair or me who had to die,” Elisabeta admitted. “It… there is a reason that the Grey Wardens are necessary to kill an archdemon. We… they… well; there is a sacrifice that must be made by one of them. I didn’t want him to be the sacrifice.”

“Because he was your king,” Gus deduced.

“No,” Elisabeta shook her head. “That wasn’t it. The reason, well… that’s in the past now.”

“What do I have to do to be worthy of hearing the real story,” Gus’ voice was teasing. “I have a feeling it might be something worthy of our Mr. Tethras.”

“So then John and Jim come running out of the ruins yelling ‘The curse, beware of the curse!’ and a three-legged squirrel was chasing after them. Then came two village girls who were only half-dressed and screaming their heads off,” Gus rode beside Elisabeta as they entered the city of Denerim. I ran into the fortress’ remains to find Adrianna sitting on an ancient chest, just laughing. The villagers became paranoid and I was half sorry I helped her set up the prank, but only half sorry.”

Elisabeta laughed. She hadn’t laughed as much, as she did around Gus, since she’d died killing the archdemon. “Did they start believing in the curse?”

“Oh, they did,” he grinned at her. “The mayor…”

“Lady Cousland!” A guard gasped and shouted. “But… I was at the Battle of Ostagar. You died!”

“I got better, thanks to the mercy of Andraeste and her Maker,” she assured him. “I’m here on secret business for the Inquisition, though, Lieutenant…”

“Bryan, my lady,” he bowed. “Lieutenant Kyler Bryan. If you need my discretion, you shall have it. My brother was in Kinloch Hold. He’s a Templar. You saved him. He’s disappeared now, but you saved him then.”

“Thank you,” Elisabeta turned to her companions. “Cassandra, go to the palace and let King Alistair know that we are looking into the report of Venatori in the palace. Take Adrianna, Gus, and Sera with you.”

“Sera?” Cassandra’s eyes widened. “Why Sera? This is a sensitive matter and I’m sure King Alistair doesn’t want to draw attention to the fact that he knows there are Venatori in the palace.”

“But seeing her with Anora will be funny,” Elisabeta cherished just the thought of Anora and Sera in a room together. She could imagine some of the things the rogue elf would say to the spoiled daughter of a traitor.
“It could cause an incident between the Inquisition and Ferelden,” Cassandra countered. “You seemed determined to do that yourself, you don’t need Sera helping you. She doesn’t have the luxury of also being a Ferelden noble to get away with such things.”

“I don’t want to meet your nobby ex and his shrew of a wife,” Sera zerberted. “Besides, I would blend in with the kitchen. I’m an elf from Denerim, they are people. You won’t be able to blend in, though, Lissa. You’re cultured accent and mannerisms are a dead giveaway that you don’t belong there.”

“She’s right boss,” Iron Bull admitted. “Why don’t you leave this to the experts? I can charm my way in through one of the kitchen maids and Cole can make people forget him. We’ll find out who wants to kill your man… or ex-man, boss, don’t worry.”

Elisabeta’s shoulder’s slumped in defeat, they were right. A guard had recognized her the moment she’d come into the city. There was no reason a kitchen maid should recognize her, but she sure didn’t sound like a kitchen maid, either. “Fine, I’ll get us rooms at the Gnawed Noble Tavern… if it survived the Battle of Denerim.”

“I’ll go with you,” Dorian assured her. “I can’t blend in in a kitchen either. It is the lot of us nobles. Let’s go get rooms and a drink and wallow in our woes of the Nobles of Thedas.”

“Very well,” she moved her horse to beside his and led him towards where the tavern had once stood, splitting off from the rest of her group. She was pleasantly surprised to find the structure still standing. As she walked in, she found that everything looked eerily the same. She could still pick out where she had killed Loghain’s seneschal.

“I don’t believe it!” The tavern’s keeper came out from behind his counter and stopped a foot in front of her gaping. “You died. I was at your funeral.”

“I’m better now,” she assured him. “Andraste herself brought me back to save Thedas from Corypheus.”

“I’ll get you your old room,” he ran around the counter and began grabbing keys himself, not letting one of the barmaids do it for him. “I suppose you move around with a large group again. How many rooms do you need? They’re on the house, of course.”

“The Inquisition is not a group of paupers, we can pay for our rooms,” Elisabeta insisted.

“You can have them pay for the others, the Hero does not pay here,” the tavern keeper insisted.

“I can’t let you…” She began.

“Let him,” Dorian insisted. “Especially if he throws in a few bottles of wine.”

“The house’s best of course,” the tavern keeper smiled at them.

“Show us our rooms first,” Elisabeta shook her head. The rooms of the tavern had mostly been redone, but one remained the same. She had stayed in this room more than once during the Fifth Blight.

“I kept your room the same,” the tavern keeper explained. “It is a popularly requested room. Guests can pretend they are a noble turned Grey Warden, battling against the dark forces.”

Elisabeta didn’t say anything at first. She gazed at the tub as a memory hit her. She was sitting on Alistair’s lap as they lounged in the both, her head on his shoulder. They were just relaxing together,
neither speaking; just comfortable in each other’s presence as they took a respite from the world. Then half an hour later, he began nibbling on her shoulder and then her neck and then… She shook her head trying to shake out the memory. She could still feel Alistair’s skin against hers and smell him, leather and steel with a slight mix of cheese and musk. It took her a moment to take in what the tavern keeper had just told her. “Why would they want to pretend to be a Grey Warden battling the Blight?”

“It’s escapism,” he shrugged.

“I guess things did work out for Alistair,” she muttered. “He became king and apparently has a nice, happy life.”

“He comes and drinks with his nobles here all the time;” the tavern keeper revealed. “He is in a cold, loveless marriage and he’s beginning to think that Eamon may not have his best interest in heart and has always had his own, secret, agenda.”

“He isn’t happy?” Elisabeta couldn’t keep her own sadness from her voice. They couldn’t be together, but she didn’t want him unhappy. That brought the emotions she still felt for him to the surface and she tried to suppress them. It was hard to move on when one’s heart was already taken. She would just have to find a way to wrestle it back, she told herself. “Why don’t we go and enjoy some of that wine.”
Elisabeta's team bring a report from the palace.

“I like King Alistair,” Gus declared after he had arrived at the Gnawed Noble Tavern with Cassandra and Adrianna. The Iron Bull had insisted on taking his own team to a seedier inn so no one would think members of the kitchen staff were hanging out with nobles.

“I guess that’s a good thing,” Adrianna took a bite of the roast set before her. “You will be a king yourself one day; it’s good to get along with the other Rulers of Thedas.”

“I don’t like Anora, though,” he admitted.

“That’s just good taste,” Adrianna confirmed. “There is something off about her.”

“We met with King Alistair away from his wife,” Cassandra reported to Elisabeta. “Leliana already said something to me about her not being trustworthy. She confided that she wouldn’t put it past Anora to have arranged for Venatori to kill Alistair so she could rule alone. I reminded her that someone wanted to assassinate Celene and she just shrugged and said it could be Anora.”

“Then maybe I should have Zevran kill her,” Elisabeta actually considered it. Still, if word got out that the Inquisitor was assassinating Thedosian nobles, things would go bad for the Inquisition. She would need proof that Anora meant her husband, she shuddered internally at the word husband, harm.

“Let’s get more proof before we do anything rash,” Cassandra insisted.

“Perhaps it is better to strike first,” Adrianna disagreed. “That Anora made my skin crawl. She reminds me of a snake.” She shuddered.

“She is definitely a viper,” Elisabeta agreed.

“How did that warm, funny king end up with such a cold serpent?” Adrianna wondered.

“She was his brother’s widow,” Elisabeta revealed. “Eamon wanted him to marry her to help solidify his claim to the throne. He refused at first and… became engaged to someone else. After she died, he must have given in and married Anora.”

“Grief makes people do stupid things,” Elisabeta wondered if Adrianna was referring to her sister.

“How do you think we became a people who built cities of the dead in Navarra,” Gus pointed out. “It wasn’t because we were a big happy group.”

“Why did the possessed mage go with the cocky mage instead of it?” Shale changed the subject.

“He is one of Hawke’s companions,” Elisabeta shrugged. “They seem to want to… spend more time alone together of late.”
“Yes, they seem to like squeezing their squishy parts together,” Shale confirmed. “Like it used to with the whiny Grey Warden, yet it didn’t go talk to the whiny former Grey Warden with the others. Why not?”

“I… my presence would have been a distraction,” Elisabeta insisted.

“Oh, I thought perhaps it was avoiding her old… paramour,” Shale admitted.

“Have I told you about the time Shale was with us and we discovered an obscure cult that worshipped birds?” Gus changed the subject again.

“I much prefer the ones who worshipped cats,” Shale admitted. “They are more sensible.”

“Well, it was in one of the tiny cities in the northernmost part of Navarra,” he began his tale, bringing another smile to Elisabeta’s lips.
Echoes Across Time

Chapter Summary

Elisabeta visits the roof of Fort Dracon, then a Kennel. The Venatori assassins are uncovered.

Twilight was falling on Elisabeta’s second night in Denerim. Iron Bull’s group was still in the kitchens of the palace. He was sure they would uncover the Venatori agents that very night. The threat to Alistair would be over and they could move on. She looked forward to investigating the tower in the Hinterlands and then meeting Hawke’s friend in Crestwood. Anders had gone with Hawke and she wanted her healer back.

Pulling the hood of her dark green cloak up to cover her red gilded golden hair, she slipped into Fort Drakon. She expected some resistance to her presence and slipped into the shadows. Going in was somewhat foolish, but she had an undeniable need to go back to the spot where she had sacrificed her own life. She wasn’t sure if she was being morbid or if it would be therapeutic, but she was compelled to return.

She quietly climbed the stairs as she remembered fighting her way through the fort. First, it had been dragonlings and drakes pouring out of the prison. There really had been drakes in Fort Dracon. Then had come the darkspawn. That included a good number of ogres and a talented emissary. Still, she had beaten them all. She had taken Alistair with her, of course, along with Leliana and Wynne. She briefly wondered what it would take to get Leliana to fight at her side again. Her friend kept insisting that she was needed at Skyhold and couldn’t leave. Elisabeta supposed she was right. At least they were planning another round of Pranquisition when she returned.

Leliana and Elisabeta were already coordinating a few of their plans through letters. They had planned for her to send a request for a dozen fennecs to be sent with the soldiers on their way to Redcliffe Village. Arl Teagan Guerrin had actually had the nerve to insist the Inquisition help him rebuild the damage to the city from the Mage-Templar war and from Magister Alexius’ take over, as if it weren’t his responsibility. She supposed he could blame her mages, but that was beside the point.

She was also sending a request from the palace, through Nene, Anora’s personal secretary. She planned to sneak in the next day and leave the false message to be sent. It was a request for a munchkin cat to be sent to the queen as a show of faith between the Inquisition and Ferelden. She hoped the cat wouldn’t suffer from being given to Anora. She doubted Alistair would let it.

Elisabeta reached the rooftop of the fort and stared at the now-empty space. The last time she’d been here, it had been filled with people. The mages were there aiding her against the archdemon as Eamon’s men tried to hold back the darkspawn. As the sun set, images appeared before her.

This was a battleground; she should have expected the Veil to become thin in this spot. She wasn’t prepared to see herself leading an army against the corrupted old god, though. She faded into the shadows only to appear behind the creature. First, she cut low, wounding one of the legs. Then she jumped onto the creature’s back and sliced up its already injured spine as she rushed to its neck.
She used a punisher move to slice at the thick flesh and tendons. The archdemon buckled below her and fell to the ground, with her still on its shoulders. She lifted her swords, aiming for the back of the head.

“She used a punisher move to slice at the thick flesh and tendons. The archdemon buckled below her and fell to the ground, with her still on its shoulders. She lifted her swords, aiming for the back of the head.

“Beta, no!” She saw the ghostly form of Alistair running towards her. “Please, Maker, no!” The desperation in his voice caught her now.

Her own ghostly doppelganger looked at him; she saw the tears flowing down her own face. “I love you.” The sword pierced the archdemon’s head and a light shot from the tower.

“No!” Alistair ran into the light. “Maker, no, no!” When the light vanished, she and the archdemon were both dead. Alistair was sitting on the rooftop, cradling her body to him. He was curled around her and his hand gently stroked her curls. “Please, I can’t… just trade our places, Maker!” He sobbed, continuing to rock her.

Leliana sat down beside them and put a hand on the dead Elisabeta’s head, her own head bowing. “Maker, no. I thought we’d won.”

Wynne put a hand on Alistair’s back. “Let me take the body somewhere. I’ll oversee its preparation.”

“No!” Alistair pulled Elisabeta closer. “She’s my… she was my…” His sobs overtook him again.

The now living Elisabeta was silent as she watched the scene before her. She reached out to touch his shoulder, without even thinking. Here before her was the man she had proven she loved more than life itself and he was in pain. Her hand passed through him and the vision before her dissolved. She fell to the ground, crying out. She sat, curled into a ball, and let her own tears come.

She didn’t react when a pair of strong arms wrapped around her. After several moments, a deep voice spoke. “I don’t come up here. It’s too painful. I didn’t realize that our story played out every night.”

Elisabeta leaned into Alistair’s embrace. Right or wrong, she was unwilling to give it up at the moment. “Then why are you here now?”

“I saw you sneaking into Fort Drakon and decided to follow you.” There was a trace of humor in his voice and he tightened his hold on her, kissing the top of her head. “I couldn’t help myself; I had to see why you were sneaking around. I’d wondered if you were here when Lady Pentaghast came to see me. I know she is part of your inner circle. Why didn’t you come and talk with me yourself?”

“I didn’t want you to know I was here,” she admitted. “It… it’s too hard to see you.” Now she did glance back to look at him. He now had a close-cropped beard and his hair was tamer than she recalled. She supposed he must have looked like this at Redcliffe, but then she was seeing through the veils of blue tears and red rage. Those tears wanted to return. There was also a scar on his right cheek. She found herself wanting to kiss it, to soothe away any memory of the pain that caused it.

“It’s hard not to see you,” he countered. “I have had to stop myself from riding with an army to Skyhold and demanding you talk to me. I don’t care that your new boyfriend is here with you, I just want to be able to see you; to be with you in any way.”

“Alistair,” her voice was weary. “You are a married man.”
“It is a business arrangement,” he insisted. “One made by Eamon.”

“Anora is your wife, the woman you promised you wouldn’t marry is your wife,” she was still angry about that. “If you’re looking for a mistress, you’re looking at the wrong person.”

“I’m looking at the woman I love,” he insisted. He stood and took her hand to gently pull her to her feet. “You were also my best friend at one time. Why don’t we start there again?”

“Would you let us?” She wasn’t sure that she was capable of just going back to being friends. Half of her was still angry at him and the other half wanted to kiss him.

“Just come on,” he kept ahold of her hand and led her away. She, surprisingly, let him. He led her past the guards, who were both excited and amused to realize who they were, seeing casually, stroll by them as if the King and Hero of Ferelden always strolled through Denerim’s prison.

Elisabeta frowned when Alistair led her into the palace, but couldn’t help the grin when she realized he was taking her to the kennels. “We recently had a new litter of mabari puppies born. They’re just about ready to be weaned. I am going to send a breeding pair of mabari to the Inquisition. I have a pair who are going through adolescence, but they will be ready to breed soon. They are excellent specimen and how can I not send such a gift when the Inquisitor is the Rose of Ferelden?”

“The Rose of Ferelden?” She raised an eyebrow.

“You are from Ferelden and you are my rose,” he leaned in and kissed her cheek. “You are still my bright spot in a world of darkness, the beautiful gift the Maker sent to see us through.”

“Is that how friends talk to each other?” She shook her head.

“I remember telling you that I was counting on you to protect me,” he grinned at the memory. “There were the two other new recruits, shivering in their boots, and you were so brave and dangerous.”

“Brave and dangerous?” She laughed, half at him and half at the little puppy who bounded into her lap and began gnawing at the ties of her bodice. She hefted the puppy into her arms. Another one had come to chew on the king’s bootlaces. He didn’t seem to mind, he just scratched the dog’s head. “You’re really going to send me… I mean the Inquisition… a pair of breeding mabari hounds?”

“Of course,” he picked up the puppy that was waging war on his boots. He hesitated a moment. “I’m sorry; I don’t know where your Calenhad is anymore. He disappeared when Zevran left. I’ve wondered if Zevran had taken him, to punish me, but Calenhad is his own agent.”

She rubbed the top of the puppy’s head with her nose and kissed it. “He went with Zevran. Neither one of them wanted to stay to see you live in wedded bliss with Loghain’s spawn.”

“I almost backed out of the wedding when I realized they had left me,” Alistair admitted. “I was prepared to, but Eamon talked me into going through with it. He was the one who talked me into it in the first place, now that I think about it.” He tussled with the puppy that was now going for the ties of his cloak. “I… I knew it wasn’t the right thing, but he kept on me about how Bann So-in-
So thought I was a usurper and how Arl What’s-His-Face doubted my ability to lead. Then he would remind me that a union with Anora would reassure the bannorn.”

“Why didn’t you just execute her after the Blight was over?” Elisabeta wondered. “That is what I wanted you to do. I thought it was what Eamon had suggested as well.”

“It was, but when you… died,” he choked on the word. “When I lost you, his attitude towards Anora changed.”

“Because I was no longer in the way of such a union,” she deduced. “He had encouraged me to propose a marriage between you two. I told him to stuff it.”

“I…” He closed his eyes. “I’ve made so many mistakes in the past. If I’d realized that Eamon isn’t the loving uncle I’ve always thought him as… if I’d just don’t that dark ritual with Morrigan… I wouldn’t have somehow lost the greatest present the Maker could ever give to men. I don’t know how to get it back.”

“Throwing the mages out of Redcliff didn’t help your cause any,” she assured him. “And you are still married to Anora.”

“Plus, you are now involved with that Tevinter Magister,” Alistair’s voice held bitterness. “Is he here, too? I had heard that he was. A friend of mine saw you drinking with him at the Gnawed Noble Tavern.”

She couldn’t believe he would be so unhappy about her finding someone else and decided not to tell him the truth of her relationship with Dorian. “Altus Dorian Pavus is at the Gnawed Noble Tavern as we speak, we’re both staying there while I’m in Denerim. If I find any deep, dark secrets about the Guerrins when I return to the Hinterlands, do you want me to tell you?”

“Deep dark secrets?” He obviously hadn’t heard what she was up to.

“Never mind,” she went back to playing with the puppy.

After several minutes he spoke again. “Does he make you happy?”

“Does Anora make you?” She answered his question with a question.

“No,” his voice was so sad that she wanted to hug him. The puppy in his lap whined and licked his face.

“Alistair, I…” She didn’t know what to say or how to say it. She wanted to comfort him, but couldn’t allow herself to do so.

“It’s OK. I at least know that you’re happy,” he leaned towards her and kissed her cheek. “That brings happiness to my life.”

Damn him! She reminded herself again that she couldn’t wish his marriage to Anora away. She wouldn’t be his mistress, no matter how much she still loved him. She wouldn’t be anyone’s sidepiece. Instead of saying anything, she looked to the puppy that was now climbing up on her shoulder and attacking one of her curls.

It was several more moments before Alistair spoke again. “So… about Cassandra, did she really punch a bear? And how did the bear react?”

Elisabeta laughed. “The bear seemed startled, but it was trying to kill her at the time, so she had
reasons to punch it. We were in the Hinterlands and…” She broke off as Cole ran through the door.

He looked at Alistair and blinked. “She’s beside me. Sweet Maker, thank you for returning her. I’d begged you so often. She’s mad at me, though. I broke my promise and now I have lost the light of my life, my sun and stars have turned from me. She doesn’t want me back. Yet, I can at least see the light again, even if I no longer get to bask in its warmth. Please, let me at least still be able to enjoy her smile and her charming wit. I need…” He trailed off. “Sorry, I just came to tell you that Sera and Bull have identified the Venatori spies. They are in the kitchen, itself. They are about to confront them.”

“Let’s go,” Elisabeta set the puppy down, but the small creature whined and tried to climb back up her leg.

“I think she’s bonded with you,” Alistair gave her a soft smile. “You’ll just have to keep her. She’s yours now.”

“I…” She looked down at the puppy. “Calenhad is going to be jealous.”

“Calenhad?” Elisabeta realized that Alistair was unaware of the fact that Zevran had brought her dog back to her.

“He’s at Skyhold,” she explained. “He’s loyal and didn’t go off and marry some little ophidian to secure his power,” she knew she was being unfair. He had gone off to be the faithful hound of an Antivan Crowe. Still, it was at least an Antivan Crowe that she liked and he had come back to her when she returned to life. She wondered for a moment if Alistair would have come back to her if he could, but then she remembered how he’d left Highever without a single word to her; he’d just whispered her name once. He hadn’t exactly gone chasing after her after she saw him in Redcliffe, either.

As they rushed after Cole, towards the kitchens, the spirit turned to Alistair. “You listened to the wrong people and she is hurt, the anger hides her heartbreak, but it can’t destroy the love. It’s too strong to abolish. Head heavy, heart sore, aching from the wanting. She wants to hate but can’t manage it. Her anger isn’t as real as the love is. You haven’t lost your sunshine… you just need to find a way to chase away the eclipse.” With that, he disappeared.

“What a strange boy,” Alistair commented as they continued to the kitchen. Sure enough, they found Sera sitting atop the Iron Bull’s shoulders and firing arrows at two women and a man dressed in the clothing of Ferelden peasants. The supposed peasants shot fireballs back at them, which Bull easily dodged.

Elisabeta grinned as she unsheathed her swords and slipped into the shadows. Alistair withdrew Starfang and used smite on one of the Tevinter wizards, before Elisabeta appeared behind her and crossed her sword across the mage’s neck. The mage’s head flew into the air and landed in the middle of a table where the cooks had been chopping carrots.

Cole arrived with Cassandra, Dorian, and the archeologists in tow. Adrianna unfurled her whip and caught the ankle of a second mage, pulling him to the ground. She then drew out her double daggers as Gus rushed in, his sword flashing. Shale jumped past him, her large axe held in the air and landed beside the second mage, decapitating him in one swift stroke.

The last mage was full of Sera’s arrows by that time, and lay across the hearth. For good measure, Adrianna stabbed one of her daggers into her heart. “Just in case,” she told her companions.
“Wow, I’ve missed this,” Alistair grinned at the cowering kitchen staff. “This reminds me of old times. We should have battles in the kitchen more often. Right, Rhona?” He addressed the head cook.

“Well, Your Majesty, I rather not… I mean…” She shuddered. “I think we should replace a lot of the food in this kitchen.”

