The Fox and the Dragon

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Aleska Lavellan, Herald of Andraste, faces an unusual situation; a man who was supposed to be at the Conclave but wasn't, and who some think may have answers to what happened at the Temple of Sacred Ashes.

Anselm Trevelyan, spoilt and scandal-loving offshoot of Ostwick's royal house, is meanwhile discovering that no good deed goes unpunished. Still, at least one of his captors is pretty...
This work is the result of an AU collaboration with Mistress_Lavellan, featuring our two favourite OCs. We've had a lot of fun and laughs bringing them together and this is published as an experiment to see if anyone else enjoys them as much as we do. If there's sufficient interest then this will become an ongoing story.
The cells beneath the Chantry stank of stale human sweat and urine, the walls damp with condensation and the braziers doing little to stave off the perpetual chill. It all felt unpleasantly familiar to Aleska. It was strange to think that less than two weeks ago she’d been exactly where this man was, with the prospects facing her equally uncertain.

Watchful guards stood around as he knelt awkwardly in the middle of the floor, heavy iron manacles digging into his wrists. The restraints looked painfully tight; according to the captain, he’d managed to pick the locks on the previous pair and had been busy working on the lock of the cell door before they noticed. A piece of bravado more than anything else, even if he’d been able to slip out of the Chantry undetected there was no way he could have got far from Haven.

They’d stripped him of his clothes and gear, leaving him in undershirt and breeches. The bruises on his face and arms and the smears of fresh blood showed they hadn’t been too gentle in handling him. He’d certainly fared worse than she had, but perhaps Cassandra’s intimidating presence had more to do with that than any sense of chivalry.

The prisoner was younger than Aleska anticipated, possibly only a couple of years older than her and, despite the bruises, undeniably handsome; with light, reddish-brown, hair and alert green eyes now fixed intently on her. The black line of a tattoo emphasised the straightness of his nose and, beneath the stubble, she could see thicker lines defining the curves of a strong chin.

That was interesting. She knew that some humans marked their faces and bodies to indicate clan or religious affiliations – like the flaming sword some of the Templars wore on their arms – but she’d seen ones exactly like these once before; on Rylen, Cullen’s subordinate. She would need to speak to him afterwards, see if he had any insight into what they meant and the significance they carried.

The man laughed slightly as she stepped into the light, looking up at her with a half-smile and a glint in his eyes

“What’s so funny?” she asked, placing a small leather satchel on the table where it would be in his line of sight. It only held a few blades, enough to make him very uncomfortable if he didn’t come out with the answers they needed.

“Just thinking; if I’m going to be hideously tortured and put to a slow, painful, death – at least it’ll be by a beautiful woman…”

There was a ‘thunk’ and a quiet vibrating noise. The man looked down at the knife embedded in the floor between his thighs, the edge of the blade barely a fingers-breadth from his crotch

“Ah…” He glanced back up at her with a tilt of his head “Perhaps we should start this conversation over again?”

“Perhaps we should…” she agreed, coldly, leaning back against the table and folding her arms “Or the next one hits two inches further up; let’s begin with your name”

His voice was refined, educated, with a graceful Free Marcher lilt. He was nobility, she knew that for certain. His clothes and equipment were all the highest quality; the leather supple and finely
stitched, the curving lines of a Rune worked into the limbs of his bow - doubtless made especially for him. Some spoiled son of a Marcher Signor; used to getting his own way with charm, good-looks and a purseful of gold. There had been plenty like him at the Conclave; what Cassandra and the others wanted to know was why this one hadn’t been present on the fateful night. He’d been spotted at the Singing Maiden, throwing his money about like he owned the place, and vanished without a trace in the wake of the explosion – until a patrol spotted him in the Hinterlands, pulling one of his arrows out of a dead Templar. That struck her as unusual. If he did have anything to do with what happened, why was he sticking around taking potshots at rogue Templars when he could have been halfway to Jader? Something about this man didn’t quite add up. Aleska knew from experience how quick Cassandra could be in jumping to conclusions and that was why she’d wanted to interrogate him first – before one of Leliana’s experts peeled the skin off him strip by strip

“I’m Anselm…” he said, still smiling up at her hopefully “Will you tell me your name now? I imagine it’s quite lovely…”

“Anselm what…?” she could feel her irritation rising “You’re no commoner, that’s for sure, you have a family name – probably even a title…”

Anselm sighed heavily. The beautiful Elf with ice in her eyes was determined to remain unimpressed by his attempts to be pleasant, despite his uncomfortable situation. Whatever mess he’d got himself tangled up in wasn’t going to go away with a smile and a joke; honestly, he never really believed it would, but the attempt made him feel a bit better.