“That’s a good idea,” he agreed. “We should also rethink the process of bringing on more staff. Perhaps someone should check to make sure they are who they claim to be. Do we just bring anyone off the streets?”

“No, sire,” the cook bowed. “The seneschal is in charge of that.”

Alistair nodded. “I’ll talk to him.”

“So did we win?” Dorian flashed a charming grin at the room. The grin faltered when he noticed Alistair and Elisabeta standing close together. He raised an eyebrow, but Elisabeta didn’t respond. Instead, she went and picked up the mabari puppy from where she had left her in a basket of rags near the door.

“We won,” Alistair’s own smile faltered as he recognized Dorian. “So you’re the Tevinter Magister.”

“I am a mage from Tevinter,” Dorian confirmed.

“If you don’t treat her well, I’ll know and I’ll come after you,” Alistair warned. “I was trained as a Templar before becoming a Grey Warden and I know how to deal with mages who hurt the people I love.”

“Are you threatening me,” Dorian raised an eyebrow. “I’ve never been threatened by a king before.”

“Alistair, my personal life is my personal life now,” Elisabeta didn’t know how she felt about him threatening someone because he thought they were romantically involved.

“I guess it’s our personal life,” Dorian slipped an arm around her and kissed her temple.

“Heed my warning,” Alistair marched off. He paused and looked back. “I love you, Beta.”

“Wow, I see why you’re having problems getting over him, he’s so strong and forceful,” Dorian gave a little shiver.

“He used to be sweet and witty,” she grimaced. “He was acting so before.” She had never seen him jealous before. Yet he had threatened Dorian only if he hurt her.

“Were you romantically involved with the King of Ferelden?” Gus looked after the king and then back at Elisabeta.

“It’s a long story,” she warned.

“Then let’s go get a drink and hear it,” Gus slipped her arm through hers and led her away.
Listen to the Dog

Chapter Summary

Gareth gives Alistair advise and meets Elisabeta.

“You gave her a puppy?” Gareth chuckled. “You gave her a *mabari* puppy.”

“She’s Ferelden, she loves dogs,” Alistair smiled at that. “She already had her own mabari hound when I first met her. She called him Calenhad. I kept him after… after the Battle of Denerim. The morning I married Anora, he left.”

“Why didn’t you listen to the dog?” Gareth wondered.

“I listened to Eamon,” Alistair knew his answer was lame.

“Well, next time listen to the dog instead,” his friend advised. “Did you find out why the Venatori were in your kitchen?”

“I would presume to poison me,” Alistair quipped. “I’m not eating out of that kitchen for a few days, I promise you that. I know what you’re asking, who wanted them to poison me? The Venatori work for Corypheus, but were the aided by someone closer?” He glanced over at his personal guard, John, who had remained quiet. “What do you think?”

“I… I’m here to guard you, sir,” John responded. “I would not speculate on who is planning to hurt you.”

“If you want to keep him from dying, speculating on who wants him dead *is* part of your job,” Gareth countered.

“I imagine the Inquisition might benefit from your untimely demise,” the head guard speculated. “They are an Orlesian organization, after all. Everyone knows that according to Arl Teagan.”

“You believe that the *Hero of Ferelden* is leading an *Orlesian* organization?” Alistair didn’t bother to keep the anger out of his voice.

“Of course, Your Majesty,” John said quickly.

Gareth looked at John in pity. “You are a special kind of stupid, aren’t you?” Looking back at Alistair he said, “You’re friends with the Inquisition’s spymaster,” Gareth reminded him. “Perhaps you should have her investigate the matter for you.”

“Does she have time?” Alistair wondered. “Maybe she can recommend someone. I’ll send her a private message.”
As Gareth left the king, he noticed the door into Queen Anora’s office was propped open. He wondered if the cold-blooded vampire was in there, plotting to take over the kingdom. It occurred to him that she would greatly benefit by poisoning Alistair, if she didn’t ingest the same poison herself. He quietly crept up to the door. There were no candles burning, but there was movement.

Gareth began to wonder when mages had become so good at stealth. He strolled into the room. “Might I be of assistance, my lady?”

The woman in question jumped, extinguishing the light. “Sweet Maker, I’ve only been a mage for six months, I’m lucky to be able to control that light that long. Usually, I just channel the magic into my swords."

“For six months?” He’d never heard of magic manifesting during adulthood and the woman before him appeared to be about twenty.

“It’s a long story,” she waved him away. “I don’t think you can be of assistance. Not unless you like a good time.”

He grinned at her. “I might be up for a good time with you.”

The woman rolled her eyes. “Ugh, you don’t even know me. I haven’t had that type of fun in over ten years and I was in love with him.”

“Ten years? No one should have been touching you then, who was it? If you let the king know, he might find the person who violated you as a child and make them pay,” Gareth promised. “Was it here in Ferelden? It wasn’t in Ostwick, was it?”

“I was nineteen at the time,” she chuckled. “And… the king seems to be punishing himself enough as it is.”

“Nineteen? The king?” Gareth’s eyes widened as he realized who the woman was. “Are you Alistair’s Beta?”

“I am Elisabeta Cousland,” she confirmed. “But I belong to no one.”

“So what is the good time you’re having, my lady?” Gareth bowed. “As an ambassador from Ostwick, I feel compelled to help you.” He didn’t add that he wanted to get to know the woman who still held his friend’s heart. She was as beautiful as Alistair claimed, he wondered if the rest were true too.

“I was just… placing a few messages to be sent out…in Anora’s name,” she had the cutest grimace, Gareth decided.

He looked through the messages. “How did you know about Anora and Teagan’s… flesh games?”

“The Inquisition has a very good spymaster,” she informed him.

“What else are we requisitioning tonight?” He grinned at her.

“Oh, I have plans,” she sauntered off. “I wonder how Teagan is going to enjoy receiving an order to marry an Aavaar princess or how Eamon will react to being ordered to make a diplomatic visit to Seharon.”
The next morning, Queen Anora’s screams could be heard across Denerim as her smallclothes were found pinned to the chantry board. Elisabeta smiled at the thought of Leliana hearing about her coup.
Elisabeta and Dorian go to Redcliffe and end up meeting his father.

Redcliffe Village was peaceful for once. There were people moving from shop to shop, but they were not under siege or worrying about an invading force. Elisabeta sent most of her team ahead to the Winterwatch Tower and went to the Gull and Lantern with just Dorian.

“So what is going on with you and the Navarran prince?” Dorian inquired when the others were gone.

“What do you mean?” Elisabeta admitted that she was fond of Gus, but hadn’t realized that anything was going on.

“Have you not noticed that he always sits beside you during dinner?” Dorian wiggled his eyebrows. “When you played the bagpipes last night, he just sat there enchanted by the music. The man has developed warm fuzzies for you. What are you going to do about it? Should we pretend to break up, so he can pursue you? Do you plan to tell him of Gaspard’s plans to marry you?”

“I’m not engaged to Gaspard,” Elisabeta rolled her eyes. “He just didn’t want an answer yet.”

“Yet a part of you is still considering it,” he knew her well. “Especially as your own handsome prince is stuck in a political alliance of his own. You might tell yourself that you are looking for a new handsome prince and may even believe it. However, you haven’t even noticed the handsome prince who is trying to catch your eye and you don’t really want the villainous duke, because your heart still belongs to your handsome prince.”

“You’re my handsome prince, Dorian,” Elisabeta declared.

His expression turned sad. “If only that were true. It would make both of our lives easier. Let’s go spring this trap.” He walked into the tavern. The tavern was empty. “Uh, oh, it’s empty. This doesn’t bode well.”

“Where is Bella?” Elisabeta looked around. “Redcliffe was overrun by the undead and she didn’t leave her post. Where is she now?”

A well dressed, middle-aged man descended the staircase. “Dorian.”

Dorian went still and his back stiffened. “Father.” He looked over at Elisabeta and then back at the man. “So the whole story about the family retainer was what… a smokescreen?”

The man approached slowly. “Then you were told.”

“Well, I wasn’t going to lie,” Elisabeta spoke up. “Now where is Bella and the rest of the town’s folk who should be in here, eating and drinking?”

“I apologize for the deception,” Inquisitor, the man turned to her. “I never intended for you
to be involved.”

“Of course not,” Dorian hissed. “Magister Pavus couldn’t go to Skyhold and be seen with the dread Inquisitor. What would people think? What is this exactly father; ambush, kidnapping, warm family reunion?”

Halward Pavus let out a long-suffering sigh. “This is how it’s always been.”

“You went through all of this to get Dorian here,” Elisabeta pointed out. “You could try talking to him.”

“Says the woman who screamed at the man she loves when she finally spoke to him for the first time in over ten years,” Dorian pointed out. “Then she threw her engagement ring at him. I want to yell and throw things, too.”

“Well, of course you do,” Elisabeta agreed. “But talk to him.”

“Yes, father,” Dorian turned on the man. “Talk to me. Let me hear how you’re mystified by my anger.”

“Dorian there’s no need to…” Halward’s expression was angry.

“I prefer the company of men,” Dorian declared. “My father disapproves.”

Elisabeta’s mouth hung open for a moment. “That’s… really such a big concern in Tevinter then? Are you the last remaining heir to the Pavus line that they are that concerned about grandchildren?”

“It’s a big concern if you’re trying to live up to an impossible standard,” Dorian revealed. “Every family in Tevinter is intermarrying to distill the perfect mage, perfect body, perfect mind, the perfect leader. It means every perceived flaw, ever divergence, every aberration is thought shameful and deviant. It must be hidden.”

“So all of this deception and your estrangement from your own family is over who you sleep with,” she marched over to Magister Pavus. “I woke up one morning to screams. A man, an arl, my father thought of as a friend had decided that the Cousland line had to be wiped from the face of Thedas. As I struck down soldier after soldier who was determined to do just that, I found the body of my four-year-old nephew. He was still clutching his teddy bear. His mother lay nearby. My parents didn’t make it out of the castle alive that day. I was dragged from their side by a Grey Warden recruiter who thought stopping the Blight was more important than stopping the deaths of any more of those I loved. That was after I had stumbled over the body of my nanny and a kitchen maid who had once brought me lemon and honey tea when I was in bed with a cold. Do you know what I would give to be able to toast Oren and his husband at their marriage? Do you know how much I wish I could even be embarrassed that he had an entire harem of men in his room and had habits that would even embarrass an Orlesian? Fix this with your son, because you don’t want to know what it’s like to wish you could change reality and so you can smile proudly as someone you love embarrasses you. I’m going to go find Bella, you’d better hope that she is cowering in fear of you or I’ll be back to deal with that.”

“Oh, let’s talk about wanting to fix reality,” Dorian took an aggressive step towards his father.

“Dorian, please,” Magister Pavus begged.

“Why, so you can spout more convenient lies?” Dorian accused. “He taught me to hate
blood magic, ‘the resort of a weak mind’. Those are his words, but what was the first thing you did when your heir refused to play pretend for the rest of his life? You tried to change me.” There were unshed tears in his voice.

“I only wanted what was best for you,” his father tried to insist.

“You wanted the best for you,” Dorian countered. “Your fucking legacy, anything for that.” He stormed away and Elisabeta followed.

“Don’t leave it like this, Dorian, you’ll never forgive yourself,” she pleaded. “I barely had time to say goodbye to my father. He’s gone, the only way I get to say anything to him is to talk to his memorial in Highever and hope he hears me from the Makers side. Don’t let there be anything left unsaid between you.”

Dorian nodded and then stormed over to his father. “Tell me why you came.”

“If I knew I would drive you to the Inquisition…” Halward began.

“You didn’t. I joined the Inquisition because it’s the right thing to do. Once I had a father who would have known that.” Dorian turned away.

“Once I had a son who trusted me,” Halward countered. “I trust I betrayed. “I only wanted to talk to him, to hear his voice again, to ask him to forgive me.”

Dorian looked over at Elisabeta, who only nodded before she went off to find Bella.

When Dorian joined his friend and the tavernkeeper, in the tavern’s kitchen, they were sharing a bottle of wine.

“Things have been quiet lately,” Bella was saying. “I don’t trust that. There are too many troubles when in this town, I don’t trust the quiet. Your soldiers are here, helping rebuild, that may be what is keeping things together. Having that Tevinter Magister come in here and pay the rest of my patrons to leave almost had me running for those soldiers. He paid a lot of money for me to close the tavern to others, though.”

“What about those who are staying in the rooms upstairs?” Elisabeta questioned.

“He booked every single one for months,” Bella revealed. “He’s been planning to ambush his kid for quite a time now.”

“Well, we were busy,” Elisabeta took a drink. “Then we had business in Denerim.”

“You didn’t see… it’s a big city,” Bella looked at her sideways and then took a long drink. “You didn’t run into a handsome former prince did you, one you happened to have by your side when you visited this town the first time.”

“She did,” Dorian sat on her other side. “I don’t know exactly what happened between them, but she now has a puppy. It’s a Mabari puppy, I hear they’re a big deal in your country.”

“He gave you a puppy?” Bella sighed. “A Mabari puppy? If my Thomas ever gave me a Mabari puppy, I’d probably forgive him anything.”
“Alistair has a lot to be forgiven for,” Elisabeta took another drink. “And some of the things he has done are not easily undone.”

“Then help him,” Bella suggested. “When you two visited here together, you were a team; a team that took out the undead together. Ferelden needs that team again.”

“Really?” Dorian grabbed his own bottle of wine. “Tell me what they did.” He drank as Bella retold her version of the battle to save the villagers of Redcliffe from the undead.
Discoveries are made in the Hinterlands.

The Winter Watch Tower was bustling with activity when Elisabeta and Dorian arrived. Gus rushed to meet them. “You should see what we’ve found already! There is a tunnel that was covered up under the tower. It leads to a series of secret rooms. You have to come see it.” He grabbed Elisabeta’s hand and pulled her along.

Elisabeta laughed as she tugged her hand back. “I haven’t even settled in. I just rode straight from Redcliffe Village. Let me at least eat and take a bath. Thorn needs to as well.”

“I can take care of Thorn,” Dorian took the puppy and snuggled her close.

Gus pouted, which Elisabeta had to admit she found adorable. “I understand, many of my relatives care more for their creature comforts than they do history.”

“Oh, that’s a low blow,” she admitted. “Fine,” she put her hand into his. “Show me what you found.” She turned to Dorian. “Could you have some bread and cheese sent along, please?”

“Of course,” he grinned. “Have fun kids. Don’t stay up too long. Lissa, don’t forget that we have more magic lessons tonight.”

“Yes, dad,” she teased back.

“Magic lessons?” Gus’s brow furrowed. “You aren’t a mage. I’m sure that Lady Cousland was not a mage.”

“It was a shocking bonus when I returned from the dead,” she explained. “I remember Andraste saying something about switching destinies before she sent me back. I think she gave me Desdemona’s powers.”

“Adrianna’s sister was a mage,” he conceded. “Does she know you got her powers? Did you get any of her sister’s memories?”

“No, all my memories are my own,” she assured him.

“You’re sure?” He looked back at her. “You have no recollections of riding across a bann’s estate with another girl or sneaking cream from a larder on Santinalia?”

“No,” she thought hard. “I remember riding across the cliffs overlooking the Waking Sea with Fergus.”

Gus stopped for a moment to look back at her, a smile on his face. “I used to go riding with my own sister. We didn’t have a sea to ride along, though. It was just a lake.”

“Really?” She took in his curling sandy hair and dimples and wondered what this sister might look like, how growing up in Nevarra compared to Highever. “What was she like? Tell me
about the lake.”

He told her about his younger sister, a woman who now engraved ceremonial and decorative weapons for the wealthy. She often dressed under her station, as did Gus, much to their parents’ dismay. He also claimed that she had a biting sense of humor. She was laughing at stories of their youth by the time he led her through the tunnel that had been hidden in the very section where she had closed a rift and shown her power to the cultists who had been occupying the tower.

“There you are!” Adrianna happily greeted her. “How was Redcliffe village?”

“They weren’t under attack, so better than usual,” Elisabeta informed her.

“We’re definitely in Ferelden,” Gus flashed his dimples at Adrianna. “Lissa arrived with a puppy. I think it was a mabari.”

“You picked up a puppy in Redcliffe?” Adrianna put down the fine brush she had been running over a femur. “Where is he?”

“She,” Elisabeta corrected. “Dorian is settling her in. I didn’t get her in Redcliffe, however. She is from the royal kennels in Denerim.”

“Was she a reward for saving the king?” Adrianna wanted to know.

“Not exactly,” Elisabeta admitted. “The king was already planning to send the Inquisition a breeding pair of mabari, before we’d found the Venatori. Thorn bonded to me while I was visiting the royal kennels.”

“You made a trip to the royal kennels when you were there to save the king?” The surprise on Adrianna’s face turned more thoughtful. “You would have been recognized in the palace, so I guess you did have to stay behind the scenes. Why the kennel, though.”

“Alistair, King Alistair, took me there,” she explained.

Adrianna raised an eyebrow and bit her lip. It was Gus who spoke. “Why would the king take you to the royal kennels?”

“To see the puppies,” Elisabeta thought that was obvious.

“They are Fereldans,” Adrianna pointed out, she still had a speculative look in her eyes.

“I guess I should keep that in mind when I buy you gifts,” Gus commented to Elisabeta. Her eyes widened. Was he planning to buy her gifts? Did she mind, she found she didn’t think she did. “You have to hear what we’ve found here first.”

“This young woman,” Adrianna indicated the skeleton beside her “was the victim of human sacrifice. You can tell by the cracks on the back of her neck, the scars on the neck, and the scraping on her ribs. We found records that indicate they were killed by a triple sacrifice. She, along with over four hundred other girls were ritually sacrificed to Imhar the Cleaver. They were first hung using a rope that had been dipped in the nearby lake. They believe there is a spirit of valor living in there. Then they were struck on the back of their head with clubs blessed by an augur. Finally, they were stabbed through the heart with ceremonial daggers.”

“Four hundred?” Elisabeta was shocked at the number. Four hundred girls had been killed and the Guerrins hadn’t noticed?
“Our research has revealed that the sacrifices began with Lornan Guerrin during the Storm age,” Adrianna revealed. “I should say they started with Orlesiano Dube. He was the bastard son of Tirnan Guerrin and Chienne Dube, who was an Orlesian. He was a soldier in his father’s pay. When Lornan was exiled to the Winter Watch Tower, Orlesiano killed him and took his place. The ritual sacrifices continued until Rendorn Guerrin was killed while fighting at Queen Moira’s side. The deaths took place twice a year, coinciding with the beginning of Winter and Summer. The Avaar celebrate Holy Days then. There were other sacrifices, at times of need as well.”

“It wasn’t just virgin women they were sacrificing either,” Gus added. “I have found a separate list of mabari puppies that were sacrificed as well.”

“They have been sacrificing puppies?” Elisabeta was outraged. She was shocked and troubled by the death of the young women, but she absolutely horrified by the senseless death of the mabari.

“I couldn’t figure out what type of Ferelden would be willing to kill dogs,” Adrianna admitted. “Then I found a more recent set of records. They belonged to the Steward of Redcliffe during the Orlesian occupation. He came here when Rendorn Howe joined Queen Moria’s cause. He left all he records and journals behind when he went. His records and journals were left behind. It was already known that Fort Connor was named after Rendorn’s lover. What wasn’t known was that he was Orlesian and would often participate in threesomes with Rendorn and Marina. It is suspected that Connor, not Rendorn, is Eamon and Rowen’s father. There is some speculation about Teagan.”

“Eamon did marry an Orlesian himself, it would make sense that he is attracted to one of his own,” Elisabeta speculated. “He even named his son Connor, so he may know.”

“Isn’t the fact that he sacrificed these young women worse than being Orlesian?” Gus questioned.

Elisabeta supposed that would be the view of anyone who wasn’t Ferelden. “Morally, I suppose so. This will be interesting news at the next meeting of the bannorn.”

“The depravity did get worse among the arls and arlessas of the Guerrin line,” Gus revealed. “There are records that they allowed some of the girls to go free. They just had to lose their virginity and lure their replacement to this tower. Well, they had to lure their replacement first, of course. No one wants their sacrificial virgin to notch her first arrow before they have a replacement lined up. The girls’ choices varied upon arl and arlessa. Some had to notch their first arrow, popped their wine cork, with the arl or arlessa. Others preferred they watch as the girls experience their first Exalted March with another woman.”

Adrianna lifted an eyebrow at her colleague. “Notched her first arrow? I never thought about it like that.”

“That’s because you haven’t notched your first arrow yet,” he wiggled his eyebrows at her. “We just need to find you the right person to make you want to have your veil sundered.” He whispered conspiratorially to Elisabeta. “I think she’s found that person, but he’s shy and she isn’t exactly aggressive. Well, not if it doesn’t involve using a whip or daggers.”

“Gus,” Adrianna hissed his name.

*Have you ever licked a lamppost in winter?* Gus’ euphemisms brought back a clear memory of Alistair asking her that same question. She’d giggled like a cloistered Chantry sister at the way he’d asked. Now she found herself laughing joyously at Gus’ approach to speaking about intimate
He flashed his dimples at her giggles chimed across the hidden room. “You know, that may be the first time I’ve heard you laugh.”

She stopped and her smile faltered. He was right; the only other time she had laughed over the last decade was when Alistair had taken her to the kennels. It felt good to do so again, it a balm for the soul. Yet she still could hear Alistair’s voice as he asked her if she’d licked the lamppost and remember the way just that voice could make her feel. That voice had said ‘I do’ to someone else, she reminded herself. She now had a different handsome prince smiling at her; this one had the most charming dimples and sandy curls. She cursed silently when another face flashed into her mind, that of the king who’d once been her handsome prince. There was something harder about the man now and his style had changed, he’d gone from prince to king and the responsibilities now weighed heavily on his shoulders. Yet she found the king as breathtaking as the prince and wondered if he would have somehow found a way to be the one who killed the archdemon. No, she wouldn’t want to live in that reality, thinking of her Alistair floating in the Abyss, losing himself, caused her heart to flutter in panic. She shouldn’t be thinking of him at all, not when there was someone who was better for her right in front of her. Of course, they were just friends… although; he did flirt with her and flashed those dimples at her all of the time.

“Are you all right?” Gus’ dimples disappeared. “I didn’t mean to make you stop. I like your laugh. You don’t laugh enough.”

“I know,” she admitted. “And you didn’t make you stop.”

“I guess I’ll just have to make you laugh more often,” he swore.

“That would be nice,” she admitted, smiling at him.

“I don’t know if we should be laughing about these findings,” Adrianna shook her head. “I’m still shocked. How are the Guerrins getting away with this? I plan to write my father tonight and make sure he reveals the truth about that family to the rest of the nobles in the Free Marches. Ostwick wouldn’t stand for this.”

“Ferelden might overlook the sacrifices,” Elisabeta bit her bottom lip. “I’m sure that Eamon and Teagan would deny that such things are going on. I mean, they might look over the humans who were sacrificed. No one is going to forgive them for killing those puppies. Adrianna, the Inquisition will pay you to publish your findings.”

“I don’t have to try and go through the University of Orlais?” Adrianna’s face lit up. “I may be a noble; I wouldn’t be able to publish anything if I wasn’t. Even Gus has that problem. They believe non-Orlesians are only a few steps above elves and everyone knows how they treat their elves.”

“They make the alienages in Ferelden seem like living in the Denerim Palace,” Elisabeta agreed. “Our alienages are definitely safer. I’ve heard how the chevaliers celebrate their graduation.”

“That is one good thing about being forced to take Uncle Marcus’ place one day,” Marcus’ face darkened at the reminder of how chevaliers tested their swords on the elves of the alienage to celebrate graduation, “I will be able to demand Empress Celene put an end to those practices and at least hurt her a little if she does not.”

Another grin cracked across Elisabeta’s face as she looked up at him, she knew she hadn’t smiled this much since her return from the dead. “I’d love to hear your other plans to become king.” It was true; she’d had no choice but to place Alistair on the throne. While Gus didn’t seem thrilled at the
idea of becoming king, he seemed to be ready to take the position.

“And I’d love to tell you,” the look he gave her was one reminiscent of daisies and doves. “Why don’t I tell you about them over dinner?”

“All right,” she thought that might be enjoyable.

“While you two are making googly eyes over each other, would one of you like to help me work?” Adrianna’s voice had a faux sickeningly sweet tone.

Gus’ expression turned sheepish. “I’ll see you at dinner, Lissa… unless; you would like to learn more about archeology work. Perhaps we’ll find yet another frightful scandal about the Guerrin family.”

“I’d like that,” she followed him over to the dig site.

The throne room was decked out in red and gold. Roses and gold chains adorned the columns and furniture. There had been chairs added and were filled with the top noble and clergy of Ferelden. They smiled in delight at the event, all but the Teyrn of Highever. Fergus Cousland glowered, his heartbreaking for the beloved woman whose memory was being betrayed.

The bride appeared, her golden hair was intricately braided with gold chains and red ribbons running through it. Her dress was black and dark gold, the colors of the MacTir clan, and was made from sea silk and nethercloth. She smiled proudly as she slowly passed the enraptured nobles.

Her groom stood under an assembled arch, with crystal grace adorning it. He gazed at her, enraptured in the vision she created. This was his bride, the one he had chosen.

As the bride reached her groom’s side, another vision appeared. This was a woman with reddish-gold hair and sea-green eyes. She wore white silken nether cloth, trimmed in blue. It was stained with blood as if an artist had thrown bright red paint at a blank canvas. The blood was on her face, neck, and hands as well. Her hair was braided with laurels in it. She walked towards the happy couple her eyes wide and pleading. She tried to scream objections and call to the groom, but no one heard her. At one point, the Teyrn of Highever turned and looked directly at her. He frowned and began to stand, but then shook his head and sat back down.

As the reverend mother bound the couple, the bloodied woman ran forward, but was grabbed from behind by the Arl of Redcliffe.

“Eamon has decreed that this marriage take place and the king always does as Eamon wants. We are the real power behind the throne. The king thinks we’re his family and that is how it will always be. Duncan gave us this power, even as he let the Couslands fall,” Teagan hissed in her ear.

“No!” She struggled against him, but her limbs felt lethargic.

“You should have let me court you instead,” Teagan continued. “I am not so easily influenced. I know what I want and I get it.”

“Is she planning to cause us trouble?” Eamon stepped up beside his brother. “We are the king’s uncles and he will do as we command. She can no longer influence him. She gave up her place at her side and I have given him a new bride, a better bride. She will help us climb to even greater heights. Just look.”
As the bloodied woman, Elisabeta, watched, the groom moved to kiss his bride as the reverend mother finished up the vows. “No! Alistair!” She felt her full strength return. She jerked forward and then smashed her head back against Teagan’s throat. She followed that move by sweeping her leg over his, causing him to crash to the floor. She ran up the aisle, intent on stopping the marriage. She was too late.

Alistair didn’t even look in her direction, he kissed Anora. When he straightened, his new wife grinnned viciously at his ex-fiancée. She could now see Elisabeta clearly and she gloated. Then, before Elisabeta’s horrified gaze, she slowly began to transform. The bride’s dress fell away and her body elongated, she transformed into a large serpent with sharp fangs. The vipress turned towards her hapless groom and sank those long fangs into his neck, injecting him with venom.

Now Alistair saw Elisabeta. He lifted a hand out to her before he crumbled to the floor.

Elisabeta let out a heart-rending scream as she ran to the man she loved. She knelt by his side as the Anora Snake flicked its tongue, as if laughing. “Alistair!” Elisabeta clutched his tunic as she called his name. His eyes stared, sightlessly into hers. She sobbed as she cradled his body to hers. Turning, she watched as the nobles of Ferelden knelt before the large serpent and lowered their torsos to the floor in worship. “What…”

Then she saw another figure walking in. There was Andraste, her own tears falling. The Bride of the Maker held Excalibur out to her. “You know what to do.”

Elisabeta sat up in her bed, in the Winter Watchtower. She blinked and wiped the tears from her face, as she reflected on the dream… no, the nightmare. What had Andraste’s words meant? She wanted to rush to Denerim to assure herself that Alistair was all right. She also never wanted to see him again after recalling the look of adoration that had been on his face when he looked at Anora. She’d write Gareth in the morning and try to get him to send a response that would involve Alistair’s present state. She had other letters to write, too, but she wasn’t in the mood. She wasn’t going to go back to sleep, either.

Elisabeta found herself near the gates to the tower, playing a mournful tune on her bagpipes. The song was a lament about a pair of star-crossed lovers. She found that the music soothed her and chased away her worries. The notes joined with the stars shining down on her too comfort her. She had finished the song before she realized that she was no longer alone.

“Hello,” Gus grinned at her. His curls were disheveled, but the smile brought his dimples out.

“Did I wake you up?” She felt a pang of guilt.

“No, I was restless,” he admitted. “I was dreaming about the poor girls who were sacrificed here. One of them was calling to me for help, but I couldn’t move fast enough. I found myself wading through the bones of the previous victims and the ancestors of the Guerrins were holding me back. It was… disturbing.”

She adjusted her pipes so she could sit down beside him. “You’re a good man.”

“What about you,” his arm lifted and then lowered again. “Why are you up?”

“I also had a nightmare,” she admitted.

“Do you want to tell me about it?” The arm rose again and this time he slipped it around her shoulders.
No, she wasn’t sure she did. How did she explain to one man that she was having nightmares that revolved around another? She wanted to cry again as she recalled Alistair lying dead in her arms. Even if it were just a dream, the memory haunted her. “I… it has to do with what happened to me ten years ago. Why don’t you tell me more about yours?”

“Very well,” he agreed. “I will be writing to my uncle about the Guerrins, that’s for sure. I wonder if the arl is still committing sacrifices and just found a new spot to do so.”

Elisabeta thought for a moment, it would be too convenient and she wasn’t that lucky. “I’ll have the Inquisition look into it.”

“Good,” he tightened his arm a little, pulling her closer. She laid her head against his shoulder as he began telling her about his dream.
Alistair sat at his desk, wondering what was going on in the Winter Tower. He’d heard of the dig and that something scandalous had been found, but no one was saying what it was. He wondered if it was just idle gossip from bored farmers. Beta would be there, would she tell him? He reached out and stroked the munchkin cat that lay on the corner of his desk.

“I don’t know why you kept that thing,” Eamon strolled in. “It was sent to Anora.”

“Would you leave this poor, innocent thing in Anora’s care?” Alistair picked up the tiny feline and cuddled it against his shoulder. He realized that Eamon had manipulated him into marrying the venomous harpy; Eamon might just sacrifice a tiny cat to the shrew.

“Very well,” Eamon let out a deep breath. “Do you plan to do anything about the Inquisition’s insistence on poking around the Winter Watch Tower?”

“It had been overrun by cultists before the Inquisition took possession of it,” Alistair pointed out. “Besides, they are just aiding the archeologists who are excavating there.”

“The archeologists did not have the Guerrin’s permission to dig around the Hinterlands!” Eamon’s face was growing red.

Alistair leaned back and studied him. Eamon seemed mad, but he also sensed fear there. What was he afraid would be uncovered? “They did have the Crown’s permission, though, and that is all they needed. The team is headed by the Bann Trevelyan of Ostwick’s youngest daughter and the King of Navarra’s nephew. The Inquisitor, whom I hear was at the dig site, is the sister of the Teyrn of Highever. This is a matter for the Crown. Beta has reportedly left for Crestwood, on Inquisition business, however.”

“My sources say that all three have left for now,” Eamon revealed.

“Do you have someone spying on them?” Alistair did not approve of anyone spying on his Beta. Then another thought came to him. “Or are you just spying on your brother. Isn’t Teagan at the palace right now?” He was likely searching for Anora’s hidden Thaig as they spoke.

“I… as the King’s Chief Adviser, I naturally must keep apprised of all of the events happening within his kingdom,” Eamon tried to justify his actions.

“I will soon be taking over as Chief Advisor,” Fergus Cousland walked into the office, Gareth was behind him.

“Why is a Free Marcher involved in a meeting with advisors?” Eamon glared at Gareth.

“This isn’t a meeting,” Fergus enlightened him. “I heard you had come to rail at the king over your fear of my little sister. I decided to come and hear what the Guerrins were saying about her now.”
“I happened to have received a letter from her and wanted to discuss it with the king,” Gareth added. “As you know, Eamon, anything between Lissa and Alistair are between Lissa and Alistair and none of your business.”

“Lissa,” Eamon’s eyes narrowed. “When did she become Lissa to you? Have you even met this so-called Herald of Andraste? What business does Ostwick have with Elisabeta Cousland?”

“That is not the concern of the former Arl of Redcliffe,” Gareth informed him. “We met the last time she was in Denerim. She is a very charming woman.”

“Is that why you keep asking me about her?” Fergus teased. “Here I thought you were hoping to court her.”

“I…” If he weren’t Alistair’s friend, Gareth would have made a move to court the woman. “She is smart, beautiful, funny… Anyway, I think the king might frown on someone else courting her.”

“She’s practically engaged to that Tevinter Magister,” Eamon sneered. “People threw fits when I married my Isolde, how are the Couslands going to survive a scandalous marriage to a Tevinter Magister?”

“We’ll survive, because he isn’t an Orlesian, unlike your wife, Eamon,” Fergus pointed out. “He’d be a more welcome addition to a Ferelden noble family. Besides, she is being courted by Augustus Pentaghast, King Marcus’ heir, to my understanding. Perhaps she’s letting the two men compete for her heart. As long as they treat her well and don’t break that heart, I will approve of marriage to either one.” He looked pointedly at the king when he said don’t break that heart. “She will decide who she marries, not the king… and certainly not the former Arl of Redcliffe.”

Alistair didn’t like talk of Beta marrying anyone else, but he had lost his chance at her. The tiny cat swung playfully at the chain around his neck, the chain that still held Elisabeta’s engagement ring. He would have to deal with the fact that she was moving on with her life and he was struggling to even renew a friendship with her. He thought he’d made a lot of progress when she was in Denerim, but that wouldn’t bring her heart back to him. He didn’t know yet what would. Now he was being told that he had two rivals and wondered what he would do when she married one of them. As her king, he should receive an invitation to their wedding and would be obliged to attend. Could he stand there and watch her bind her life to someone else? Would she gaze up at them with love and devotion, the emotions that had once been his and he dearly wanted back? He would have to and it would shatter his heart.

“I imagine her advisers will decide that,” Eamon was sure they would. He decided to show just how good his sources were. “I have also been informed that Duke Gaspard has proposed to Inquisitor Cousland. Josephine, the Inquisition’s Ambassador and the Inquisitor’s Chief Adviser, is in favor of the match. I’m sure they will have a marriage agreement before Celene’s peace talks are over.”

“When has being an ambassador made anyone chief adviser?” Gareth wanted to know.

Fergus laughed. “Do you really think Lissa would let her advisers push her into any marriage? She’d gotten our parents to agree to let her marry for love; she could marry whomever she wanted. She would have accepted Alistair’s proposal if he were the son of a baker and an elven mage. Despite how advantageous a marriage would have been for both of them, it had nothing to do with power. At least it didn’t on Lissa’s part.” He glared at Alistair at the last part.

“It had nothing to do with power on either part,” Alistair assured him. “I knelt down and thanked the Maker that I was able to marry the woman I love… then He took her away.” His voice had grown quiet. “We only agreed that we would take the throne, because neither of us wanted Anora on it.”
“Why did you marry Anora if you didn’t want her on the throne?” Fergus laid his forehead against his hand and shook his head.

Alistair glared at Eamon. “I was convinced, at the time, that it was what was best for my throne and for Ferelden. I realize now that my trusted adviser was peeing on my leg and telling me it was rain. I wonder what he got out of the union.”

“I just want what’s best for the throne,” Eamon assured him. “The union was what was best.”

“Best for you,” Fergus muttered.

“I don’t see the advantage,” Gareth interjected. “After all, the MacTirs were already in disgrace. You would have been better served to have had her executed.”

“I agree,” Alistair leaned back and rubbed his eyes. “It’s too late now.”

Fergus glanced at Eamon and then back at Alistair. “Your majesty, I must speak with you in private, Gareth and I must that is.”

“Eamon you are dismissed,” Alistair waved him away.

“Your Majesty…” Eamon protested.

“Go,” Gareth lightly pushed the former arl. “We’ll see if your spies are good enough to find out what is said behind this closed door.”

Eamon seethed, but left.

“Is this about the Guerrins?” Alistair wondered.

“We do need to talk to you about the Guerrins,” Gareth confirmed. “You also need to address the situation in Crestwood.”

“Crestwood?” Alistair repeated.

“The town is being overrun by the undead,” Fergus reported. “It was the site of a flood during the Blight. A lot of town’s folk and refugees were caught in the floodwaters and drowned. Now a rift has opened in the lake and the dead are walking again.”

“Why didn’t the mayor have the lake drained and the bodies cremated?” Alistair demanded to know.

“You’ll have to take that up with the mayor,” Gareth sat down in one of the plush armchairs in the room. “Perhaps the local reverend mother would know.”

“I’ll go myself,” Alistair decided. “The last thing I need is for the Inquisition to show up and Beta to berate me about not doing my job again.”

“I’m going to watch your back then,” Gareth declared. “I have reason to believe your darling wife is plotting your demise.”

“She hasn’t before, why now?” Alistair wondered.

“Lissa believes that someone is planning to kill Empress Celene,” Fergus revealed. “When she was sent into the future Celene had been assassinated. You died trying to retake Redcliffe Castle.”

“It would have been the last place Lissa was seen before she disappeared,” Fergus pointed out. “Alexius was in the castle and only he might have had an idea of where she was. From her letters, he didn’t know where she was; but you wouldn’t have believed him.”

“If he was my only hope to find her, nothing would stop me from getting to her,” Alistair agreed.

“Really?” Fergus sat in the chaise that faced Gareth’s chair. “I told you to back off from her and you did.”

Alistair opened his mouth and closed it. “Good point. You don’t want me to ruin her chance of finding happiness, though. You’re just being a good brother. You were right; I can’t offer her what she needs anymore. I’m a married man and she wouldn’t agree to just be my mistress, a teyrn’s daughter deserves more. My Beta deserves more.”

“Wasn’t she the one who once told you that most people are out for themselves and that you need to stand up for what you want?” Gareth reminded him. “I recall you telling me about that. I’m going to add that you need to fight for what you want. Plus, in a letter I recently received from Inquisitor Cousland, she expressed deep concern about your wellbeing. She obviously still cares.”

“He’s married,” Fergus reminded Gareth. “I will not have my sister become merely a man’s mistress, especially when she has other options. What you must do, Your Majesty, is remove your obstacles from marrying her; Eamon and Anora. Gareth and I have both received information from the Hinterlands that will weaken the Guerrin’s power and give you the opening to dismiss Eamon as an adviser. The Inquisition has found rather… scandalous information about the Guerrins.”

“That’s one way of putting it,” Gareth agreed.

“As for Anora… Zevran is with the Inquisition now,” Fergus laced his fingers. “As you know he has… a certain set of skills. He would be more than delighted to… use those skills… on your wife.”

“You want him to bang Anora? She’s already caboodled half the bannorn, why would he make a difference?” Alistair was confused.

“I meant his skills as an Antivan Crow,” Fergus clarified.

“I can’t just kill Anora,” Alistair protested. “That would be wrong.”

“Technically, it would be Zevran that would be killing your wife, not you. I’m pretty sure she and Ambassador Merde… I mean DeMontigue are plotting to kill you,” Gareth referred to Anora’s friend, Meghan. “Who else could be behind the Venatori that were found in your kitchens?”

“It could have been the Orlesians,” Alistair considered. Gareth was right, though, Anora would benefit greatly by his death.

“I’m going with you to Crestwood,” Gareth didn’t believe it was the Orlesians who had sent the Venatori assassins. “I think you need someone watching your back.”

“Especially with the Guerrin’s reputation about to take a hit,” Fergus added. “The Inquisition has found evidence that the family has been making sacrifices to an Avvar god for several generations. They even have evidence that one of their ancestors, Lornan Guerrin, was killed by one of his father’s half-Orlesian bastards who then replaced him. There is further evidence that Rendorn’s children were actually fathered by his lover, Conner, who was also Orlesian.”

“They were sacrificing people?” Alistair was troubled by the news. “Did they just grab their own villagers or were they looking for something specific like virgins?”
“They were virgins according to the records uncovered,” Fergus confirmed. “Although not all were human. There seems to be an even distribution between women and mabari.”

“Mabari?” Alistair repeated, his voice hoarse. “They sacrificed mabari?” He had trouble reconciling the people who raised him with this news. “Did Eamon and Teagan do such things?”

“They are apparently Orlesians, your majesty,” Fergus obviously thought that equaled committing despicable acts for entertainment. “However, the Inquisition found no evidence of virgin or mabari sacrifice. They have found that modern Guerrins have moved on to sacrificing goats. Lissa claims that a spirit that dwells in a nearby lake guided them to Fort Connor. There they found fresh evidence of the killings. One seems to have gone… wrong. There is a ram that is now owned by a local family that is possessed by a rage demon. The demon goes by the name Ser Woolsley and seems to have been giving them financial advice.”

“The demon gives financial advice?” Alistair found that a bit too surreal.

“Good advice at that,” Fergus added. “The family is doing quite well and the demon shows real affection towards them. Adrianna Trevelyan, the head of the Inquisition’s archeology team, believes the family may be the rightful Arls of Redcliffe and that is why the demon is helping them. It is a rage demon, after all. Perhaps it is fueled by the rage of the Guerrin’s victims; that would include whoever the Orlesian bastard replaced. The Crown might want to look into that, especially since I’ll be sharing this information with the rest of the bannorn. The possibility that they are using the blood of these sacrifices for blood magic can not be overlooked either; I will bring that concern to the bannorn.”

“If Eamon and Teagan aren’t the children of Rendorn Guerrin, you might want to find out who is the rightful arl anyway.”

“I don’t know if I can just throw Teagan out of his home,” Alistair protested. “Rendorn accepted them as his children and Marina birthed them. Legally, they are his.”

“They are Orlesians,” Fergus reiterated. “Eamon is even married to another Orlesian. We can’t have Orlesians holding land in Ferelden. Some Orlesian count already tried to claim that Haven was theirs. Lissa, naturally, punched him and told him in detail what would happen if he tried to claim ownership in Ferelden again. Didn’t she send you a letter about it? She said she would.”

“Eamon probably intercepted it,” Gareth deduced. “He is upset at some of the… names… she has chosen to call Anora in her communications. If there was an Orlesian who claimed to own any land in Ferelden, she likely used some choice words. I know how Fereldens feel about Orlesians.”

“Our grandfather was executed during the Orlesian invasion,” Fergus confirmed. “We should have realized when Rendorn’s father wasn’t killed that something was up with the Guerrins.”

“Where is Teagan now?” Gareth wondered. “Do you plan to tell him what you learned, Alistair?”

“Not yet,” Alistair hedged. “I’ll speak with Eamon privately about what was revealed. I don’t want him to be caught off guard at the next Landsmeet. I owe him enough to give him a heads up… although Beta won’t be happy about it. As for where Teagan is, he is in the palace right now. He’s probably taking a trip through my wife’s Deep Roads as we speak.”
Anora MacTir-Theirin groaned in pleasure as Teagan’s turgid tool plunged deeply into her salted wine casket. He planted his palms on either side of her head and lifted his shoulders to give his hips more room to delve into her Abyss rift.

“Oh, Teagan, I’m almost there!” She cried. “Yes, my bulging bronto!” She arched her hips, taking him deeper. Then cried out as she orgasmed beneath him.

Teagan continued with his efforts to bring himself satisfaction and then threw back his head. “My queen!” He collapsed on her.

Anora frowned; there were many times that she suspected that Teagan only came to her bed because of her position and the power that brought. She wondered if any of her lovers actually… loved… her. “So what brought you here, my pet? I’m always glad to see you, as you are to see me, as we can both tell.”

“I’m sure you’re gladly… seeing… Meghan when I’m not here,” he shrugged.

Their relationship wasn’t like that, but there was no reason to let the arl know that. She shrugged. “Perhaps we are, what about it?”

“I think we might have a little get together, the three of us, one of these days,” his voice was nonchalant.

“Perhaps when nugs fly,” she rolled her eyes. “Why aren’t you in Redcliffe, shouldn’t you be seeing to repairs? Don’t you also need to go to the Frostback Basin? I hear you’re engaged to an Avvar princess now.” She referred to Teagan’s engagement, which neither of them knew was to the pranks being pulled by a certain Inquisitor and her spymaster.

“I will have Eamon speak to the king about this ridiculous betrothal and the Inquisition is helping me with the rebuilding of Redcliffe,” he tried to keep his voice casual. “Speaking of the Inquisitor, she might cause problems for my family. What can we do about her?”

“About Elisabeta Cousland?” Anora laughed. “If I thought she was easy to deal with, she wouldn’t be a problem for either of us. She’s not just a skilled warrior, but well protected. To go after her, you’d first have to take down her Inquisition.”

“They’re the only ones fighting Corypheus, though,” Teagan leaned against her headboard and pulled up a blanket. “Once he’s dealt with, then we can strike at the Inquisition itself.”