“Look, my family thinks little enough of me as it is. They wouldn’t thank me for tarnishing our good name further by getting hanged for… for whatever it is you seem to think I’ve done…” His shoulders sagged a little and some of the bravado faded from his voice “If you’d seen what those bastards are doing down in the valleys… you would’ve done the same…”

“What…?” Aleska straightened herself up a little “You think this is about those Templars you killed?”

He looked up at her with a puzzled frown.

“You mean it isn’t?”

“No, it isn’t…” she responded sharply, her temper fraying “You were at the Maiden, boasting about your ‘important role at the Conclave’ then you disappeared. I don’t need to spell out how that might look to certain people. Perhaps you should stop trying to get into my smallclothes and explain that while you still have some of your good-looks left…”

Anselm gawped at her in astonishment for a moment then laughed again

“At least you think I’m good-looking…” he flinched back as her hand hovered over a knife “Alright! Alright! I wanted a drink, a game of cards and a pretty girl on my… never mind… Haven seemed a better option than a Temple full of Mages, Priests and Templars. Once I stopped shitting myself after the place blew up and the sky tore open I decided to take the sensible option and clear out. I don’t know if you noticed, but there were demons all over the place and lots of people looking to take it out on someone. I didn’t fancy being their target…”

“I did notice it, now you mention it…” Aleska folded her arms again, at least they were getting somewhere. There was still the possibility this man was a clever liar, but his story was perfectly consistent with the impression she was forming “And yet you stayed around the Hinterlands, hunting Templars, why?”
Anselm grunted derisively

“T’m sensible, not a coward; and armed men attacking terrified farmers and their children because they might have given a loaf of bread to a Mage, well…”

Aleska had to admit this was unexpected. Perhaps he wasn’t entirely the spoiled, lecherous, brat he seemed to be…

“You support the Mages?”

Anselm looked at her cautiously for a moment then gave a sharp laugh

“I don’t support defenceless people being cut down in their own homes, or anywhere else, if that’s what you mean” he dropped his gaze to the floor and when he spoke again it was slower and lacking flippancy “I have family on both sides of this mess, some of them died up there. I couldn’t tell you who’s right or wrong but, whether you believe me or not, I don’t like seeing people get hurt…”

A quiet cough in the doorway caught her attention. The Dwarf, Varric, stood there beckoning her urgently. However he’d managed to get down here without being noticed, Aleska was sure he wouldn’t be interrupting unless it was important and the man, Anslem, seemed lost in thought for now. She turned to one of the guards

“Keep an eye on him, but loosen those manacles…” she nodded at the blood trickling down the prisoner’s hands “they’re cutting into his wrists…”

“I know who he is…” Varric said quietly as she closed the door “and you should have seen the look on the Seeker’s face when I told her…”

“Spit it out, Varric…” Aleska replied, running her hands over her face “It’s been a long day and he’s got a talent for getting on my nerves.”

“He’s Lord Anselmo Guillaime Montecaballo Trevelyan di Tresaquae…” Varric grinned, the polysyllabic Free-Marcher names and titles rolling off his tongue “Better known as Anslem to his friends and creditors, yours truly included among the latter. He’s the scandalous nephew of the Sovereign Count Boniface of Ostwick. The Trevelyans have had Ostwick in their grip since the Second Blight, and they’ve got fingers in every pie worth tasting from Rivain to Nevarra. There’s even a few branches of the family tree in Orlais…”

Aleska sighed as Varric leaned back against the wall, folding his arms with a satisfied smirk. The Lavellan Clan might avoid wandering too close to the great cities of the Free Marches – preferring to roam in the perpetually disputed borderlands between their territories and venturing into the towns and villages only to trade – but that didn’t mean they chose to remain ignorant of human affairs. The Count of Ostwick was known to be less openly hostile to the Dalish presence in the Marches than some other rulers, but the Marcher lords were proud and wilful – even by human standards – and quick to take offence at any slight, real or perceived