“Oh, I don’t think Corypheus is nearly as bad, or as dangerous, as they claim,” she laid her head against his shoulder. “I’m sure they’re just trying to scare everyone.”

“He assassinated the Divine,” he reached out and began playing with one of her sunny blonde locks.

She laughed. “Many have tried before him and she no longer had the Templar army to guard her. The Inquisition claims that he caused the rifts and that only Cousland can close them, but we only have their word for that. What if they’re lying? I’m sure our mages could figure out a way.”

“What mages? I didn’t know that the Crown had a company of mages working for them,” his eyebrows raised. “I thought they all rebelled and were now allied with the Inquisition.”

She bristled, knowing he was right. “That is only a temporary situation. When the
Inquisition fails, they will return to their circles and do as they are commanded again. Meanwhile, the Couslands have sworn to take down the Guerrins. You can’t leave such a challenge unanswered and must strike first.”

“We’ve already established that it is too late to do so,” he smiled indulgently at her. “The Inquisition’s… inquiries… into the past… and present… of Redcliffe and the Hinterlands might have uncovered a few embarrassing family… faux pas. I need the help of my vivacious vixen, who is also the beautiful queen, to smooth things with the bannorn.”

“You mean those people who sided with Alistair and Elisabeta against my father and then stood and watched as Alistair beheaded him,” she still chaffed at the memory. “They approved of the murder.” She now had a way to avenge him, though.
Elisabeta and her team arrive in Crestwood.

“Have you ever thought of raising up more of the undead and having them fight the ones rambling around?” Gus suggested to Dorian.

“They could have a dance-off,” Dorian’s sarcasm laced his words. “We could see if skeletons raised by a necromancer are more graceful than those possessed.”

“A dance-off?” Gus questioned. “I’ve never seen one. Is that where groups dance to see who is better?”

“It is a vulgar display that has become popular among the soporati. There are six rounds that are judged by a nearby group. Sometimes they have professional dancers and dance teachers judge them, other times they let the rabble. It is all unseemly,” Dorian explained.

Elisabeta listened to the two men. They had talked to Scout Harding when they arrived in the area. Lace had told them about the undead that were plaguing the town. She found it a strange and suspicious coincidence that refugees had been ‘accidentally’ drowned. She remembered many of the people she’d met who were fleeing the Blight. They’d lost so much on their journey, including family. She hated that they would then lose their lives when they thought they were safe. At least Gus and Dorian’s banter brought a smile back to her face.

“He wants to make you forget,” Cole spoke from behind her, starteling her. “He wants to replace the darkness with his light, but it isn’t darkness. The light is shattered, its shards sharp and piercing, but the anger that shattered it is woven into the love. It’s too tightly woven. The darkness is armor binding the shards. It tries to protect you from the hurt and keeps the shards together. What would happen if you removed the armor? I can’t try to remove the pain if you don’t remove the armor.”

“The shards would probably kill me,” she admitted. “I wouldn’t be able to try to move on; I probably wouldn’t be able to function.”

“Maybe I could try to make you forget, then,” Cole suggested, and then shook his head.

“No, I don’t think you can,” she realized she didn’t want him to either. “I managed to keep those memories while in the Abyss. I clung to them.”

“They became part of you,” Cole realized. “He doesn’t realize it. You should be with your handsome prince.”

“You want me to start a relationship with Gus?” Elisabeta had been wondering if that was the direction Gus was moving towards.”

“Augustus isn’t your handsome prince, but he wants to be,” Cole confirmed. “He was worried that you and Dorian were having sex, but then Dorian hit on him.”
“Dorian hit on him?” Elisabeta grinned as the two men in question turned and looked at them. The grin turned to a pout. “I thought you loved me, Dorian! Am I not woman enough for you?”

He flashed her his most charming smile. “Quite the opposite, my beautiful temptress. You are too much… woman… for me. I need something more… strapping. Alas, our dimpled delight here is after those of the feminine persuasion. I believe he desires… you.”

“You need someone bigger and rougher to challenge you, Dorian,” the Iron Bull stopped and posed.

Gus’ face had turned red. “I…” He stumbled. “Well, I…” His voice softened. “He’s not wrong. I mean you’re an amazing woman and…I like you… a lot.”

You are beautiful, intelligent, brave, and a hundred other things you would hurt me for not saying. She remembered the love and devotion that seared through her as she promised him that I would never hurt you. Then he’d sworn to her Nor I you. She shoved the memory away. They had hurt each other and there was no way to undo certain things. She needed to just move forward. “I’m fond of you, too.” She stepped up and kissed his cheek. Perhaps we can talk more about it after we get rid of this undead and find Hawke’s friend.”

“Why can’t we…” Gus began.

“We’ve got trouble up ahead boss,” Iron Bull interrupted.

Sure enough, there was a trio of rambling skeletons were carrying swords and attacking a local villager. The woman already had help, though. Two men in Grey Warden armor had leaped to her defense and were battling the undead. One of the skeletons fell quickly and each engaged the remaining two. As Elisabeta’s group rushed forward, the two remaining walking corpses collapsed to the ground.

“You saved me, my heroes!” The rescued woman threw her arms around the shorter of the two Wardens.

“Um… yes, miss,” he awkwardly patted her back. “It is our pleasure to help those in need.”

“We’re glad to help,” his superior officer agreed. “Now hurry home before any more monsters show up.”

“Will you help to protect my village?” The woman fluttered her eyelashes at the shorter Warden. “You are so strong and brave Commander…?”


“I’m Jana,” she kissed his cheek and rushed off.

“I see why Blackwall pretended to be a Grey Warden,” Sera whistled. “Whatever happened to him?”

“He is seeking something, no someone,” Cole answered. “His friend is in danger. He is going into the lion’s mouth.”

“O.K. weirdy,” Sera snorted.

“What brings you two here?” Elisabeta greeted the Wardens. “I had heard a rumor that the
Grey Wardens had all disappeared.” The one thing that was nice about having been recruited during the Blight and dying at the end was that none of the Wardens realized she had once been one of their kin.

“We are looking for one of our missing comrades,” Warden Jameson explained.

“It’s Warden business,” his superior shot him a warning look.

“Oh?” Elisabeta blinked innocently. “Are you Ferelden Wardens? There isn’t a Grey Warden Base nearby. Soldier’s Peak is between Highever and Denerim and Amaranthine is near the eastern edge of the Coastlands. We’re 75 kilometers away from Soldier’s Peak and 90 from Amaranthine. Warden...?”

“I am Senior Warden DeBurns,” he supplied.

“DeBurns? Orlesian?” Elisabeta narrowed her eyes at him. “Are you one of the Orlesian Wardens?”

“I am,” he confirmed. “We are here looking for one of our missing companions.”

“The Orlesian Wardens are looking for one of their comrades in Ferelden?” Elisabeta reiterated.

“Yes,” DeBurns didn’t see why she would have a problem with that. “We have traced her to here.”

“I don’t think she is here, ser,” Jameson objected. “We’d best move on.”

“You aren’t going to stay and help the village?” Iron Bull objected. “People are dying, man.”

“Grey Wardens don’t get involved in politics or problems that aren’t related to the Blight,” DeBurns insisted.

Elisabeta laughed. How many times had she been forced to play politics during the Fifth Blight? That didn’t count rescuing people, because they needed rescuing. “So you just cross borders when it serves Grey Warden business?”

“Yes,” DeBurns attested.

“Then where were you guys during the Fifth Blight?” She challenged. “Not a single one of you crossed the border; you left the defense of Ferelden to two people. They just happened to be the two junior-most members of the Ferelden Order and had no clue what they were doing.” She took an aggressive step towards the two Wardens. “You left them and all of Ferelden to die! Now you’ve shown up in the nation you refused to aid, looking for a lost member of your little group; one you say is not a Ferelden Warden. Do you have an explanation for your Order’s egregious decisions during the Fifth Blight? Are you carrying an apology from them?”

“Commander Blackwall said that King Loghain wouldn’t let us in and that we weren’t to mess with Ferelden politics,” DeBurns took a step back. “We had orders.”

“King Loghain!” Elisabeta took another step forward, her fists clenched. “Loghain was never king! He arranged for the death of King Cailan and the tried to appoint himself Anora’s regent, only she had no rightful claim to the throne either. Marrying someone does not suddenly make you the heir to a kingdom. The MacTirs will never rule Ferelden. Have the Wardens become so politically dense? People died because you didn’t help! I died!”

“But your standing right here,” Jameson pointed out.
“I died,” Elisabeta assured him. “There was a funeral and my body was burned. My fiancée moved on and married someone else; I lost the person I loved more than any other. And it is all because the Orlesian Wardens chose to do nothing while a Blight was going on. Heck, most of you probably chose to be Wardens, I didn’t. I was conscripted and carried to the Joining kicking and screaming. If you are crossing the border now, it had better be to help those you turned your back on before, not to go searching for a missing buddy or someone who wants to stay lost.”

“Um…” DeBurns gulped. “I’ll express the Fereldan’s displeasure to Commander Clarel.”

“You do that,” Elisabeta hissed. “And you tell her that the next time an Orlesian Warden steps foot in Ferelden; it had better be to kill an archdemon. We’re not sacrificing our own again.”

DeBurns and Jameson rushed away, with the Inquisition watching after them. “You’d better run you, cowards!” Sera called after them. “Wardens are supposed to be better than you two! The ones in Ferelden are!”

The group continued to move into Crestwood. They stopped and talked to several of the villagers. Elisabeta realized she shouldn’t have as one man requested she find his friend Judith and convince her to move into the village. Why did everyone expect her to solve their problems for them? Why didn’t he go to Judith and explain why he needed her to stay? Did he think a stranger would have better luck? She also found Jana, the elf who had been rescued by the two Wardens.

“I’m going to go join the Grey Wardens!” Jana declared. “Did you see those two who rescued me? The Wardens are real heroes. I want to help people like that.”

“This may not be the best time for that,” Cassandra tried to keep her voice gentle.

“Something wonky is going on with them,” Sera warned.

“All they care about is the Blight,” Solas added.

“The Blights are a problem in Thedas,” Gus countered. “Crestwood is an example of that. All of Ferelden is still trying to recover.”

“The Wardens can be heroes,” Elisabeta agreed. “They are needed, but now is not the time to join them and there are things that you do not… realize… about their Joining. If you want to make a difference, join the Inquisition. We’re fighting for the little man right now.”

“I…” Jana hesitated. “I guess you’re right. I make the pilgrimage to Skyhold instead.”

“Why are people making a pilgrimage to my home?” Elisabeta didn’t like the word. Yes, she was a miracle, the Herald of Andraste, brought back by the hand of the Maker. She didn’t want people making pilgrimages to her castle, though. She preferred, traveling to join your force or leaving to help.

“You’re the Herald of Andraste,” Cassandra’s smiled a bit. “You’re proof that Andraste and her Maker are with us. Speaking of which, Josephine has been writing both of us reminders that you need to return to Skyhold to finish your portrait.”

“I’m busy,” Elisabeta objected. “They can come to Crestwood while I’m here, but I am not responsible for the artist’s life. She will have to find one who knows how to fight.”

“Why don’t I do your portrait?” Dorian suggested. “I bet I could do one you’d like better than anyone Josephine hired.”
“You probably could,” Elisabeta agreed. “And I know you can defend yourself.”

“As soon as we get trade going to this very wet village, I’ll find supplies and get to work,” Dorian decided. “I have a few things in my bag.”

“Why don’t you do one of me, Dorian?” Iron Bull struck a pose. “I bet you could really appreciate my rippling muscles and rock hard abs and capture my impressive… charisma.”

“No one could do your charisma… or ego… justice, Bull,” Dorian sighed. “As for yours, Lissa, perhaps something grand befitting the daughter of a teyrn and the head of the Inquisition? No, maybe in your battle coat with your braid flying in the wind. Either that or a green skirt and jacket over a white blouse, to bring out the green in your eyes. We’ll let your curls wave free, no some we’ll tame with that marvelous circlet of yours. You do have it on you, don’t you? That and the blue ribbon choker with the griffons. Or perhaps a pair of trousers with high boots and a blouse that is open at the neck. We’ll do the braid and have your harp… and Calenhad and Thorn. It will be so Ferelden, Orlais will hate that.”

“Which is always a plus,” she grinned mischievously at him.

They soon came up to a wooden structure that was larger than the others. It was still a bit worn, but it was steadier and larger than the other homes. There was a placard on it that confirmed it to be the home of the mayor. Elisabeta let herself in and found a man, who vaguely reminded her of Arl Teagan, standing there.

“I’d heard that agents of the Inquisition were in town,” he said by way of greeting. “I’m hoping you can help us with our problem.”

“We are going to help, aren’t we?” Sera commented behind Elisabeta.

“No,” the sarcasm dripped from Elisabeta’s voice. “We’re going to become Orlesians and only worry about our own fashion. Of course, we’re going to help them.”

“Good,” Sera nodded. “I don’t want to have to start wearing one of those masks.”

Elisabeta realized that she was becoming rather adept at dealing with the undead and so was her team. Dorian was lighting Bianca’s bolts so the walking skeleton lit up the night when they were hit. Iron Bull cut the head off of one of the other rambling dead and used it as a ball to knock its oncoming companions down.

When they did arrive at the Caer Bronach, the keep where the old games master had lived until he was murdered by bandits, they decided that there was no reason to wait to recapture the old fort. Elisabeta harnessed flame through Excalibur and shot it at the door, splintering it. Then her team moved in. They worked as one, destroying all who stood in their path. Soon, they were the only living things in the keep.

“The Inquisition could use a base around here,” Cassandra advised. “This would be perfect.”

“The bann won’t be happy,” Elisabeta considered her options. Bann Isabella was obviously doing nothing to help Crestwood, and there was no evidence of anything but neglect since before the Blight began. The Inquisition was going to have to use its own resources to help these people. The keep would be considered payment in kind for their trouble. She wondered if the bann was living it
up at court and trying to become the queen’s wiper rather than take care of her people. Maybe she was one of the Queen’s sex toys instead. Who knew anymore? The town was under siege by the undead and the countryside was crawling with bandits and Red Templars. “Let’s do it.” She attached the Inquisition’s ensign.
Bad Guys' Behinds

Chapter Summary

Anora takes a moment with a new lover.

Anora stretched out beside her lover. The woman was lithe and had talented hands and an even more talented tongue. They were in a seedy inn in Jader, cuddled together in a rickety queen-sized bed. She’d never been in such poor conditions, but that meant she was less likely to be recognized. “This is nice. I should be single by the time I return to Denerim. That will be nice, too. Today is a good day.”

“That would please the Elder One,” her companion approved. “Celene won’t survive the year, either. What have you done to rid yourself of that fool you are tied to?”

Anora smirked. “He doesn’t suspect that some of his own soldiers are loyal to me. All I had to do was give one a dagger with the Inquisition’s symbol on it and the instructions to plant it into that idiot’s back when it was turned. It will be dealt with.”

“It feels sweeter when you’re the one implanting the dagger,” her lover assured her. “You should try it. Get your own hands dirty. I know you can use your hands well, sweeting.”

“As can you,” Anora kissed the other woman, slipping her tongue into her lover’s mouth to twine together. “Let your Elder One know that I will ensure the fall of Ferelden’s King and its chief noble family. The Couslands are causing him too many problems.”

“He’ll be pleased.” Her lover let her hands wander low.
Caer Bronach

Chapter Summary

Elisabeta and company spend time in Caer Bronach as they wait for reinforcements.

Elisabeta had waited for a week and a half for reinforcements. She had sent Cole, Sera, and Iron Bull to defend the village from the undead until she could be free to drain the lake and close the rift. She hoped that Hawke’s friend was still safe. She didn’t want to leave the keep undefended, though. She was sure that the bandits would have just moved back in.

While she waited, Elisabeta sent a letter to Bann Isabella, informing her that the Inquisition now had a fort in her land and why they felt it was necessary to take Caer Bronach. She invited the bann to send men to defend the area and to deal with those human and once human creatures that were preying on the area if she objected to the Inquisition’s presence. The bann did not respond.

Carter showed up with a handful of scouts after about five days, but Elisabeta decided to wait until a small force of soldiers had also shown up to patrol the keep’s walls and nearby countryside. During that time, Adrianna and Gus happily traipsed through the old structure, investigating every nook and cranny to look into the lives of those who had held it before. Gus had dragged Elisabeta along with him several times, cheerfully pointing out antique pieces of furniture and books that he swore should be protected in an archive somewhere. He even took her down to the flooded basement after he and Adrianna had killed a giant spider they called Snowball.

“Once we drain the lake, we can go through this area,” his voice was fast and high. “I hate to think about what artifacts were likely damaged by this flooding. There should still be artifacts under this water, though.”

“Well now I have a reason to drain the lake,” she joked. “I wonder if I should have done it before now. Was getting to the rift and any horrors trapped there worth it? Possible artifacts hidden there means it definitely is. My archeologists must be allowed to get their hands dirty.”

“Are you teasing me?” He gave her a playful pout and then kissed her nose.

She couldn’t help herself, she giggled. “I might be.”

“Good,” he playfully pulled her into the water and splashed her. “That means war.”

She couldn’t believe he’d lured her into playing in the basement water with him, splashing and even laughing for a good half hour. He then led her back out of the area to the courtyard, where it was still raining, as if Maker himself were in mourning. She briefly wondered if it were for Ferelden, Thedas, or something else. Gus led her to a library where they dried off and talked.

Dorian was happily painting the first of the portraits of Elisabeta that they had discussed. He let Thorn sit on his lap, and judge his work silently as he painted her mistress.
Elisabeta was surprised when Commander Cullen was at the head of the Inquisition soldiers sent to guard Caer Bronach, the Keep of Crestwood. She didn’t think he ever left Skyhold. She began to approach him when Adrianna rushed by her and then slowed, her cheeks turning red, despite the cold rain that was falling.

“Lady Trevelyan,” Cullen put his hand behind his neck and his own face began to turn a pretty shade of pink, but Elisabeta noticed his attention was solely on Adrianna.

“I got your letters,” Adrianna’s feet shuffled and she took another step towards the commander. “I think I got all of them.”

“I… I believe I received all of yours as well,” Cullen was stuttering a bit. “I read them all… twice,” the last part could barely be heard.

“Really… good,” Adrianna looked around. “There… there was a question I had about one of yours. I… could we discuss it… in… my… I mean in… the library. We found an old library; it hasn’t been used in at least fifty years. Some of the books are ancient. You have to see them. Please?”

“I would love to,” Cullen offered her his arm and the pair walked away.

“Did the Commander just fail to report into you?” Cassandra’s expression was an interesting mix of shock and awe.

“I believe he was distracted… by Adrianna,” Elisabeta looked wistfully after the couple, as memories came flooding back to her. She was no longer standing in the rain-drenched courtyard of Caer Bronach, but in a clearing in the forest between Denerim and Redcliffe.

“Do you two even know that there are other people around?” Leliana’s voice had startled Elisabeta, causing her to jump.

“What?” She blinked at her friend, when had Leliana snuck up on her? She realized she’d been gazing at Alistair… again.

“You and Alistair lock eyes across camp and it’s like the rest of us don’t even exist,” Leliana explained. “The archdemon could probably land in the middle of the campfire and you’d only notice him if he got directly between you two. It’s rather cute, actually.”

“We don’t…” She trailed off, yes, they did.

“The rest of us can feel the heat leaping between you two. The archdemon would probably burst to flames if it got in your way,” Leliana teased.

Elisabeta looked back at Alistair and couldn’t help the smile that spread across her face as he looked at her. The grin grew wider as he walked to her.

“You smile and the Maker’s heart must also lighten,” he framed her face in his hands and then kissed her softly. The kiss was long and tender and her heartbeat slowed as a gossamer warmth spread through her. When the kiss ended, Alistair laid his cheek against her. “Maker’s breath, I love you so much.”

“I love you, too,” she closed her eyes, basking in his tender embrace.

“Elisabeta!” She jumped at Cassandra’s voice.
“What?” She blinked at the Seeker. Sorrowful tears of Andraste, she’d been so lost in her memory that she hadn’t been aware of anyone around her.

“Are you going to reprimand Commander Cullen for his break of protocol?” Cassandra clarified.

“He did bring Ser Calenhad to you, my lady,” Rylen brought Calenhad forth.

“Dorian will be delighted to see you,” Elisabeta told her dog. “Dorian has been despairing; he insists he must see him again for the painting he is working on. You didn’t bring my harp did you?”

“No, my lady,” Rylen was confused. “Did you need it?”

“Only for Dorian’s painting,” she shook her head. “Thorn will be happy to see her big brother. No, I’m not mad at Commander Cullen,” she changed the subject. “I feel bad about stealing her away tomorrow to go close a breach. Maybe I’ll leave her behind.”

“She wouldn’t like that,” Gus assured her. “She would want to go.”

Giving thought to bittersweet memories, Elisabeta gave a weak smile and said, “I’m not so sure about that.”

Elisabeta left for Old Crestwood without Adrianna. Lady Trevelyan had chosen to stay behind to help Cullen oversee the defense of Caer Bronach. “I use to coordinate with my father’s generals before, Des’ incident,” she explained. “I miss it sometimes, along with running the rest of the bann. If I hadn’t become an archeologist, I would have likely become someone’s seneschal.”

After closing the rift, Elisabeta returned for her missing party member. She found Cullen and Adrianna examining a long dagger.

“I’m sure this dates back to the reign of King Calenhad,” Adrianna was insisting. “Look at these marks.” She pointed to two spots on the blade. “And this folding pattern is rarely seen anymore. It’s damascened steel. It hasn’t been seen this far inland since before Calenhad united Ferelden.”

“That’s too bad,” Cullen ran a finger along the dagger’s blade. “It’s pretty.”

“And the handle and guard are made from iron and leather,” she added. “It is lovely, isn’t it?”

“That it is,” Cullen was looking at Adrianna when he said it, but she didn’t notice.

“I… here,” she handed it to him. “I want you to have it.”

“I can’t…” he began.

“Yes, you can,” she placed it in his hand. “You’ll appreciate it more than a museum or some private Orlesian collector who will bribe the museum into giving it to him.”

“Are you giving away artifacts?” Elisabeta teased.

“Yes,” Adrianna raised her chin. “I am. You don’t want an Orlesian collector getting it, do you?”

“Of course not,” Elisabeta agreed. “It should be in the hands of a Ferelden as that is its origin. Take
He accepted the present, sliding it into a sheath at his side. Cullen looked up at Elisabeta. “Now that you’re both here, there is something I need to talk to you about.” He fidgeted a bit.

“What’s wrong?” Elisabeta sat down across from him.

“You can tell me anything,” Adrianna assured him.

“I…” He took another deep breath. “I a no longer taking lyrium. I haven’t taken it since before I left Kirkwall.”

“Cullen,” Elisabeta knew some of the dangers. “Alistair counted himself lucky that he was recruited to the Grey Wardens before he took his vows as a Templar and it wasn’t just because he’d never wanted to be a Templar. Lyrium is addictive to non-mages. You could die.”

“I’d rather die than to remain shackled. I want to be completely free of that life,” he declared.

“I’ll help you,” Adrianna offered. “Let me help you.”

“I respect your decision,” Elisabeta nodded. “Just let me know if you need extra help, but it looks like you’re in good hands. Will you be all right?”

He nodded. “Cassandra knows, she is monitoring me. She’s to step in if… if she needs to.”

“Why don’t you come to see Hawke and his friend with us,” Adrianna suggested. “It will do you some good to get back into fighting, rather than being buried under a stack of papers. According to Varric, you know Hawke personally. He thinks you were hiding from him when he was in Skyhold earlier.”

“I wasn’t hiding,” Cullen fidgeted nervously, bellying his words. “I was working. I’m a busy man. If Hawke tried to come to my office, I was probably training the men or touring the battlements. I would love to come with you, Addie, but I should have returned to Skyhold yesterday.”

“How are you supposed to train your men to fight Red Templars if you haven’t been fighting them yourself?” Adrianna challenged. “It will make you a better leader; you’ll know what to prepare them for.”

“Some of those men were my friends, they were my comrades. If I hadn’t made some life-altering choices a couple of years ago, they could have been me.”

“Fine,” she tried to keep the disappointment from her voice, but failed.

“We could use your help, Cullen,” Elisabeta added her opinion. “There are not just Red Templars and bandits between us and Hawke; there is a dragon out there somewhere. We’ve seen it flying overhead. There could also be more Grey Wardens and I can’t be positive that they can’t sense me, I don’t know how much of the Joining was undone when Andraste brought me back.” She was pretty sure that all traces of the Joining were gone, but she felt compelled to help Adrianna spend more to with her Commander.

“If you were so worried about such things, why did you send Blackwall away?” Cullen had respected the Warden.

“I didn’t send not-Blackwall away, he left when he realized I knew he was no Grey Warden,” Elisabeta corrected him. “I don’t know who he was, but he was lying to everybody. Hawke’s friend
is our only hope of finding the Grey Wardens now.”

“All right, I’ll go just to make sure you get to Hawke,” he conceded. “We do need the information his friend can give us.”

“Good, we’ll leave in the morning,” Elisabeta stood. “Go do your paperwork so you aren’t fretting about it while we fight our way to Hawke.”

“I’ll help you,” Adrianna offered. The look that passed between the rogue archeologist and the former Templar turned commander was enough to lighten her heart. It brought back memories she would rather keep repressed, but it also reminded her that love like the one she’d once known still thrived in Thedas, no matter what was thrown at her people.
Elisabeta meets with Hawke and his Warden.

The green, lush countryside of Crestwood was infested with Red Templars and bandits. Elisabeta’s inner circle cut through the perilous pests like a sickle through wheat.

“What are those red riffraff doing out here?” Sera wondered.

“There is a note about some search for elven ruins,” the Iron Bull held up a paper he’d been reading.

“Ruins?” Adrianna perked up. “There are ruins nearby?”

“Really?” Gus turned to Elisabeta. “Do we have time to check them out? I can get out team transferred from the Winter Watch Tower.”

“They haven’t found them yet,” Bull laughed at the excited looks on the archeologists’ faces.

“They also seem to be trying to get a foothold in Ferelden,” Cassandra deduced. “Someone should tell King Alistair.” She looked pointedly at Elisabeta.

“We can send him a letter,” Elisabeta reasoned. “I should tell Fergus. He could not only influence Alistair, but make sure the Venatori and Red Templars aren’t infesting Highever.”

“No one can influence the king like you can, Stormy.” Varric cleaned a bit of blood off of Bianca.

“That’s…” Was it true? Elisabeta’s heart beat faster at the thought that Alistair might value her voice above all others. They had been apart for so long, though, and it was painfully obvious that Eamon had more of an influence than she had ever had. He’d convinced Alistair to break her heart. She was sure that Eamon never expected her to walk the lands of Thedas again, yet if she had been at the Maker’s side when certain events had happened, she would have wept tears of inconsolable grief. Her voice softened. “I wish that were true.”

“We should still write King Alistair,” Cassandra declared. “Warn him that the Red Templars seem to be moving freely across his country.”

“I will,” Elisabeta promised. “Shouldn’t the king have a network in place that already monitored these things?” Eamon was definitely the worse adviser in the history of Ferelden, well perhaps second worse. She doubted King Brandel’s advisers could have been much better; after all, they let the Orlesians steal the throne.

They found Anders standing outside of a cave, waiting for them. A tabby cat sat at his feet.
“What’s wrong?” Elisabeta’s voice was quiet. She didn’t want to draw attention to the fact that something was amiss.

“Anders insisted. The cat meowed at him. “Fine, Ser Pounce-a-lot, but having you back makes up for a lot of it. I… I thought he was with Isabela and that… well, that is… what was going on with us meant I was special, but… and she’s his cousin.”

“Blondie, what has waffles done?” Varric put a calming hand on Ander’s arms.

“She brought Ser Pounce-a-lot back to me, though, so I can’t stay too mad at her over this.” The cat in question was now climbing up Anders coat. He picked up the cat and deposited it in his knapsack. “Just come with me.”

“I have a feeling Anders wasn’t the only person Hawke has strayed with,” Varric grumbled to Elisabeta as they followed Anders into the cave. He led them to a wooden façade with a doorway in it. Beside the door, someone had pained the Thedosian symbol for smugglers.

Elisabeta walked cautiously through the door, only to have a blast of cold whip by her head. The brunette in front of her wore the armor of a Warden Battle Mage and held a staff. Neither of them had flinched at the blast of cold and now stared at each other. “That was a warning shot.”

Elisabeta studied the other woman. Her chestnut hair gleamed in the candlelight and was pulled back in a single braid. A couple of loose tendrils fell in waves near her face. There was a scar that ran from her hairline to her ear on the left side which came dangerously close to her green eyes. There was a light scattering of freckles along her nose and cheeks. Elisabeta gave her a soft smile, she liked this mage. “I was under the impression that you wanted to speak with me.”

“That’s why it was only a warning shot,” the other woman returned the light smile. “I can’t be careful enough these days. Thankfully, I had Hawke and Anders guarding me. I’m…”

“Solona Arnell?” Cullen had entered the room and was staring at the woman with his mouth hung open.

“Cullen?” She smiled and ran to him, throwing her arms around the former Templar.

“Oh, you know each other?” Adrianna’s voice had chilled several degrees, it could compete with the warning shot Amell had given earlier.

“Addie, this is Solona,” Cullen introduced them. “She was in Kinloch Hold when I was stationed there. She’d fled the tower before… the incident. She’d helped a friend of hers find his phylactery and destroy it.”

“I was helping him on Irwin’s advice,” Solona explained. “I went to him when I learned that Jowan was up to something and he told me to go along and report back to him. Then when we were caught, Gregoire wouldn’t listen to reason. He thought Irwin was just protecting me. I ran to the Free Marches where I became a Grey Warden. I’d been looking for my family. I never did find them.”

“Her mother and mine were cousins,” Hawke put an arm around her and drew her to his side. “We found each other when she was reassigned from Adamant to the Free Marches.”

“I was looking into the red lyrium that was found by Varric and Hawke in the Deep Roads,
when I somehow came to Commander Clarel’s notice. Something is wrong with the Wardens. They are all hearing the Calling now. All of them. Commander Clarel ordered me to stop my investigations and report to her. Like she can order me around,” Solona let out an indignant huff. “I refused and she sent her men after me. They’re still after me, that why… I have to be careful, I hope I didn’t give you frostbite. All of the Orlesian Wardens have abandoned their keeps and moved to a new one… or perhaps an old one. I’m not sure where, but I’ve heard reports of increased Warden activity in the Western Approach.”

“We met two Wardens looking for you when we arrived in Crestwood,” Elisabeta admitted. “They are gone now. They moved on rather than helping the people here.”

“Orleans,” Solona rolled her eyes. “Of course they did.”

“Are you hearing the Calling?” Elisabeta studied the woman. “And you Anders?”

“I am,” Solona admitted. “But I can still ignore it… for now.”

“I did,” Anders shrugged. “I was able to suppress it the same way I did Justice. That apostate in the Fallow Mire had some great meditation techniques.”

“Are you sure you’re all right Anders?” Solona moved to the other mage and touched his temple. The way she looked at Anders made Elisabeta wonder if something was going on between them. What sort of weird triangle was her healer mixed up in? She had a feeling he didn’t even know.

“I’m fine, Commander,” his voice was more firm, less humorous, than usual.

“You used to call me Sol,” her voice held hurt.

“I’m fine, Sol,” his voice gentled a bit. “I swear. I’ll teach you some of those meditation techniques. I won’t let the Calling get you.”

“No, we won’t,” Hawke stepped between them and threw an arm around both of their shoulders.

“Waffles,” Varric growled under his voice. “What are you up to?”

“Let’s get back to Caer Bronach,” Elisabeta suggested. “We’ll debrief there. Then I have a dragon to kill and we should be able to get back to Skyhold.”
Elisabeta returns to Caer Bronach to find visitors.

The trip back to Caer Bronach was uneventful at first. Elisabeta turned to Anders. “You seem to already know this Commander Amell.”

“I do,” Anders confirmed. “She was the Grey Warden Commander who conscripted me. She did it to save me from the Templars. We knew each other before that, though. We were both in Kinloch Hold. There was an incident with a friend of hers, Jowan, who turned out to be a blood mage. She was implicated when he escaped, so she ran for it, too. Naturally, I also took the opportunity to exit myself from the circle.”

“I met Jowan,” Elisabeta recalled. “He’d ended up in Redcliffe. The Templars had caught him, but they ran afoul of Loghain who used Jowan for his own purposes.”

“Solona was smarter than that,” Anders smiled. “She crossed the Waking Sea and blended in with the refugees in the Free Marches. She ended up with the Wardens. When King Alistair took the Howe lands and gave Amaranthine to the Grey Wardens, they were going to send an Orlesian Commander to see to the rebuilding of the Ferelden Wardens.”

“After they let us all die?” Elisabeta’s hands tightened on Rowan’s reins, causing her horse to rear up. She calmed the mare, patting her neck. “Sorry,” she whispered to her mare.

“Alistair wasn’t very happy, either,” Anders recalled. “I hear that he told Weisshaupt they were shitting on your memory and refused to let the Orlesian Commander cross the border. So they found a Ferelden among their ranks. That was Amell; she went from a recruit to a Commander rather quickly. By the time she arrived at Amaranthine, it was under siege by strange darkspawn. I happened to be there; caught by the Templars again. She conscripted me so they couldn’t keep me. She saved my life.” The affection and admiration were evident in his voice.

“Then she stole your man?” Elisabeta guessed.

“He was never really my man,” Anders sighed. “Technically he is Isabela’s. I don’t think she would approve of how free spirited he is being in her absence. Still… and he says he does care for me. I have a lot to think about on that line. He looked back at Hawke and Amell and his eyes lingered longer on the Warden.”

“Is it his affection you want, though?” Elisabeta followed his gaze.

Elisabeta was still a mile out of Caer Bronach when she encountered a group of soldiers in Ferelden armor and heraldry. At their head was King Alistair. He wore a deep red and gold brocaded fur lined cloak to keep the rain off and approached Elisabeta immediately, a wide smile spreading across his face as he saw her, and ignored John’s protests about the possible dangers of
exposing himself.

Elisabeta became conscious of the drops of rain falling from her own hat and sloughing off of her leather battle coat as she watched Alistair approach. The leather did a good job of keeping her dry, but she was chilled and felt even new shivers running down her back as Alistair dismounted and slowly stalked to her. She slid from Rowan and approached him. “What are you doing here?”

“This is Ferelden and I’m her king,” he reminded her. “I had reports of the undead plaguing the city.” He paused for a moment. “I was doing my job.”

She smiled. “I already took care of them.”

“Of course you did, Beta,” he reached up and untied his cloak and then whipped it around her, tying it securely and lifting the hood over her head. As he did so, she removed her hat and put it over his now exposed hair.

“It’s a little big for me,” she pulled the cloak close, reveling in how warm it was and gazing up at him. She knew her feelings for him showed in her eyes and couldn’t stop.

“It’s perfect on you,” he assured her, as he stroked her cheek. Then he put his hands on either side of her face and brought his mouth to hers. The kiss was soft and long, full of love and affection that had been too long without their recipient. She felt warmth seep into her bones, even as a shiver of delight ran down her spine, and wound her arms around his neck and kissed him back. She couldn’t hold back her feelings; this was her soul’s mate. Even if they could not be together, that didn’t keep her spirit from reaching out for its other half. When they finally parted, he kissed her forehead and nose and then brought his cheek to rest against hers. “It’s good to see you.”

“I’m not giving you Caer Bronach back,” she warned. “If Bann Isabella wants it returned, she can tell me herself and prove she can protect it this time. Otherwise I need it.”

“If you want a keep, all you need do is ask me for it.” Alistair looked back at her group. He noticed that the prince of Navarra was glaring at him and wondered what political faux pas he had made in terms of that nation. “Hawke, it’s good to see you again. Commander Amell?”

“Your Majesty,” she bowed low on her horse. “There is something wrong with the Grey Warden order. I have come to the Inquisition to aid them in locating our Wardens and stopping whatever craziness Commander Clarel had mixed them up in.”

“The Wardens? Do you know where they are?” Alistair kept a hand on Elisabeta’s back, without either of them really noticing. Nor did she notice Gus’ look of hurt and disappointment. Her head was still spinning from the kiss.

“I’ve heard rumors of activity in the Western Approach,” Solona reported.

“We were going to investigate,” Elisabeta added.

“I’m going with you,” Alistair announced.

“You can not just march your troops into Orlesian territory, Your Majesty,” Elisabeta studied his men for a moment. “Think about what would happen if Orlais tried it. Speaking of which, were you trying to compete with Orlais for ugliest armor when you designed those helmets?”

“It was Eamon’s idea, he liked the bow look,” Alistair explained.

“That didn’t clue you in to how bad his advice is?” She pulled away from him. “Did you
leave him in charge of Denerim?"

“No, your brother is taking care of the throne right now,” Alistair answered. “It will be good for Eleanor to learn the ins and outs of running the kingdom early.”

“What if you end up having a child of your own, your… Alistair?” She didn’t want to think about him having a child with someone else.

“I wish we had… I mean…” He touched her cheek again. “There are a lot of things about this world I would like to change. Until the Maker grants me a few more wishes, Eleanor will remain my heir. For now, I ask the Inquisition’s permission to use your keep to house my soldiers while in Crestwood. May we stay with you, sweet Inquisitor?” He bowed to her.

“You may,” she nodded. Maker, as if she were strong enough to deny him such a request. She turned to Cullen. “Commander, it appears that we will need to accommodate more soldiers. Will that be a problem?”

“We’re happy to have them,” Cullen hopped down from his horse and bowed formerly to Alistair. “I promise to see to your safety, your majesty.”

Carter was understandably surprised to see a contingent of Ferelden soldiers arrive with her Inquisitor, one of whom was King Alistair himself. She quickly set up to secure the accommodations for the newcomers.

Alistair turned to Elisabeta, who was helping Thorn out of her saddle bag, before he left. “I’ll see you at dinner, Beta. The cloak looks good on you.”

She smiled at him. Her hat was too small for him, but the roguish tip of it was charming. “I’ll have to have a larger hat made for you, one in heavy leather. Perhaps we’ll add a few feathers and the Theirin crest.”

“Perhaps the Cousland crest,” he suggested. “For that is where my head and heart will always dwell.”

“Alas, but not your body nor your hand,” she gave him a sad smile. “For you gave those to another. I’ll see you at dinner, Alistair.” She turned towards her rooms.

“What is going on between you and Ferelden’s King?” Gus intercepted her.

“I told you of my history with him,” she continued to her room, she felt a pang of guilt. Gus was a wonderful man and one who deserved love. She should be able to love him. She could love him… but a part of her still held back and she didn’t want to face why. She had faced why, though. Why had just put his tongue in her mouth. She would just try harder to resist him. She could have a future with Gus, but not with Alistair.

“That didn’t look like history to me,” Gus accused.

“I know and I’m sorry, it’s just…” She sighed. “Look, he’s married and you know I’d never become any man’s mistress. There is no reason to be jealous, but he will always be my friend. We… he… get to know him, you’ll like him. I assure you, he isn’t competition.”

He paused and turned her to look at him. “Are you sure?”
“Yes,” she assured him, knowing it for a lie even as she said it, before continuing to her rooms. She wondered why she didn’t sound convincing to her own ears.

“Fine,” he pulled her back to him for a moment and kissed her. It was short, but intense. “I’ll see you at dinner as well.”

Alistair continued on. He followed Carter to his room and removed the hat that Elisabeta had placed on his head. He put it in his satchel. He hoped she didn’t expect to get it back from him that definitely was not happening. He’d keep it and cherish it, even if it was a bit too small on him. He might give it back if he figured out a way to get her to return to his side. When she’d returned his kiss earlier, he’d been given hope and his heart had been light again for a few moments. No, it had begun beating again for those moments. He hadn’t realize that it had stopped when hers had, for then all light had gone out of Thedas for him. The light was back and his heart wanted its mate back.

He stayed in his rooms for about half an hour before venturing out. When he’d kissed Elisabeta earlier, he’d more than half expected a fireball to be aimed at his back. His honor still dictated that he speak with Dorian and let the Tevinter Magister know that he fully intended to win Elisabeta’s heart back. True, he was still married, but together they could figure out what to do about the harpy Eamon had forced upon him. He grabbed one of the scouts and asked them where the magister’s room was. The scout pointed the way and then smirked.

Only a minute later, the scout came back. “Your Majesty, is there a reason one of your soldiers is following you at a discreet distance? They were too far away to be a bodyguard and when I said hello to him, he screamed like a milkmaid frightened by a garden snake.”

“That is strange,” Alistair agreed.

“It thought so,” the scout would also report the incident to Carter and the Nightingale. The King of Ferelden might be in danger from his own men.

Alistair continued to Dorian’s room, only slightly concerned about a soldier who was stalking him, and knocked softly. The door opened to reveal the Tevinter. He was holding a bottle of wine and a wedge of cheese. “Yes?” His expression brightened. “Have you come to join us? We could have a party.”

“Us?” Alistair took a step in and saw Hawke sitting on the bed.

Hawke winked at the king. “I was enjoying being away from that cold, damp cave.”

“But you aren’t celebrating with Anders and Amell?” Alistair observed. “They were stuck in that cave with you.”

“No, I decided to get to know one of our neighbors from the north instead,” Hawke stood and sauntered to Dorian, running a hand along the other mage’s back from his shapely butt to his neck and back down.

“He brought wine and cheese,” Dorian shrugged. “I just thought I’d let him in to talk.”

“Were you going to let him do anything else?” Alistair growled.

“Well, we’d see about that,” Dorian grinned sheepishly. The grin ended when the king
planted his fist in Dorian’s face.

“I can’t believe I came in here to talk to you about Beta… and my feelings for her, only to find you betraying her!” Alistair stood over Dorian. Hawke stood to cast a spell and found himself knocked back by a Smite. “Don’t try it.”

Dorian sat up, grinning. “Hawke, stand down. Alistair has every right to hit me. He thought he was defending the honor of the woman he loves. I wish I’d found someone who’d resort to fisticuffs if they felt I was being dishonored. I’ve never had a man punch a rival over me.”

“I came to tell you that I still love Beta and that I won’t give up on winning her heart back, only to find you with him,” Alistair’s fists were balled and his face was the color of a disembodied heart.

“I’m not with either of them,” Dorian slowly stood up. “Beta is a good friend, probably my best friend, but we are merely friends. Gus is court ing her, Augusts Pentaghast.”

“The Navarran prince? Marcus’ heir?” Alistair recalled seeing the man in question among Beta’s new companions.”

Dorian nodded. “He is enamored with Lissa, she… she won’t like me telling you this, but she still loves you. I wouldn’t give up on her yet. She won’t settle for merely being your mistress, though.”

“No, she wouldn’t,” Alistair’s fists unclenched. “So you and she…”

“You’re much more my type than she is,” Dorian admitted. “You are handsome, strapping, if you weren’t a king…”

“Oh,” Alistair now understood. “So she let me think she’d moved on and now I have another prince to worry about.”

“She wants to move on, but… from what I saw earlier, its obvious neither of you have,” Dorian recalled the kiss he’d seen in front of the fort. “I’m going to help you win her back, but only after you figure out how to get rid of that lowborn vapid whore you married.”

“She is the daughter of a teyrn,” Alistair objected.

“Her father was the child of farmers,” Dorian countered. “Everyone in Tevinter knows that. The MacTirs are a cautionary tale about social climbers back home.”

“I feel a bit disloyal, but… not as disloyal as that woman is,” Alistair decided. “She certainly is not what is good for me or Ferelden.”

“I suggest you talk to Varric and Sera. They always have ideas, usually bad ones, but they never fail to amuse,” Dorian suggested. “I should really get back to my guest,” he glanced back at Hawke who was leaning back in what he thought was a sexy pose.

“I’ll leave you to that,” Alistair turned and left. He was only a hundred feet from Dorian’s door when there was a motion from behind him. He turned to see one of his soldiers being held up by a large Qunari. A dagger of Ferelden make, but with the Inquisition seal on the hilt, was on the floor in front of him.

“He meant that for your back,” the Qunari informed him.
Alistair only vaguely knew the soldier. “Is this true?” The soldier was Ferelden; he wasn’t an Orlesian plant as far as Alistair could tell from a quick scan.

“Of course not,” the soldier protested. “Would you believe a Qunari over one of your own soldiers?”

“They don’t lie often,” Alistair had only known a few, but they didn’t practice to deceive. Well, he supposed their Ben Hassrath did, but not the rest. “I’ve known one who freely admitted to having murdered an entire family. He’s a war hero now. Life is strange.”

“What is the going on?” Dorian ran out of the room and saw the Iron Bull still holding up the soldier.

“It seems that a Ferelden soldier thought he’d play assassin,” Bull shook the soldier in question. “He was so intent on trying to shank his own king that he didn’t even notice me. He had the dagger positioned and was about to pounce. You’ll notice the Inquisition symbol on it, I do believe we were going to be framed.”

Alistair didn’t want to admit that he hadn’t heard the Quanari, either. “What do you have to say for yourself, soldier?”

“I…” The man choked. “I… really didn’t notice the Qunari sneaking around and I think that means we can’t trust him. That is all I’ll admit to.”