“Great! This is going to cause problems, I imagine…”

Varric shrugged, the smirk still creasing his face

“Look, if you ask me – which maybe you all should have at the start – that kid had nothing to do with what happened up at the Temple. He’s a cheerful loudmouth who’s too damn good at cards and keeps his brains in his breeches. The most he’s guilty of is having one too many aces in that last game of Diamondback…”
Aleska let out a long, slow breath. Varric’s estimation matched the opinion she’d formed, the only problem was how to deal with him now. The new-born Inquisition, and Clan Lavellan, faced enough enemies without adding another one needlessly to the list.

“So, what do suggest we do?”

Varric chuckled, brushing some imaginary dust from the shoulders of his coat.

“Letting him go with all his vital parts attached would be a good start. The Lady Ambassador is having conniptions, of course, although he’s not the sort to go crying to his uncle that the nasty Inquisition bruised his noble arse so you don’t have to worry about that. But he’s handy with that bow, and with a blade; it might be useful to have him around, at least until he pays me those fifty royals he still owes.”

The dwarf strolled off whistling cheerfully as Aleska squared her shoulders and walked back into the cells.

“Take the manacles off him…” she ordered.

Anselm gave her a vaguely hopeful look as one of the guards moved to comply with her instruction.

“You’re letting me go… or is this where it get’s really nasty? If it’s the latter, I do have a couple of sensitive spots – tickle them enough and I’ll probably tell you everything…”

“I already know everything… Lord Trevelyan…” Aleska snapped back, enjoying the sight of him flinching in surprise. “You’re a spoiled, pampered, boy who enjoys drinking, whoring and gambling - and thinks a few clever words will get you your own way in everything, but you do seem to have a shred of conscience and some skill at fighting. You can either get out of here and run back home, or you can stay and be of use for once in your life; your choice…”

“Well, when you put it like that…” Anselm tried to stand but his leg had gone to sleep, and he fell to one knee with a genuine cry of pain. Aleska grabbed his arm and helped him to a chair.

“Thank you” he gasped, stretching out his leg and massaging the calf to restore circulation. “and since you have such a high estimation of me I feel obliged to accept your most generous offer. I am at your disposal… my Lady”

“Good. Get yourself a bath and somewhere to sleep. The guards will return your gear. We ride down to the Hinterlands at dawn, let’s see if you’re as good with your bow as you are with your tongue…”

She cursed her words the moment they left her mouth and she saw the mischief in his eyes.

“Oh, I’m very good… with both…”
Aleska gives Lord Trevelyan his first real taste of life in the Hinterlands and finds out he might actually be of some use - if he can learn to fletch properly! Meanwhile Varric discovers that being around the two of them could be hazardous to his peace of mind.

The moon rose high over Haven, in the distance a distinctive wolves howl echoed through the valley sending a chill even down Aleska’s spine. Despite growing up within the Marcher forests she had never adapted to the wolves’ howl; intimidating and beautiful within the same breath, commanding both fear and respect.

Replaying the conversation she’d had with Lord Trevelyan within her mind, she couldn’t help but remember the distinctive tattoo upon his chin, *humans don’t mark their faces, not unless it was to signify something*, she pondered. Lifting her head, Aleska noted Knight-Lieutenant Rylen leaving Cullen’s quarters, her eyes adapted to the darkness well enough to catch the similar tattoo upon his chin.

“Knight-Lieutenant?” Aleska called after him, her walk breaking into a run. “Might I have a word with you please?”

“Herald?” Rylen spun around, unsure if he was dreaming. “I am at your disposal, my lady.”

Aleska smiled softly, she still hadn’t gotten used to people calling her ‘my lady’, despite not wanting to admit it to herself, the tone Lord Trevelyan ushered it sent a tremble through her body. *No, he is just a pompous, arrogant Lord. He wants you to play his game, they love the thrill of the hunt. Don’t give him the satisfaction*, she scolded herself.

“Your tattoo,” gesturing to her chin, Aleska tilted her head to the side. “Where did you get it?”