“You saved the king?” Dorian grinned at Bull. “My, you are a hero.”

“Let’s go question the man,” Bull continued to carry the struggling man half a foot off of the floor.

“What were you doing in this part of the Keep?” Dorian wondered as he joined them, Hawke was completely forgotten.

“I was coming to see you,” Bull coughed and juggled his prisoner around. “I see you had other company, though.”

“Oh,” Dorian smiled. He looked back at Hawke and the smile faltered. “Oh.”

Dinner turned into an overwrought affair. Alistair and Gareth ate with the Inquisitor’s inner circle, in a room obviously reserved for a private family’s meals rather than that of soldiers. Hawke and Commander Amell joined them. They sat at a long rectangular table. Elisabeta and Anders were the first to arrive for the meal.

“I still have the Grey Warden appetite,” Anders admitted. He sat down on her right side and began filling his plate. “I was also hoping… well, what should I do about Solona and Hawke? I thought his feelings were real and… I think I might have feelings for her.”

“Have you told either how you feel?” She was one to talk. She was still in love with one man and determined to move on, but even that was increasingly hard. She was hitting the point where her heart and head were at war. Or was there a war for them?

“I need to talk to them, I know that,” he sighed. “Nothing will be resolved until I do. Do I
admit to Isabela what is happening? I don’t even know how to contact her, but I’m sure Leliana does.”

“She likely does,” Elisabeta heard more footsteps approaching.

Solona Amell walked in and sat beside Anders. “How are your rooms?” She asked him.

“Good,” he nodded. “Pounce-a-Lot jumped right on the bed and fell asleep. He doesn’t get enough cushiony spots anymore.”

“Was he the only one settled into your room with you?” She tried to keep her voice casual.

“He was, although…” He coughed. “Although… he might like it if you came and visited. I think he’s missing you a bit.”

“Does he?” She smiled at him. “Really? We just spent all that time together in a cave.”

“Um… true,” Anders conceded.

“Still… I should pay him more visits,” she blushed a bit.

The next to arrive were Dorian and Hawke. Dorian sat on Elisabeta’s left, while Hawke sat to Amell’s right. The food began to be delivered as Amell and Anders looked between their fellow mages. “So you two were together?”

“We…” Dorian stopped speaking when Alistair and Iron Bull came in together.

“We’ll need to question the soldier further, but someone paid him to put a dagger in the king’s back, a dagger with the Inquisition’s symbol on it,” Bull announced.

“What?” Elisabeta shot to her feet. She rushed to Alistair’s side and began to run her hand up and down his torso. “Are you all right?”

He gave her a boyish grin. “I am now. Bull was there to save me, don’t worry, Beta. He’s more personable and formidable than Sten was. I like him.”

“Is His Majesty on the menu now?” Gus walked in with Adrianna and Cullen.

“Someone tried to literally backstab our handsome Ferelden monarch,” Dorian stood up and gestured for Alistair to take his seat. “But our own valiant Bull saved him, with his powers of keen observation and fast reflexes.”

Alistair sat down beside Elisabeta and grinned at Bull. “If you aren’t careful, I’m going to woo him away from the Inquisition and make him my personal bodyguard.”

Elisabeta didn’t know whether or not she should mention that Bull was a member of the Ben Hassrath. She just sat down and grabbed her goblet, taking a deep drink. Someone had tried to kill Alistair. She wanted to send Bull and Zevran to hunt them down and kill them. “Who was it?” She didn’t notice Gus look from her to Alistair, sitting side by side, and back again.

“We don’t know, Boss, the soldier hired for the hit isn’t talking,” Iron Bull explained. “I have some ideas, though. I think we should write Red and talk to her about it.”

“I know that I don’t feel safe sending, His Majestiness back to Ferelden without extra protection,” Varric entered the room with Gareth. “Ostwick here told me all about the incident.”
“I’m sure he’ll be happy to stay in Skyhold until everything is settled,” Dorian suggested as he took a
seat across from Alistair and Elisabeta.

Gus sat down beside him. “Is he not safe in his own palace? Are Fereldan soldiers incompetent?”

“Apparently they’re homicidal,” Varric began filling his plate.

“I’m sure I’d be perfectly safe,” Alistair assured him, ignoring Gareth’s cough and kick.

“Uncle Marcus would likely be thrilled to send extra guards to Denerim as a gesture of friendship
between Navarra and Ferelden,” Gus offered. “I’ll write him tonight. I would hate for any monarch
not to feel safe in their own home.”

“Skyhold has its own standing army and a first rate Commander who could see to his safety,
though,” Dorian insisted. “It is also in a remote location. It is among the peaks of the Frostback
Mountains, whereas the Palace of Denerim is… well… in the middle of Denerim. We also have
Sister Stabbity Stab Kill Kill. She can find out who is trying to kill you before they succeed.”

“Yes, but she can go to Denerim to do that,” Gus insisted.

Elisabeta stopped with her fork midway to her mouth. “I can’t even get her to come and fight with
us. She’s the best archer I know,” she ignored the protests from Varric and Sera. “There is no way
she would leave Skyhold for Denerim Palace. Besides, she’d likely put a dagger through Anora’s
ribs on principle alone if she spends more than ten minutes with her.”

“That she would,” Alistair agreed. “It wouldn’t take ten minutes either.” She’d do it because
Anora’s present position hurt Elisabeta and he knew how much Leliana valued Beta.

“Then the Inquisition would be accused of regicide and Josephine would go insane trying to spin the
entire incident,” Dorian declared. “It would be pandemonium.”

“We can’t allow Ruffles to be driven to insanity,” Varric agreed. He rather liked the perspective of
King Alistair staying at Skyhold. Having the King and Tempest together might inspire an entirely
new book series.

“But…” Gus began to protest.

“He can’t stay near her,” Cole spoke from the doorway. “What if he steals her back? I’m only now
beginning to woo her successfully.” He paused, looked, around the table and then continued as he
picked up another’s thoughts. “Can I be near her when she is no longer mine? Desperate,
heartache. Just to be near the warmth of her sun, to be able to look upon the light and know that it
shines again. How can I not take this chance? Sweet Maker, but she is the most precious thing in
Thedas. She is my rose, she is my sun, and she is my starlight.” He stopped and started again as yet
another’s inner monologue intruded on him. “He is so much sterner now, where is my jovial mage?
He’s still so charming under it all, but now more hurt. I want to soothe the hurt, but he thinks I’m with… am I? Is he with anyone? The Hawke flits from flower to flower, he must know this.” He
looked around at them. “I’m sorry… I think I need a quieter place.”

Adrianna patted Gus’ arm. “It will be all right. Cullen and I will keep an eye on things. No one will
steal your girl away from you.”

“She isn’t as fickle or free with her affections as some,” Anders glared at Hawke.

“Oh, is that why he was in your room?” Bull teased Dorian, although there was a bit of an
underlying hurt in his voice. “I thought he was just getting a tour of the wine cellar with you.”
“I know he’s toured Broody’s wine cellar,” Varric’s voice was falsetto.

Solona sighed. “I can just see Fenris’ reaction when he learns that Hawke has tangled with a Tevinter Magister.”
Elisabeta has another nightmare.

Elisabeta wasn’t sure how she felt about Alistair visiting Skyhold. Yet by the end of dinner, he and Gareth were both making plans to stay there for a while. She had to admit that Leliana was the best person to uncover who had tried to kill him and he could still rule Ferelden, through Fergus, while there. She worried about him being so close, but she also worried about his safety as well. She knew that if something were to happen to him, it would shatter her heart further. It was he who had kept the darkness from consuming her, the memories he’d given her. They had been even more powerful than those of her family when it came to battling the Abyss.

She reminded herself that she needed to find someone new and make new memories with as she changed into her nightdress of soft white linen. She had found someone new, someone who wanted to give her new memories. She determined to let him as she crawled into bed.

She lay in the soft bed, falling asleep. As she drifted into the land of dreams, there was a sensation of lips on hers as she relived a recent kiss; not the kiss given to her by the man she should love, but the one she could never stop loving.

Darkness pressed all around, surrounding her, consuming her. There was no escape from the unending night, the night without stars or moon, just the frigid nothingness. It reached for her, trying to tear away her soul. She screamed in defiance and fear and Elisabeta found herself sitting up in her bed, shivering. She clutched the warm blankets around her and looked around. There was a sliver of moonlight coming in, but it wasn’t enough.

Then her door was thrown open and a figure stood in the doorway, the light from some hallway torch shining about him. He seemed to be a light onto himself. “Are you all right?” He finally asked.

“Alistair?” She held out a hand to him without thinking. “What are you doing here?” She wanted to beg him to hold her, she ached to be in his arms, but she refused to allow herself to give in to the urge to leap into those arms. She needed to be strong.

“I heard you calling to me,” he took the hand she hadn’t yet realized yet that she was holding out to him. He kept ahold of it as he sat down beside her and pulled her into those very arms she’d been yearning for.

“I…” She curled into him without thinking. She didn’t remember calling his name. Could she have done so in her sleep? Even if she had, he shouldn’t have been able to hear her from his rooms. She had one question that she could ask him. “How did you even know where my room was?”

“I followed your voice,” he ran a hand along her back and kissed the top of her head. “What’s wrong?”
She shook her head and then laid it against his shoulder. She didn’t want to resist him anymore. He was what had kept the darkness from consuming her before and she wanted to revel in his strength again. “It was a nightmare.”

“Tell me,” he urged.

“I was… I was in the Abyss again,” she admitted. “The darkness… it… it was so horrible. I was back there again, with that…”

“Shh…” He held her even tighter. “I’m here with you now. I don’t know how you survived being in that place, but I thank the Maker that you did and that He got you out of there.” He lay back against her pillows, still holding her. “I’ll protect you; let me protect you this time.”

She closed her eyes, cherishing the feel of being back in his arms. They were like a strongest armor around her, she felt safe for the first time in so long. Nothing could touch her when he was at her side. She listened to the sound of his heartbeat as she drifted back off to sleep.

Elisabeta reluctantly opened her eyes; she felt safe, content, blessed. She slowly became aware of the solid form curled around her and memory came back. Alistair had stayed with her through the night. Light now shown in the window, bathing the sleepy pair in its rays. She carefully turned so she was facing him.

He was still asleep his light eyelashes fluttering against his cheeks. The time weary king was gone and the hopeful young Warden shone through. She wondered how much her sacrifice had added to that weariness. She remembered seeing the reaction of his shade on Fort Drakon, the look of utter despair and anguish as he begged the Maker not to take her. She lifted her hand and noticed the leather cord around his neck, there was a ring attached. It was her ring. He was carrying her engagement ring with him, against her his heart. She glanced at her chest; the chain that she wore his ring on was in there. She’d taken it off when she realized he’d be staying in the keep.

She laid her hand against the ring and kissed him gently. He kissed her back, pulling her closer. When he lifted his head, he grinned at her. “Good morning, my love.”

“Thank you for staying with me last night,” she smiled back. She wanted to kiss him again, she wanted to… her heart and head warred with each other as she remembered countless mornings when they would snuggle together in their tent before continuing on their quest to end the blight. No, she corrected herself. They weren’t countless mornings; there were not enough of them. Countless mornings and nights together had been snatched from them by fate. Fate had taken everything from her. Andrashe had given her life back, but so much was still gone, so much was out of reach. She was lying next to a married man and no matter how much she loved him, she shouldn’t forget that.

“What’s wrong, dearest?” He smoothed her hair away from her face.

“Nothing and everything,” she sighed, sitting up. “I…”

“Hey, boss,” Iron Bull threw open her door. “Are we going to go slay that dragon today? “Oh… I didn’t realize… good morning, Your Highness.”

“I believe I am in the mood to go fight a dragon,” Elisabeta agreed. “Then we will all return to Skyhold.”

“How often do you have the nightmares?” Alistair asked as he climbed out of her bed.
“Often,” she admitted. “I’ll be all right… eventually. For now, I’ll go take my frustrations out on a high dragon.”

“You know I’m here whenever you need me,” he kissed the top of her head and left.
Elisabeta returns to Skyhold and makes some changes.

The large group that returned to Skyhold was met with excitement and apprehension.

Josephine came running out of the castle to greet the group. “I was hoping you were kidding about the Ferelden contingent. Did you really bring King Alistair back with you?”

“She did,” Alistair jumped from his horse and moved to Elisabeta’s side to help her down. Gus rushed to her side at the same time and the two royals glared at each other, while Elisabeta smoothly dismounted and patted Rowan’s neck. She reached into the saddle bag and drew Thorn out. Calenhad strolled faithfully behind her.

“How… why… I don’t know if everything is ready to have a king here,” Josephine turned to Cullen. “Are the men in place to protect him?”

“They are,” Cullen assured her as he helped Adrianna from her horse. She moved smoothly from the saddle, but let him take her hand and kept it in his when her feet were on the ground. “I’m aware of the situation. There was an attempt on the king’s life while he was staying with us at Caer Bronach.

“I suppose this means that we will have even more Ferelden nobles arriving,” Josephine sighed. “Lissa, I know you have extended an invitation to all of them to visit, but with the Orlesian nobles in residence as well, there have been… incidents.”

“Then send the Stinky Cheese Munchers home,” Elisabeta shrugged as she led Rowan to the stables. “I don’t want them here.”

“We need Orlais’ help,” Josephine ran after her.

“Yep, we needed their help during the Fifth Blight, too,” Elisabeta reminded her. “We still managed to kill an archdemon without them. Of course, I probably wouldn’t have died if they had helped.”

“We’ll have to soothe some feathers,” Josephine insisted.

“I guess it’s a good thing we have you, then,” Elisabeta patted her arm. She handed Rowan off to a stable boy and tipped him to ensure her horse had the best care. Then she continued toward the main hall. As she passed her group, she noticed Leliana rushing to Alistair’s side. The two old friends embraced.

“I hear you have a prisoner for me to interrogate,” Leliana looked around after she stepped back from Alistair.

“We do,” the Iron Bull spoke up. He gestured to the Ferelden soldier who sat, tied up, in the middle of his former comrades. “I’ll take him to the dungeons for you. We can question him there. That does mean that Lissa will be the one to judge him.”
Leliana shook her head and patted the prisoner on the leg. “May the Maker have mercy on your soul.”

Elisabeta marched into the main hall, intent on the door that led to her rooms. She wanted a nice, hot bath and a nap. She glanced back at Alistair who was entering the hall, remembering how his mere presence seemed to chase her nightmares away. She was tempted to ask him to lie down beside her. No, that wasn’t a good idea. He was still a married man and she still had to find a way to move on. Sweet Maker, but she yearned to be back in his arms. He gave her a cheeky grin, as if he could read her thoughts.

“Inquisitor,” an irritatingly Orlesian voice interrupted her thoughts. “May I speak with you?”

“Who are you?” She looked around and was happy to note that now about a quarter of those milling around the main hall were in Orlesian dress, with bare faces. “How am I supposed to know who you are with that mask on your face? How do I know you are who you say you are?”

“This is the mask of my house, Inquisitor,” the Orlesian moved his hand in front of his mask. “That is how you know. I am a member of the house of Leloup.”

“Which member?” She challenged.

“Quen… Quentin, Inquisitor,” he stumbled. “I am the second born son of Lord Gerome. I just wanted to…”

Elisabeta had stopped listening to him. She noticed another masked figure approaching Alistair. This one held something metallic in their right hand. She pivoted on her heel and sped towards the figure, ripping off the mask that hid their features. A pair of startled hazel eyes with a scar above the left eyebrow stared at her. The mouth quivered as she reached for the mask.

“What is the meaning of this?” The woman stomped her foot. “You can not just remove my mask. That is the mask of the house of Badeaux and I…” the lip quivered again. “I need it. Give it back.”

“It’s true,” Raylee Nieves twittered. “Orlesians are helpless without their masks. “Why was this not discovered before they invaded our country?”

“You were approaching King Alistair carrying something,” Elisabeta grabbed Lady Badeaux’s wrist. The woman carried a metal fan. “Aha, a metal fan. I’m sure its sharp edges could do damage to him.” She found the very thought of Alistair being hurt by one of the Masked Marauder Monkeys unbearable and unacceptable.

“No, my lady,” Lady Badeaux lifted the fan in front of her face and began fanning herself vigorously. “It is… to keep me cool in this hot hall. Skyhold is stuffy and warm, have you not noticed?”

Elisabeta blinked at the woman as if she’d grown a second head while Raylee giggled again. “You think it’s hot in Skyhold? I’ll be sure to let the servants know that they should stop stoking the fireplace in your room.” She looked around at the rest of the Orlesians. “The rest of you remove your masks as well, there will be no hiding behind them in my home.”

“Surely this is a jest,” another of the Orlesians laughed.
“Who knew the Orlesians were so cowardly they couldn’t show their own faces,” one of the Fereldens laughed. “The bannorn must figure out how to use this to our advantage at the next Landsmeet.”

“It was a long journey back to Skyhold,” Josephine ran into the room. “Why doesn’t everyone go back to their business? Your Majesty, let me show you to your rooms and we’ll set about doubling your guards. The Inquisitor seems to think there are assassins behind every door.”

Elisabeta watched them leave before glaring at the Orlesians gathered in the room. Then she went to enjoy a nice long bath.

“You can not just order the Orlesians to remove their masks!” Josephine glared at Elisabeta across the war table.”

“Sure we can,” Elisabeta insisted. “They are used to hide facial expressions and could allow an assassin to sneak into Skyhold. Someone has already tried to kill Alistair.”

“Orlesian society is dependent on those masks,” Leliana backed Josephine, blanching at the disappointed look that Lissa flashed her.

“They are a security risk,” Cullen agreed with Elisabeta. “Lissa’s right. Pose it as such. How would the house of De Le Whatever feel if an assassin gained entrance using one of their masks? We can couch the order in such terms.”

“The Orlesians would be scandalized and we could lose their support,” Josephine stood her ground.

“We’ll lose every other country’s support if we seem to be kissing up to the Orlesians,” Elisabeta countered. “ Heck, you’ll lose my support. I’ll go head some other radical group. Do I have to remind you that my grandparents were killed by Orlesians, so were Alistair’s for that matter? We are not an Orlesian organization and I refuse to kiss their stinky butts.”

“I… it’s bad enough you ripped poor Lady Badeaux’s mask off, let’s not insult the rest of Orlais,” Josephine begged.

“My order stands,” Elisabeta hoped that might get rid of more of the vacuous Orlesians who just stood around Skyhold and gossiped.

“You could ruin everything we are building here!” Josephine objected. “Please, see reason.”

“What I see are a bunch of people hiding their faces, they could be anyone,” Elisabeta disagreed. “What you see as a fashion choice and playing a game, I see as a threat to those I love.”

“Love?” Leliana repeated. “Lissa, are you saying you still love…”

“I’m glad to hear you have decided you love Prince Augustus,” Josephine interrupted. “I was happy when I heard you two were courting, although that might interfere with your betrothal to Duke Gaspard. However, don’t let this new found devotion cloud your judgement.”

The Skyhold gossips had to be stopped. It didn’t help that Caitlin, one of the maids, had shown up to her room that morning with a tray. There was a plate with sausage and eggs on it, along with a hot tea from Navarra and a single rose. The maid had explained that the food was from Gus, but the rose was a gift from Alistair. He’d had the maids leave a rose in her room every day since he’d come to Skyhold. He had also sent treats for Calenhad and Thorn and bolts of Highever weave to her.
dress maker, to ensure she was dressed in proper Ferelden style. Gus had given her an old book and chocolates, as well as a rune stone from a dig he’d been on. Rune stones always reminded her of Alistair, who loved them. The gossips knew of the gifts from the prince, but the king was more subtle in his gift giving methods; besides, rumor said that he hadn’t courted any woman in over a decade. She realized what that meant.

“Lissa, are you even listening to me?” The exasperation in Josephine’s voice was evident.

“What?” She looked at the three expectant faces. “I’m not betrothed to Gaspard, despite what he might think.”

“So Leliana just said,” Josephine confirmed. “I was just saying that you needed to sit for your portrait.”

“Dorian’s done two portraits of me, just use one of those,” she insisted.

“We’re about to insult all of Orlais,” Josephine reminded her. “The least you could do is sit for another portrait.”

“Fine,” she relented. “What else do you have for me today?”

“Prince Sebastian of Starkhaven is offering his support of the Inquisition,” Josephine finally smiled.

“Despite Anders being part of our organization?” Elisabeta was surprised. “I was under the impression that he despised Anders and wanted to make him pay for that little incident in Kirkwall.”

“By ‘little incident’ I assume you mean blowing up their chantry,” Leliana shook her head.

“We haven’t exactly made it publically known that Anders is part of your inner circle,” Josephine admitted.

“Sebastian is going to have a royal fit when he does learn,” Cullen cautioned them. “He and Elthina had a… special… relationship.”

“Then we just don’t tell him,” Leliana decided. “I’ve heard rumors that Elthina and Meredith had a secret and very close relationship, I hadn’t heard of any such relationships with anyone else.”

“So we take Starkhaven’s help and hope they don’t realize who else is helping us?” Elisabeta considered it for a moment. “Fine.”

“We also need you to go to Val Royeaux,” Leliana announced.

“Lil, are you kidding with me?” Elisabeta had no idea why she would have to go to Orlais’ capital city yet again.

“No, one of my scout’s showed me this,” she handed Elisabeta an announcement about an upcoming hanging, the criminal being executed was a man called Mornay. “I have reason to believe that Blackwall will be there.”

“You mean the imposter who claimed he was a Grey Warden,” Elisabeta hadn’t heard from the supposed Blackwall since she had revealed that she knew he was lying.

“Yes,” Leliana confirmed. “I have suspicions of whom I believe him to be, but I want to see if you can get him to confess first.”

“Why do I get the feeling that you’ve suspected who he truly was before he left and you’ve just been
“waiting to spring this special knowledge on us,” Elisabeta narrowed her eyes at her friend.

Leliana struck a pose of pure innocence. “I wouldn’t do something like that, Lissa.”

“Yes you would,” Elisabeta was sure of it. “Your secrets have secrets, I know you, Lil. It’s one of the reasons I love you.”

“True,” Leliana agreed. “Still, I need you to take care of this. Oh, and leave Adrianna behind when you do, we wouldn’t want our poor Commander pining.”

“I…” Cullen’s hand went to the back of his neck. “I mean…”

Elisabeta laughed. She knew the Commander was in love with Lady Trevelyan, even if he didn’t realize it was love yet. “We’ll be fine in Val Royeaux without her.” She turned to leave.

“Could I speak with you in private a moment,” Josephine glanced nervously at her co-advisers.

Elisabeta didn’t like where the conversation might go, but didn’t see a reason not to. “Sure.” She waited as Leliana and Cullen left. “What’s going on?”

“My family is in… well, this is embarrassing,” Josephine fidgeted. “We’re in a bit of a financial bind.”

“Are you coming to me for a loan?” The Couslands were wealthy, but this was coming at a surprise.

“Oh, no,” Josephine hurriedly waved her hands. She went on to talk about the Montilyet’s trade status in Orlais and how those trying to turn around their trade status were being assassinated. She needed Elisabeta to meet her at Val Royeaux and to talk to some annoying Orlesian noble. Even as Elisabeta left, she wasn’t sure why she’d agreed to the meeting. She decided to take Zevran to the meeting with her.

After the war table meeting and Josephine’s revelation, Elisabeta needed a drink. She was tempted to go to Alistair and curl up in his arms so he could soothe her, which just made her want a drink that much more when she reminded herself that she couldn’t go to him. When she entered the bar, she was greeted by several of the patrons.

Sera bounced up to her. “So which one are you really snogging, Lissa? Is it Gussy-Wussy or the Mighty Warrior King?”

“Neither, actually,” Elisabeta insisted. When Sera just zerberted at her, she laughed and shook her head. “O.K. I admit that I’ve kissed both of them, but nothing more.”

“I heard you slept with the king,” Sera revealed.

“Who…?” Elisabeta’s eyes narrowed and she looked to where the Iron Bull was sitting in his regular chair, nursing a pint.

“Don’t worry,” Sera jumped up on the bar and grabbed another patron’s drink. “He didn’t tell anyone else, he knew I’d keep your torrid secrets.”

“We didn’t… he just held me while we slept,” Elisabeta sat on a bar stool and put her head down, holding her hand out. Cabot placed a wine flute in it.

Sera was quiet for several moments, eyeing Elisabeta speculatively. “So you were there
and…lady and dangly bits were there, but they didn’t…. mush there. Least you could teach him what to do with a peach, how boring… or sickeningly sweet. I’m not sure which one yet. I mean, you’re supposed to…” She made a gesture, making a circle with her right thumb and index finger and moving her left index and middle finger through it. “That’s it, innit? Not that I would know, I don’t go for the dangly bits. Ya didn’t though. His dangly bits do work don’t they.”

“They used to work quite well,” Elisabeta assured her. “He… well, our first time together… he came to me and he was sweating. He told me he wanted to spend the night together and didn’t want to wait any longer. He’d wanted everything to be special, but was afraid there wouldn’t be time for special and couldn’t wait any longer. He wanted to make sure I wanted that, too.”

“Did you,” Sera saw the blush and laughed. “So he knew how to use his crown on you then.”

“Yes, very much so, he… does quite well in that department,” she assured Sera. She wondered if he had been using his ‘little crown’ on anyone else and felt a surge of jealousy. She was ready to grab her swords lob the heads off of every woman who had dared take her place in the arms of the man she loved. Sweet Maker, she needed to get her emotions under control. He wasn’t hers anymore, no matter how much they both wished differently. She stood. “Excuse me; I think I need to have a word with your gossip buddy.”

“Before you go, I need a favor at your big table,” Sera declared. She went into detail about nobles who were marching their soldiers through farmers’ crops.

It took another twenty minutes to extricate herself from Sera. Elisabeta stood before the Iron Bull. She opened her mouth to demand to know who else he’d mentioned finding her and Alistair in the same bed together but he spoke first. “It’s good to see you, Boss.”

“It is?” She had just come from three different people wanting favors from her. “What do you want me to do?”

“Nothing,” he held up his empty hand. “Well, something. Just come and have a drink with my company tonight. I want you to get to know my boys and meet my team.”

She didn’t see anything wrong with that. “So it won’t just be Krem?” She talked with Cremsius Aclassi more than once. She often went to him with jobs for the Chargers. They’d been unable to recover records and some goods, but not her harp. Unfortunately, there had been no survivors left when they got there.

“Nope, there will be a big group, you’ll like most of them,” he assured her.

“Very well,” she agreed. “I’ll be back tonight. Meanwhile, let’s talk about idol gossip and who you might be sharing with your friends.”

After leaving Bull, Elisabeta climbed up the stairs of the tavern to the top floor that Cole had converted into his own space. She’d reminded him that Skyhold had plenty of space, but he insisted that the top of the tavern was where he wanted to be. The music was soothing and the people were there to drown their sorrows or relax.
He nodded to her as she approached him. “He was hungry and the colorful food looked so good. They said that it was only for children, but it was they, not the food, that was deceitful. They should have let him have some. Why wouldn’t they let him have some of the colorful food? The bunny was so hungry.”

“I don’t know,” she admitted.

“You… you don’t come and see me a lot,” he fidgeted in front of her. “You let me go on your journeys, but you… you think you are hurting me… because I can’t fix you.”

“I don’t want you picking up on my memories of the Abyss,” she admitted. “They’re… not pleasant and, well, I don’t even like thinking about it.”

“Darkness all around, but your mind clings to him, he will see you through. You ride on your father’s shoulders as he tours your home. Your mother holds your hands as she teaches you to steer a ship. He smiles at you, he tells you that you are brave and beautiful; the smile makes your heart flutter. He holds you and you are safe, you remember that feeling and your mind stays safe from the nothings. He held you and kept the memories away, when I could not do so. Why do you not let him hold you more often?”

“It wouldn’t stay to just holding,” she tried to explain.

“Because you want more or because he does?” Cole questioned.

It was strange to see someone else who could into your desires. “Both.”

“What can you tell me about the man who pretended to be Blackwall?” She pressed.

“His dagger was bigger than mine,” Cole pouted. “He was afraid of questions about the Grey Ones. When you revealed that you used to be one of the tainted, he panicked and left. He knew his mask would slip and his true being revealed. He… dark memories, shame, horror… he didn’t mean for that to happen. Anger, betrayal… he wants to make amends, but to do that he must die and let someone else live.”

“I’m going to Val Royeaux, leaving tomorrow, and you’re coming with me,” she declared.

“Oh, good,” he approved. “I can buy a new hat while we’re there.”

Elisabeta had to admit that she liked Bull’s Chargers. They were an eclectic group who were loyal to each other and had found their niche in the world. She thought about Dalish, who tried to claim to be an archer, rather than the mage she obviously was. Dalish, which was obviously not her real name, had informed her that many Dalish clans exiled their mages. The Keeper chose a first and the other mages were traded to other clans, but if there were no openings in other clans, they were thrown out into the world on their own. She was sure there was something the Inquisition could do for them. If there were not, she would go to Fergus. Highever could use an army of elven mages, she could envision what would have happened if they’d had a secret army of mages when Howe had massacred the Couslands. How many of their people could have been saved?

She was also disturbed by Skinner’s revelation that when Orlais’ chevaliers graduated, they tested their new blades on the elves in the alienage. Something needed to be done about that. She would bring it to Leliana, but for now she knew she’d have to wait and watch. It made her trust those chevaliers even less now.
She passed the practice ring in the middle of the courtyard and smiled when she realized that Adrianna was in there with Cullen. The archeologist was teaching him how to use a whip as a weapon.

“Why do I have to wear this hat?” Cullen was questioning, although he looked quite dashing in the hat in question, which was similar to one that Adrianna liked to wear when working. It was brown and had a large brim.

“Because you look adorable in it,” was Adrianna’s answer. “Plus it will protect your head if you pull the whip back wrong. I wouldn’t want you getting anymore scars on that handsome face of yours. Now, do I argue with you when you tell me how to hold a shield?”

Elisabeta continued on from the lovebirds. They really were quite adorable. It reminded her a bit of falling in love with Alistair. She’d been madly in love before realizing it, too. She went back to her room and pulled out her harp. It was too large to just move anywhere in the castle, but she found a couple of servants to move it into the main hall for her and set it before her throne.

It was late and there was barely anyone in the hall, not that anyone ever complained about her playing. She began to play a sad melody. She opened her mouth to sing, but it was another voice that began to sing. She realized he was singing to her.

Let it be a true star
That shines for you
And if the darkness falls
Your heart will be true
For there’s a head a road
The will safely lead you home.

Though, darkness has come
From me you are not far from
Though darkness falls,
I will always heed your call

Even when the Shadows Call
And you lose your way
Know that I won’t let you fall
And continue to the light of day
Together the night we’ll overcome
For you have always been my sun
Though, darkness has come

From me you are not far from

Though darkness falls,

I will always heed your call

You are my sun and I won’t let you fall.

Elisabeta looked up at the singer. “What are you doing here, Alistair?”

“There’s a threat on my life, remember,” he sat on the floor beside the throne. “Leliana has been letting the prisoner fret. She goes to visit him once a day. She hasn’t asked him again who paid him to kill me. She just looks at him assessing and then leaves. She’s playing with his head. She’ll start questioning him soon. The guards say that he’s more scared of what you’ll do when you judge him.”

She nodded. “I meant what are you doing in the main hall right now,” she clarified.

“I heard you playing and couldn’t stay away,” he laid his cheek against the side of the throne. “I still remember how you’d play at night when one of us had one of those Blight induced nightmares,” he reminded her.

“Oh, yes,” she recalled. “I thought those were horrible until I started having nightmares about my time in the Abyss. Now I miss seeing the archdemon a bit.”

“I miss waking up next to you,” he admitted. “I’d gladly have the nightmares back if I could wake up and find you there afterwards.”

“Anora isn’t there when you have nightmares,” she absently began plucking at the strings of her harp.

“Anora and I have shared a bed just once,” he lifted his head. “We… tried to consummate our union. Eamon kept reminding us that we needed an heir. I swear that any baby Anora gave birth to would be a coldblooded creature,” he gave an exaggerated shutter. “The first time we tried, I kissed her and closed my eyes, trying to pretend she was you. The smell was wrong, though, and the feel. There was no spark, either. It was like kissing a fish. I don’t know why she’s so successful at seducing ambassadors and nobles. I fumbled for about two minutes, rolled off of her and told her goodnight.”

He really had never had intercourse with Anora? Elisabeta found that utterly delightful, but it didn’t change the fact that he was legally married to her. “How did she take that?”

“She seemed indifferent,” he recalled. “We tried again, but the second time we didn’t get past the first kiss. She declared that she had a more willing partner waiting for her to return and I told her to go bang the cold corpse that was likely decomposing on her bed. I swear a cold corpse would be a warmer bed partner than she would be. Not that I’m planning to ever find out,” he quickly added. “What about you? I hear you’re seeing the Navarran prince. Have you…”
She wondered if he really wanted an answer if it had been affirmative. He must know that she wasn’t one to just jump into bed with someone. “We have kissed,” she admitted.

“How was it?” His voice betrayed him. He didn’t want to know.

“It was better than a dead fish,” she began to play a slow sonata. “Alistair, why are you asking me about this?”

“We’re friends, aren’t we? I want to know what is happening in your life,” his eyes were full and earnest. “I need to know that you’re happy.”

“There is a Tevinter magister who thinks he’s a god out there,” she reminded him. “It’s hard to be happy in those situations.”

“We had an Old God turned Archdemon to deal with before,” he reminded her. “But I was happy when I was with you.”

“So was I,” her voice was soft. She changed her song to one that was written by a Ferelden farmer. It was a lament to all of those killed defending his homeland when the Orlesians invaded. Alistair continued to sit beside her and Calenhad and Thorn left their warm hearth to join them. They stayed there, the Fereldens caught up in another war, until the sun rose yet again.
Elisabeta is forced to go back to Val Royeaux to save a former companion.

Val Royeaux still looked and smelled like a mediocre Orlesian whore, Elisabeta decided as she walked through the market. People were gathered around the gallows to glory in the death of the man they now thought beneath him, because of his crimes. She wondered how many of them had done something just as bad and not been caught. It was Orlais; they had probably done something worse.

There were vendors wondering among the crowd. Off to the side were a juggler, acrobats, and a mime. She watched the mime for several moments. It was pretending to argue over prices with a vendor who wasn’t even there. Heck, the shop wasn’t there. Then it grabbed and invisible sword and began dueling the shopkeeper. It was a rather scary sight.

She watched as a man was brought onto the scaffold, his hands were already tied behind his back. A guard read the charges. “Cyril Mornay, for your crimes against the Empire of Orlais… For the murders of General Vincent Callier, Lady Lorette Callier, their four children, and their retainers you are sentenced to hang from the neck until dead.” He rerolled the scroll he’d been reading from. “Do you have anything to say in your defense?”

The condemned man just shook his head slowly, his despair and defeat evident to all who watched.

“Very well,” the guard nodded at two other men who grabbed Mornay’s arms and moved him to stand under the rope.

“Ah,” Solas spoke from behind Elisabeta. “Human justice.”

“They’re going to kill him!” Cole was shocked.

“That’s what we do with murderers,” Elisabeta continued to watch the scene unfold. “They can not bring those they killed back to life, so they too must die. I doubt the Dalish have anything more merciful,” she glared at Solas. “If they do, tell me now.”

Solas just fidgeted and looked away.

“Proceed,” the guard instructed.

The rope was place around Mornay’s neck and the condemned man closed his eyes, not wanting to see death’s stealthy approach.

“Stop!” A new voice rang out, causing Mornay’s eyes to snap open.

The man who had once claimed to be Blackwall slowly walked up the gallows’ steps. “A Grey Warden,” the guard explained, causing the crowd to gasp.

“That’s no Grey Warden!” Elisabeta shouted back at him. The crowd gasped again. They
were getting more entertainment than they had bargained for.

“This man is innocent of the crimes laid before him,” Blackwall declared to the crowd. “Orders were given and he followed them like any good soldier. He should not die for that mistake.”

“He followed the shite orders,” Sera pointed out to her companions. “It was his own shite actions.”

The guard turned on Blackwall. “Then find me the man who gave the order.”

“He obviously is!” Elisabeta shouted. “I already said he isn’t a Grey Warden. This is not Warden Blackwall.”

“No, I am not,” the imposter agreed. “I have never been Warden Blackwall. I left the Inquisition when the Inquisitor revealed that she could see through my deceit. Warden Blackwall is dead and has been for years. I assumed his name to hide, like a coward, from whom I really am.”

“You,” now Mornay recognized him. “After all this time…”

The Man Formerly Known as Blackwall turned to him. “It’s over. I’m done hiding. I gave the order. The crime is mine. I am Thom Rainier.”

The crowd gasped as one again. Then people began to murmur and shout.

“Was that so hard?” Elisabeta wondered. “Could he not have just done that when I punched him? No, he had to run away.”

“He’s here now,” Gus laid a hand on her back. “That’s what matters. You punched him? Do you punch people a lot?”

“You haven’t noticed?” Sera zerbeted. “You haven’t punched enough people lately, Lissa. Why not?”

“I guess Loverboy,” Varric used his new nickname for Gus, “has had a calming influence on Tempest.”

“I don’t like it,” Sera shook her head. “More people need punching.”

“She did rip the mask off of an Orlesian a few weeks ago,” Cassandra pointed out. “That was fierce and entertaining to watch.”

“There are plenty of masks to rip off around here,” Sera noted.

They watched as the guards marched Thom Reinier away. As he walked solemnly down the stairs, it began to rain. The executioner took the rope from around Mornay’s neck. “Hey!” Sera protested. “He’s still guilty, too. Just following orders is not an excuse for murdering children.”

“You are as blood thirsty as these humans,” Solas noted.

“Are you saying I’m not human?” She stepped up so she was in his face.

“Uh… I… You’re…” Solas wasn’t sure how to answer that.

“Aren’t you going to go talk to him?” The Iron Bull looked to where the guards took their former companion to prison.
“I suppose I should,” Elisabeta looked after him. “Dealing with the werewolves was more pleasant, though.” She walked to the prison.

Gus followed for a few steps. “I’ll go with you. I’m a Navarran prince; I doubt they’ll keep me out.”

“You just want to stop me from punching Not-Blackwall again,” she continued walking towards the prison.

“I want to be by your side,” he took her hand.

“Does that mean I get to punch him?” She didn’t take her hand from his.

“It’s best if you don’t,” his voice was patient. “The guards would frown at that.”

“They are Orlesian,” she conceded. “That means they’re no fun.”

Elisabeta was surprised when the prison guards didn’t even try to stop her from walking by and into the prison. She remarked about it to Gus.

“You are the Inquisitor,” he reminded her.

“Yes, but how do they know that?” She looked at the guards executively. “I don’t exactly have a sign on that says ‘I’m the Inquisitor, ask me how’ and you’re holding my left hand, so they can’t see the Mark.”

“Um…” Gus looked at them and shrugged. “We’re in Orlais, nothing makes sense.”

They walked down a long corridor and a few sets of stone stairs, descending into the belly of the Orlesian prison. They found Thom Reinier sitting on a bench in one of the iron barred cells.

His head was down, staring at the floor, his expression was a mix of despair and resolve. After several moments, he spoke. “I didn’t take Blackwall’s life, I traded his death. He wanted me for the Wardens, but there was an ambush; darkspawn. He was killed. I took his name to stop the world from losing a good man.”

“He wasn’t a good man,” Elisabeta disagreed. “He ordered his men not to go into Ferelden to fight the Blight. A lot of people died because of him, I died. I do not mourn his loss at all. I just had a problem with you lying to me.”

“He was a good man,” Thom insisted. “He… he really let the Blight go on unchecked?”

“He did,” Elisabeta confirmed. “Leliana has a copy of the orders that he gave his men. He bowed to Loghain’s bullying. For all I know, they were two peas in a pod. Because of men like him, Ferelden was left with two Grey Wardens to fight against the archdemon and the Blight. Because of him, I had to make the killing blow against the archdemon and my soul was almost destroyed.”

“Your soul was almost destroyed?” Gus put an arm around her. “You never told me that.”

“I was in the Abyss,” she shook her head, not wanting to discuss it with him.

“He wouldn’t have let another die in his place,” Thom insisted.

Elisabeta grabbed the bars of cell and shook them. “I died in his place!”
“You saved your friend,” Gus gently pulled Elisabeta back. “That took a great deal of courage.”


“Mornay and the others were not brave enough to question your orders and do the right thing,” Elisabeta tried to step forward, but Gus put an arm around her waist. “Sera’s right, they are guilty for the blood on their own hands. If I had ordered you to kill the Guerrins, including any children they might have when you were part of the Inquisition, would you have?”

He looked at her in shock. “I know you would never do such a thing.”

“Are you?” She didn’t mention that she still hadn’t let Zevran kill Anora yet, no matter how tempting it was. She just wanted that woman away from Alistair. “Would you have done it?”

“No, I’ve learned my lesson,” he assured her. “But you wouldn’t…” He looked over at Gus. “One moment of courage will make up for giving the order. Why are you two even here?”

“You need to know that you aren’t alone in this,” Gus answered.

“I came for answers,” Elisabeta countered. “I want to know why you chose to take Blackwall’s identity and who you really are now.”

“Don’t you two understand?” Thom stood up. “I gave the order to kill Lord Callier, his entourage, and I lied to my men about what they were doing! When it came to light, I ran. That’s who I am! Those men, my men, paid for their treason while I pretended to be a better man. This is who I am! A murderer, a traitor… a monster.”

“All right,” Elisabeta nodded. “That’s what I needed to know. I’ll just return to Skyhold, I guess I dragged myself out to this Maker forsaken city to say goodbye.”

“Lissa,” Gus shook his head and sighed. “You’re better than that, I know you are, dearest. Blackwall, I know you’re more than you say you are. You must have faith in yourself. We’ll get you out.”

“He doesn’t want out,” Elisabeta pulled away from Gus’ hold.

“I don’t want out!” Thom agreed.

“See,” Elisabeta thrust a hand in his direction.

“We’ll discuss it over dinner, darling,” Gus took her hand again as they ascended the stairs again.

Elisabeta’s eyebrows rose. Did he suddenly expect to partner her in the Inquisition? That wasn’t going to happen. There was too much at stake to let someone try to step in and influence the Inquisition’s decisions. “You want to discuss what I will decide as Inquisitor?”

“No,” he brought the hand he was holding to his mouth and kissed it. “I want to discuss Lissa’s decisions. I want to discuss you as you, not as some holy leader. I hope to someday be an integral part of your life.”

He what? She had known that their courtship might lead to marriage. He was a good match; it wasn’t his fault that her heart yearned for someone else. She glanced back down towards the cells as a thought came to her. “I’ll be right back, wait for me.”
“Don’t punch him,” Gus pleaded.

“I won’t unless he really deserves it,” she assured him. She walked back down the stairs and to the cell where Thom Reinier languished. “I have more questions.”

“You came back without your new boyfriend,” Thom observed. “If you’re planning to punch me, go ahead.”

“I think you’re beating yourself up harder than I can,” she conceded. “I had a couple more questions that I didn’t want Gus to hear.”

“You want me to be your boyfriend now?” He made an egregious guess. “I don’t think you truly know me and that prince seems really fond of you.”

She glanced back over at the stairs. Her new prince was already hinting at marriage and here she was, more worried about her king. “You admire the Grey Wardens greatly, don’t you?”

“They have an honorable purpose and help those in need, despite what you think about Blackwall,” Thom declared. “They fight for all of Thedas.”

“They are needed,” she agreed. “Were you aware that the King of Ferelden is also a Grey Warden?”

“I am,” he nodded. “He helped to defeat the archdemon.”

“I couldn’t have done it without him,” her voice grew quieter. “Someone is trying to kill him. Your life could still have meaning, think about it.” She went back up the stairs.

As Elisabeta and Gus emerged into the guard room of the prison, they found Cullen waiting for them.

“You left Skyhold?” Elisabeta’s jaw dropped.

“You left Adrianna behind?” Gus looked around for his friend.

“She’s making reservations at L’escargot Lent,” his cheeks pinked. “She said that we weren’t going to come to Val Royeaux, deliver Leliana’s report, and then just go back to Skyhold. I was going to just hand you this report and have you tell me what you decided, but she… We had a talk while we were at Skyhold. I know I should be focusing on the Inquisition, it’s what’s important, but she…”

“What good is saving the world, if you sacrifice what will make you happy while you do so? I sacrificed to save who I love; I don’t regret loving him or what we were able to have before I died. Don’t turn away from a gift from the Maker,” she would have hated herself if she had pushed Alistair away because of a Blight.

He nodded. “She had to make the first move and has chastised me for it since,” he coughed. “Anyway. She insisted that we have a nice dinner together and…find time to be alone. Several people at Skyhold talked up L’escargot Lent when she asked around and she is now off making reservations. Anyway,” his words grew faster. “I have Leliana’s report on Thom Rainier.”