“That is a long story my lady,” Rylen laughed. “I don’t think you’d want to hear about it.”

“It is a nice night,” Aleska shrugged. “I could use a stroll to tire me out, Commander Cullen doesn’t allow me to leave Haven without a proper escort.”

Aleska raised a brow, placing her hand within Rylen’s extended arm, listening intently to his story about his tattoo. Even she couldn’t deny, his accent was captivating, she could listen to it all day if she had her way. According to the Templar it was connected to the Grand Tourney of the Free Marches; the only thing that, other than the Chantry or an external enemy, ever united the squabbling City-States. He was a little vague about the exact details, but the tattoo was part of a series of endurance trials and challenges – not part of the main Tourney itself – that some of the more adventurous young combatants were invited to participate in. It sounded intriguing, and suggested there might be a little more to Lord Trevelyan than met the eye.

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The sun rose high atop the mountain peak, the rays catching the glimmer of the Breach in its wake, the rays fractured, separated like a thousand tiny fragments of glass against the torn Veil. Creeping
through the quiet town. Birds awoke, chirping their happy little songs, reaching the ears of a sleeping young elf, blissfully unaware of the events that the day will bring her.

A groan left her lips, rolling onto her stomach, Aleska covered her head with the blanket. *Go away,* Aleska thought, fully aware complaining wouldn’t make the sun recede back into the treeline. Throwing the blankets off herself, Aleska sat up huffing, her eyes glanced at the new set of armour, the cold of Ferelden was something she hadn’t grown accustomed to.

“Time to go to the Hinterlands,” Aleska reminded herself, *with Lord Trevelyan. I hope he is decent with a bow.* Aleska fixed the archers gauntlet along her wrist. Walking out of her quarters, her fingers still fiddled with the strings of the bracers.

“Need some help?” a familiar voice caused her to halt her steps. “You’re not going to tighten that on your own.”

Aleska turned around, noting the smirk upon his smug face. “Please?” Aleska extended her wrist. *He is right you know. Despite how much I want to deny, I would have spent most of the trip trying to get the strings together.*

“Why didn’t you get the buckled ones?” Anselm’s green eyes peered into hers. “Much easier to do one handed.”

“I’m certain you would know,” Aleska averted her gaze, watching his fingers effortlessly tighten the strings. *Undoubtedly from practice.* Aleska reclaimed her hand, clenching her fingers into a fist and releasing. *Decent job, at any rate.* “Thank you, Lord Trevelyan.”

Aleska continued down her path, barely allowing him to utter another word. *Just because he agreed to help, doesn’t mean I have to be nice.* Aleska affirmed, heading towards the stables. Running her hand along the bannister surrounding her horse, she unlatched the gate, leading the horse out of her pen; just as Cullen taught her to.

Placing her boot within the stirrup, Aleska hoisted herself into the saddle, her hand running along Vesena’s neck. “That’s a good girl.” Aleska patted her neck, gesturing her to move forward.

“Where to first?” Anselm climbed into the saddle of his horse, resting beside her.

“If you must know.” Aleska inhaled deeply. “The Hinterlands.”

Aleska refused to meet his gaze. *One taste of the Hinterlands and he will run back to the Marchers with his tail between his legs.* Aleska assured herself, tapping Vesena’s sides with her boots to move her forward.

“It’s going to be a long few weeks.” Varric muttered.

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“Thank you, Mother Giselle,” Aleska smiled warmly, walking away from her and back towards her companions.

“What did she say?” Cassandra sheathed her sword.

Aleska relayed her conversation with Mother Giselle, slinging her quiver over her shoulders. Closing her eyes, Aleska pushed the thought of Val Royaeux out of her mind. *I don’t want to think*
about that right now. Aleska clipped her bow back onto her pack, her eyes glancing around at the chaos around her. The Mage and Templar war had devastating consequences – and the Chantry was turning a blind eye.

“I’m starving,” Varric grumbled again. “Can’t we stop, make camp and have something to eat?”

Aleska stifled a laugh, listening to Cassandra grunt in disgust at Varric’s complaint. Noticing a field in the distance, Aleska walked towards the open field. A decent spot to camp, shut Varric up about the abyssal void in his stomach, give Cassandra some peace from his complaining.