“She already knew who he was, didn’t she?” Elisabeta grabbed the report. “She isn’t supposed to be keeping secrets from me.” She would have a work or two or three with Leliana later. “Give me the overview.”
“It looks like our friend was once a respected captain in the Imperial Orlesian Army,” Cullen revealed. “Before the civil war, he was turned, persuaded to assassinate one of Celene’s biggest supporters. He led a group of fiercely loyal men on this mission and then told them nothing of it. His men took the fall for him. A few lucky ones, like Mornay, managed to escape.”

“You sound like you admire him.” That surprised her.

“Coming here to save Mornay was very brave of him,” Cullen conceded. “Few would have had the courage to trade their lives for one of their men’s.”

“This was at least educational,” she nodded.

Cullen let out a long sigh. “What do we do now? Black… Rainier has accepted his fate, but you don’t have to. We have resources. If he’s released to you, you may pass judgement on him yourself.”

She had a few ideas, but wanted to hear Cullen’s first. “If it were up to you, what would happen?”

“What he did to his men under his command was unacceptable,” the anger in Cullen’s voice spoke of how good of a commander he was for the Inquisition and how lucky she was to have him. “He betrayed their trust, betrayed ours. I despise him for it. And yet he fought as a Warden, joined the Inquisition, gave his blood for our cause. And the moment he shakes off his past, he turns around and owns up to it. Why?”

“Perhaps Andraste has paid him a visit as well or my punch finally knocked some sense into him,” she suggested.

“Saving Mornay took courage and perhaps faith,” Cullen conceded the possibility of divine intervention. “I can’t tell you want to do, though.”

“Get him out,” Elisabeta ordered. “I have plans for him.”
Gus takes Elisabeta on a picnic.

The sun was setting as Gus led Elisabeta into the gardens. He carried a large basket, lined in soft white linen. Couples walked along rows of blossoming trees and blooming flowers. The pair talked quietly as they walked along.

At one point, he pulled her into the lover’s alcove. It was so exposed to those in the gardens that it was apparent that any who ducked in there wanted to be seen together. Still, he moved in for a kiss. She responded warmly to the kiss, but then pulled away. “I think we have company.”

Sure enough, a drunken Orlesian couple stumbled in, their masks askew. “Oh, Dimitri,” the woman breathed. “We are hardly alone, it will be so scandalous.”

The man laughed. “Lydie, your reputation is safe with me; you know how much I care for you.”

“That’s what you told Monique,” she protested, but let the man back her into a corner. Elisabeta’s eyes widened at what else he was letting her do. “Yet just a week later, you two had split. Her reputation is in tatters.”

“She’ll recover,” Dimitri assured her. “Let’s think about us, not Monique and her ruined prestige.”

“Why don’t we go and have our picnic,” Gus agreed. “I wouldn’t want you to end up like poor Monique.”

“I would hope my reputation is not so easily besmirched,” she shook her head. “I have deeper and darker secrets than not being a chaste virgin. You do know that I have…” Was Gus still expecting an unsullied wife? She had been raised in a world where it was expected of noble women and she had been chaste when her castle was ambushed and she was forced into the Grey Wardens. However, she’d gladly lain with Alistair during the Fifth Blight, even before they were officially engaged. She… well, she’d loved him. She’d loved him more than anything and gladly gave him her heart and more. She still loved him more than anything, but it didn’t matter anymore.

“I know,” he assured her. “Although, you are obviously not the type to fall for Dimitri’s stupid game.”

“He is an amateur compared to Zevran and I resisted him,” Elisabeta smirked at the memory of some of Zevran’s attempts to woo her during the Blight. If she hadn’t been so attached to Alistair, he might have succeeded.

“Josephine sure hasn’t,” Gus grinned. “Have you realized that she thinks she’s being discreet? He doesn’t seem to have a discretionary bone in his body.”

“He can be sneaky,” she assured him. “But that is usually when he’s going to kill someone. Although… he isn’t always the best at being stealthy then, either, I managed to turn the tables on him
and he was robbed by street urchins once. Later, he said that he knew their game and let them rob him."

“You’ll have to tease Josephine about her un-Antivan display of obviousness when you meet her and that count of hers tomorrow,” Gus spread a blanket on the ground and set the picnic basket down. He opened it and began distributing silver and food. “I… he looked into her eyes. I’ve mentioned that my intentions toward you are honorable. I want you to… Let me start over. You are bright, beautiful, brave, and your pedigree is one that makes you a suitable wife for any king.”

“Gus…” She wondered if he knew about her coming back with magic. She might just keep that a secret. She didn’t want it interfering with her future and only those closest to her knew she was channeling the magic through her weapons.

“Let me continue,” he took her hands. “I love you and I think you’ll come to…”

“There they are,” Adrianna’s voice interrupted them. “See, I told you they’d be here.”

“We could just go to the café for dinner, Adie,” Cullen was pleading. “We don’t have to interrupt them. I doubt they have enough food for two people.”

“What are you doing here?” Gus looked up at his friends.

“Do you know that L’escargot Lent serves snails and halla?” Adrianna sat down on the blanket. “They call the halla their ‘living dangerously and rabbit life’ food. I wouldn’t be surprised to find they actually had elves on the menu.”

Cullen shuddered. “Don’t put that thought in my head. After looking at that menu, I wouldn’t doubt it though.”

“Can the Inquisition do something about that?” Elisabeta thought for a moment. “I think we should start a smear campaign against the restaurant and their owners.”

“That seems like it is a waste of our resources,” Cullen protested.

“It will be fine,” Elisabeta waved off his concerns. “One thing you learn as a noble; a little talk costs nothing.”

“We need to do something,” Adrianna insisted. “What if they really are serving elves? They are Orlesians; I wouldn’t put anything past them.”

“Fine, talk to Josephine and Leliana,” he conceded. He grabbed a grape from the basket and plopped it into Adrianna’s mouth. “Sorry to intrude on your picnic, but we couldn’t stay at the restaurant.”
Shopping in Val Royeaux

Chapter Summary

The Inquisitor and her inner circle go shopping.

Elisabeta was up early her second day in Val Royeaux. She doubted that any of the shops were open, but she’d been dreaming of being in the Void again. This time, a portal of light had opened and Alistair had appeared. He was floating, dead, with a large dagger in his back. She could hear Anora’s laughter. She kept reaching for him, but couldn’t. Something had grabbed her ankle and was holding her back. She’d woken calling his name.

Now she ran a silver comb through her hair. She began plaiting it in a long reversed braid and then thought better of it. She was going shopping and meeting some Orlesian count. Instead, she did a half Orlesian braid in the front and let the rest of her curls fall. Then she reached into her pack and placed the metal rose twisted circlet that Alistair had given her behind the braid. She dressed carefully and then went down for a breakfast. Dorian and Anders were going to meet her to do some shopping.

Cole was sitting with the two men. He looked up as she approached. “He left his flower on the beach. He didn’t want to; he wanted to keep her with him always. She was the bad wolf who was there to protect him and he her. His rose was gone, though.”

“It’s all right kid, maybe he found his rose again,” Varric also entered the room.

“Are you two coming with us?” She was surprised.

“You want to find a new pair of shoes for the nightingale, just because it will make her happy” Cole nodded.

“It will be fun,” Varric assured him. “I plan to find some more quills and ledgers. Perhaps a present for Bianca.”

“You do love your crossbow,” Anders murmured.

“Speaking of love, how is Solona Amell?” Varric teased.

“I don’t know,” Anders’ shoulders drooped. “She’s back at Skyhold with Hawke. He… well, I must admit that I did have feelings for him as well, but he…”

“Perhaps you should tell them both how you feel,” Cole suggested. “Then everyone will know and you can talk about the things.”

“It isn’t that easy,” Anders shook his head. “I… I understand that Hawke can’t… settle… with me, but what if he wants to with Solona? I thought he was with Isabela, but he is…”

“He is hurting and looking for a way to keep away his demons… not his Fade demons, but… darkness… Bethany, sweet Bethany, and mother, father, the blood. There was so much blood and destruction. He kept trying to stop it, but it kept getting worse and worse. His nightmares aren’t as bad as Lissa’s, but they are troubling and keep him awake. He wants to sleep, a warm body helps,”
Cole revealed.

Elisabeta thought back to the night in Crestwood when she’d slept in Alistair’s arms. It had helped. She wondered if she could feel that same comfort with someone else. Could Gus provide a place of rest in the darkness?

Elisabeta found herself spending more than she’d intended. At first she was focused on gaining materials and supplies to keep her inner circle well outfitted and in top fighting form. She also was resupplying basics, like a silver comb and scented soaps for her bath. Then she’d begun to find other items.

She found a pair of blue satin shoes the exact color of Leliana’s eyes. It had embroidery, sapphires along the buckle, and the most ridiculous pointed toes. She was sure her friend would love them. She also stumbled on something she could not resist buying for Alistair. As she hauled it around, she felt a pang of guilt. She was supposed to be courting with him, or at least letting Gus court her.

She went to a few shops that might have items. She found some old, polished rune stones. She supposed an archeologist would like them, yet she remembered how much Alistair loved them. He’d been so delighted the first time she’d given him one. It was as if no one had given him a present before, which made her want to do it more often. Almost before she realized what she was doing, she’d purchased three of them to give to her king. She finally told Dorian, Anders, and Varric her problem.

“What?” Dorian drew the word out, emphasizing his mock surprise. “You are buying presents for your hot king and just now remembered that you have a boyfriend who might like some attention and trinkets from you?”

She smacked his arm. “Yes, that is pretty much the situation. Dorian, I think he wants to marry me and I know that he would make a good husband. Our union would be beneficial to both Navarra and Highever; it would even be good for Ferelden, as Navarra is on the other side of Orlais. He’s kind, considerate, and funny, he makes me laugh. I mean, he isn’t as funny as Alistair, but few are.”

“Kingly is married, Tempest,” Varric reminded her. “He isn’t an option for a husband. “Gus seems to care about you and he’s a good guy. Give him a chance, but don’t rush into anything.”

“He has been hinting that he plans to propose marriage,” she revealed.

“He hasn’t yet, though,” Varric pointed out.

Dorian bit his lip. “Did you know he and Adrianna are both excellent artists? I was already going to a couple of boutiques de materiel d’art. I have a few ideas of what you can get him. Something that says, I’m thinking about you without saying ‘Let’s run off and make babies together’.”

“Perfect,” she nodded.

“Maybe we’ll find something else for you to give your hot king,” Dorian mused. “I know if I were the only one his heart yearned for, that I would want to keep it that way. I would defy the Maker and the Fates for it.”

“The Maker brought me back from a living hell,” she reminded him. “I don’t think defying him is a good idea.”

“Maybe Alistair is one reason he brought you back.” Dorian looked at her through hooded eyes.
“Food for thought, Love, nothing more.”

Elisabeta was leaving *La Brosse Humide*, where she had picked up charcoal and sketch paper for Gus, when Dorian brought up the subject of her conflicted heart. “I understand that the very hot king went and married someone else while you were dead, but does it really have to be such a deal breaker to having a relationship with him. He loves you.”

“He’s married, Sparkler,” Varric reminded him.

“But he doesn’t have to be,” a charming Antivan voice interrupted the conversation. “It would look like an accident, my Deadly Hand of a God.”

“Zevran,” she smiled at him. “What are you doing…? Let me guess, you and Josephine have been enjoying a romantic respite in Val Royeaux. As Oghren would say, you were taking this time to practice for a hide the banger tournament?”

Zevran’s own smile faltered. “Have you discovered what happened to Oghren?”

“Leliana’s on it, but we’re sure he disappeared with the rest of the Wardens,” she explained. “I hope that when we find the Wardens, we’ll find him. Why would he have joined them after what happened to me?”

“He told me how brave and valiant you were until the end,” Anders remembered. “He wanted to be more like you.”

“I was dead,” she heard the bitterness in her own voice and didn’t care. “Why would he want that?”

“He honored your memory,” Anders assured her. “Although, Felsi thought he was just trying to ditch his responsibilities. He left his wife and baby.”

“He left Felsi? He left Felsi and *their baby*?” Elisabeta’s nostrils flared as she pressed her lips together. “After everything I did to get those two back together he went and… I’m going to have Leliana find her. Then I’m going to find Oghren and plant my fist into his unfaithful face.”

“Let’s go meet Josie first,” Zevran pleaded. “Then you can turn your delightful vengeance on whoever you like. Might I suggest Anora first? I have some ideas on how you can make it appear as if she were just clumsy. It could even look like she slipped getting out of the bath or had a boating accident.”

“As much as I would like to, I will not kill someone for merely marrying the man I wanted to,” Elisabeta wished she could justify doing just that. “Knowing Alistair, he’d be upset at us if we *did* do it.”

“Did you know that The Antivan Crows began as an arm of the Chantry. An order of monks grew and used herbs to “oppose” the rule of a tyrannical leader, and things grew from there?” Zevran enlightened Elisabeta. “It could be said that I am doing the Maker’s work by murdering Anora for you. Think about it, Lissa. I’m sure the Maker wants her dead.”

Josephine was waiting for them near the entrance of the Du Paraquette’s estate. “There you are. What is with all of the packages?”
“The Couslands are not of somewhat fallen fortune and, as Inquisitor, I need to ensure my team is well equipped,” Elisabeta shrugged. “Speaking of equipping my team, has the artificer arrived at Skyhold yet?”

“She will be there when you arrive,” Josephine assured her. “I see the materials to make new armor and weapon, but what about that?” She indicated Alistair’s present.

“It’s…” Elisabeta felt her cheeks warm. “It’s a present for Alistair. I saw it and thought of him.”

“There was a time I wished that you would think of me as often as you think of him,” Zevran lamented. “Now I have my little strawberry, though, he leered at Josephine who blushed and looked away.

“Um, yes,” she stuttered. “I’m happy to see that you are trying to play nice with the royals now and hope you we be so kind to Orlais. Perhaps you can pick up something for Empress Celene here or in Denerim the next time you are at the capital. That would be a nice gesture, to send royals something they can’t get in their own country. I’m sure we can figure something out.”

“You want me to buy presents for Empress Celene?” Elisabeta was pretty certain that her parents would come back and haunt her if she did.

Josephine thought a moment. “No, if you are to marry Gaspard, you wouldn’t want to send Celene presents. Not until the war is over.”

“I’m not marrying Gaspard,” Elisabeta knew she had told Josephine that already. “And he’d probably find it funny if I sent Celene a gift, especially from Ferelden.”

“I know that an alliance with Navarra would also be beneficial, but marrying Gaspard could add to Orlais’ strength and would solidify them as an ally of the Inquisition,” Josephine argued. “That is if he can smooth things over with his cousin. Perhaps you should agree to his proposal with that contingent made clear. We could draft a written contract that states if he is still in bad graces with Celene, the wedding won’t take place.”

“The wedding isn’t going to take place one way or another,” Elisabeta insisted. “Now let’s go meet this comte of yours.”

“My darling lemon, we’ve discussed this before,” Zevran slid his arm around Josephine’s shoulder. “You need to understand that Lissa will not make a marriage alliance for the Inquisition. She once told me that her parents had agreed to let her marry for love and that is what she will do. Perhaps you can try to use Cassandra or Leliana for such a match.”

“Why don’t we use you, Josie?” Elisabeta suggested as they waited for the comte’s butler. “You could make a match for us. I don’t know if your husband will mind that you and Zevran are making Bangers and Mash together, but you will figure it out.”

“You honor us, Inquisitor,” an overly dressed and pompous man greeted them. His mask marked him as a servant. The Comte will see you in the conservatory.”

“We’re coming with you,” Anders appeared, almost by magic, behind Elisabeta. The rest of her companions were with them.

“I’m sorry my lady,” the butler wrinkled his nose at her friends. “My instructions are for only Lady Montilyet and the Inquisitor only. The rest of you will have to wait right here.” He led the pair away. When the butler returned, he found the Inquisitor’s companions still waiting for him.
Dorian stepped forward. “Good sir, I don’t believe you know who I am.”

Josephine and Elisabeta sat across from the Comte at an ornate round table on a balcony overlooking the city. Elisabeta idly wondered what would happen if she threw the fop over the ledge.

“Thank you for seeing us, Comte Boisvert,” Josephine greeted their host.

“The honor is mine,” he swirled wine in a small gold goblet. “Please drink, eat. It is my honor to assist two distinguished guests.”

“Sure it is,” Elisabeta sipped the wine. “We appreciate your willingness to help the Montilyets.”

“The death of Lady Montilyet’s servants must weigh heavy on you,” the comte had decided. “You’ve heard of the House of Repose?”

“The assassin’s league?” Josephine’s eyes widened.

The comte casually crossed his legs. “My contacts obtained a copy of a document in the archive.” He slid the paper towards the ambassador. “It’s a contract for life.”

Josephine read the contract. “The house of Repose has hereby sworn to eliminate anyone attempting to overturn the Montilyet’s trading exile in Orlais.”

“This sounds typical of Orlesians,” Elisabeta leaned forward. “Who put the contract out?”

“The contract was signed by a noble family, the Du Paraquettes,” the comte explained.

“But the Du Paraquettes died out as a noble line over sixty years ago,” Josephine objected.

“Indeed,” the comte confirmed. “But the contract was signed one hundred nine years ago.”

“That is Orlesian logic, one step down from ogre logic,” Elisabeta objected. “How can a family continue to try to kill you if they died out? That makes feuds even harder.”

“The Du Paraquettes were our rivals,” Josephine explained. “They drove the Montilyets out of Val Royeaux. This contract was drawn up over a hundred years ago, but it wasn’t invoked until I tried to overthrow my family’s exile.”

“You say exile and Val Royeaux together as if it’s a bad thing,” Elisabeta lifted a piece of cheese to her mouth and then stopped, sniffing it. Only the Orlesians could mess up cheese.

“It is!” Josephine insisted. “Val Royeaux is a capital of trade. The revenue the Montilyets would receive would save my family.”

“Unpleasant thought it may be, the House of Repose is merely fulfilling its contractual duties,” the comte argued.

“Why don’t we just persuade the house that it isn’t worth their while to peruse this contract? Elisabeta suggested.

“The reputation of the entire guild is at stake!” Josephine was affronted by the question. “A contract is a contract. All Orlesian businesses live and die by their reputations. The guild cannot just toss aside an agreement on a whim of fate.”
“She’s quite right, Inquisitor,” the Comte agreed. “The House of Repose is doing what it feels is necessary by its standards.”

Elisabeta sat back and studied the others. “You’re all nutters. I’ll make sure these attacks stop, Josie, but no one should fear a family that has died out.”

“Thank you, Inquisitor,” Josephine leaned towards her. “I think I may know how. The Du Paraquettes still have descendants under the common branch. If we elevate them to nobility, a Du Paraquette could annul the contract on my life.”

“Why can’t the common branch just nullify it?” Elisabeta questioned. “They are still the same family.”

“No, it must be a noble,” Josephine continued her madness. “We will make them nobles.”

“That will take time, Lady Montilyet,” the Comte warned. “Time during which the House of Repose will be obligated to hunt you.”

Elisabeta narrowed her eyes at the comte and then glanced at Josephine who was giving her a similar look. Orlesians really were stupid. She nodded at the ambassador who leaned forwards and regarded the comte with an icy glare. “Will they now? You are exceedingly well informed. Your note to us said you’d heard rumors at best.”

“A bit of subterfuge,” he waved it off with a negligent hand. “The contract on your life is an ugly business, one the House of Repose deeply regrets. But this is Orlais; even an assassin’s word is his bond.”

Elisabeta laughed, leaning against the table as she let a bit of hysteria through. “Did you just…” She giggled some more. “Did you just use the words ‘Orlais’ and ‘bond’ in the same sentence? Are you suggesting Orlais has honor?”

“Lissa,” Josephine’s voice held a warning.

Elisabeta ignored that warning, they were lucky she didn’t try turning the Inquisition’s army on Orlais. Heck, she would have let Empress Celene die if it didn’t cause chaos that Corypheus would take advantage of. “Does Comte Boisvert even exist?”

“Absolutely,” the foolish assassin assured her who did not realize the danger in front of him. “The Comte’s offer to reveal the killers of Lady Montilyet’s messengers was genuine. So was his information, somehow. That’s an end to be tied up later.”

“Comte Boisvert slumbers in a nearby closet!” The assassin seemed to be insulted that Elisabeta thought him a stone cold killer. “Nothing more. The contract on Lady Montilyet’s life is so unusual; we felt the curtesy of an explanation was in order.”

Josephine looked shook at hearing the word’s contract, life, and Lady Montilyet used in the same sentence. “It is appreciated, monsieur.”

“Your idea to seek out the Du Paraquettes to revoke our orders is an interesting one,” the assassin assured her. “I wish you luck.” He stood, only to have Elisabeta slip out of her chair and intercept him.
“I did not come to shed blood today, Inquisitor, only to speak,” the assassin straightened his gloves. “Might I pass?”

“She only spares handsome assassins, who are very charming,” Zevran approached the rest of her party behind him. “You are a masked fop who is threatening my guava and works for an inferior guild.”

“Inferior?” The member of the House of Repose was offended. “Good ser, the House of Repose is the greatest, most honorable, house of assassins in Orlais.”

“Oui,” Zevran took on a bad Orlesian accent. “It is the best in Orlais. It is still nothing compared to the Crows.”

“The Crows are just a bunch of birds that flit from victim to victim, with no real honor,” the Orlesian assassin sniffed. “They would not honor a contract where they are no longer being paid.”

“That is correct, it is called being practical,” he pulled out a sword and then a dagger. “Just as killing all of those who threaten my blueberry and lives. You got my back on this, Lissa?”

“Of course I do,” she pulled out her swords. “He’s threatening my ally, he dies. It is only logical.”

The faux comte bowed. “As you wish.” He threw a smoke bomb, jumping up. When he landed, his mask and clothes had changed.

“I’m impressed,” Dorian twirled his staff. “I’ve never seen someone change clothes that quickly, not even when their wife was about to discover us.”

Two more assassins seemed to drop from the ceiling. One landed on his feet, another landed on his face, with two of Sera’s arrows protruding from his back.

The head assassin turned towards Elisabeta, only to have fire shoot from her sword, striking him. Excalibur then flashed out, separating his head from his body.

The third assassin took one step towards Elisabeta’s friends. Then was hit with an arcane blast and fireball. “Don’t burn down the comte’s home!” Josephine screeched. “The Orlesians would be most upset if we started setting estates in Val Royeaux on fire.”

“Relax, Josie,” Sera winked at her. “I’m sure you can put a spin on it if we do.”

“We’ll just blame Lady O’Leary’s druffalo,” Varric decided. “She has a farm right out of the city’s limits.”

“Let’s get back to Skyhold,” Elisabeta turned and left.

End Notes

Many thanks to my wonderful beta, Idunasapple.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!