“We’ll make camp here,” Aleska gathered some wood from a nearby tree. “Light a fire, get some rest.”

Aleska turned around to find Cassandra behind her, extending her arms to take the wooden logs from Aleska. Grateful for her aid, Aleska handed the wooden logs over, taking the flint from her pack. Soon a roaring fire had been lit, Aleska noted Cassandra and Varric set up the tents for them to sleep in, her gaze shifted to the horizon; the sun slowly descended into the sky, night would be upon them shortly enough.

“What about food?” Varric ruffled in his pack, realizing he’d forgotten to pack his rations of nuts.

Aleska took her bow; in a flash an arrow soared past Varric’s head followed by a small squeak. “Does rabbit sound good?” she smirked, watching the colour flush from Varric’s cheeks.

“You almost hit—” Varric protested, only to be interrupted.

“I bet you fifty silver you can’t do that again!” Anselm chuckled. Aleska raised an eyebrow.

“What; Shoot a rabbit or make Varric shit himself?”

“If you can do both, I will raise it to a sovereign.” Anselm jingled a satchel of coins, tossing it onto the rock before her. “Your call… My Lady.”

A tremble travelled down Aleska’s spine, the way his lips moved with those two words, how his voice emphasised it; how his green eyes sparkled with mischief. Stop it! Aleska mentally scolded herself, raising another arrow.

“Sorry Varric,” Aleska took careful aim, shooting a second arrow into the thicket of grass. Another small squeak followed.

“Will you stop that?!” Varric protested, the feeling in his legs returning.

Aleska felt the satchel of coins being placed within her hand; the tips of Lord Trevelyan’s fingers brushing against her palm, blue eyes meeting green. Feeling the weight of the coins within the satchel, Aleska shook her head, placing the coins back in his hand.

“Keep it,” Aleska said. “If you don’t, donate it to someone who actually needs it. I don’t want your money.”

“My Lady,” Anselm attempted to give her the satchel one last time. “I don’t think you understand how a bet works—”

Aleska held up her hand. Granted, it would be the easiest one hundred silver she had ever earned,
but something deep within her didn’t want it; nor could stomach accepting it.

“I am fully aware of how a bet works, Lord Trevelyan,” Aleska kept her tone even. “I just don’t want your money. Now, if you want to do something, prove to me your hands will be of good use.”

Stunned by her own words and seeing the beginnings of a smile twitch around his mouth, she held up a warning finger. “Don’t. You. Dare!”

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Listening to Varric slurp up the rabbit stew, Aleska blinked. *He said he was hungry, but does he have to act like we’ve been starving him?* Aleska took another mouthful of stew, amazed that Lord Trevelyan knew how to cook.

“You were right,” Cassandra nodded. “The carrots do add more flavour, where did you get them?”

“A farmer,” Anselm swallowed the liquid within his mouth. “I paid him for a bushel, I have some left for tomorrow as well. How do you find it, My Lady?” Anselm glanced at her.

Aleska chewed upon the rabbit meat, the tenderness of it was juicy and full of flavour, swallowing the mouthful, she nodded in agreement with Cassandra. “It is really good.” Aleska placed the empty bowl beside her.

Reaching behind her, Aleska took her arrows from her quiver and lay them at her feet. Pulling out her blade, Aleska picked up the first arrow her hand touched, trimming the fletching down and rotating it every so often to ensure all sides were even. She blew on the trimmings in her hand, examining the fletching one last time before placing it within the quiver.

“What are you doing?” Anselm curiously observed her.

“You’re an archer,” Aleska stated, her eyes remaining upon her arrow. “You should know.”

“If I knew, My Lady,” Anselm sat beside her. “I wouldn’t be asking.”

Aleska drew in a deep breath, taking one an arrow between her fingers, she sat closer to Anselm, holding the arrow at eye level for both of them. Rotating it slow enough for him to notice what she did.

“What do you notice about the fletching?” Aleska said, twisting the shaft within her fingers.

“It is uneven,” Anselm peered closer at the feathered ends.

“Correct,” Aleska took the blade from beside her. “Now when the fletching is uneven like this, you run the risk of the arrow veering off its course. Because Harrit doesn’t have the luxury of time to ensure the fletching is cut properly, I do it when ever I get a new batch.”

“I didn’t even notice,” Anselm inspected each of his own arrows, noting she was correct, not a single one had been cut evenly.

“I don’t expect you do,” Aleska carried on with her task. “Not something the average person does notice, especially with the luxury of having other people to do it for them.”

Aleska refused to meet his gaze, not wanting to draw attention to her own comment. Minutes passed, the camp fell silent, the only sound was the wooden shafts of the arrows hitting the ground and knocking against one another. *What is he doing?* Aleska glanced down at his feet, noticing the
ground between them covered with arrows.

Aleska stopped, watching his fingers tremble as he attempted to cut a straight line, the blade gliding along the fletching. He’d already made his first mistake. Too short, Aleska criticised, shaking her head. Glancing at him every so often, her annoyance rose as he cut yet another arrow’s fletching too short. That makes three.

“Okay, stop it.” Aleska took the arrow and blade from his hand. “You are doing it too short, keep doing that and you may as well use them for fire wood because that is all they will be good for.”

Placing the arrow between his fingers, she repositioned his fingers along the shaft, pinching them together to indicate where he must grip. Resting his elbow upon her leg, Aleska turned to face him; with the blade in his hand, her hand over his sent an involuntary quiver down her spine. He’s enjoying this. Aleska needn’t look up to know the smirk upon his face.

“Now,” Aleska glided the blade along the fletching, the sharp metal slicing through the feathers effortlessly. “You don’t press down like you are trying to skin a rabbit, it will guarantee that you will cut it too short.” Aleska looked up, ensuring he had been paying attention. “You barely touch it. Enough that the blade makes contact, but not to accidentally slice off the entire row of feathers.”

“Like this?” Anselm followed her instructions; cutting down all three sides and handing the arrow to Aleska for inspection.

Aleska took the arrow from him, examining the fletching under the fire light and twirling it between her fingers. Even she couldn’t deny he’d done a decent job. Handing the arrow back to him, she placed another within his hand.

“It’s a reasonable first attempt,” Aleska picked up one of her own arrows. “But still a little too close. Try again, all it takes is a bit of practice.”

Aleska found herself smiling as they carried on with their tasks in silence. This was the first real conversation they’d had and neither of them imagined the civility would last long.
Demons, Apostates and rogue Templars are no longer the only threats the Inquisition has to face in the Hinterlands. Mysterious groups of bandits with an unknown agenda have been added to their list of problems.

Aleska has more immediate issues on her mind; finding much-needed food for the refugees at the crossroads, and dealing with the constant discomfort of the Mark. Anselm, meanwhile, inevitably finds time for a couple of his favourite indulgences.

They could see the Rift clearly up ahead; a sour-green cloud of light and mist, crackling and spitting between a stand of trees and the ruined tower. Aleska felt the Mark flaring and sparking in response, pain like hundreds of tiny needles twisting in her nerve-endings. She swore sharply, eyes watering as the Rift belched into life; spilling deformed, corrupted shapes that screeched and hissed as they fanned out to attack the party.

It felt impossible that mortal weapons could have any impact on these creatures but, according to Solas and the Seeker, in the Waking World they were as vulnerable to blade and arrow as they were to magic.

Aleska became aware of a light, familiar, rippling over the surface of her skin; Solas’ barrier would give them a brief edge and it was crucial not to waste it. She raised her bow, carefully tracking one of the demons as it circled for a flank attack.

Aim for the head. At least I hope that’s its head...

Only two waves of demons – this Rift was smaller than the last one. From the corner of her eye she saw Trevelyan drop his bow and draw a pair of long, curved knives as a pair of spindly, shambling beast-like monstrosities closed in on him; too close for him to risk firing another shot, but she was able to take one down from her vantage point, getting a grin and nod of acknowledgement as he gleefully eviscerated the other with three precise strikes.

Glad someone’s enjoying himself

As they cut down the last of the second wave, the demons’ physical forms dissolving into heaps of stinking matter, the Rift curled inwards on itself and the sensations in her palm turned to an insistent tugging no less uncomfortable than the needles. With a deep breath to steady herself she stretched out her hand as a current of brilliant emerald fire surged between her and the now dormant Rift. She felt it in the marrow of her bones: a juddering, burning vibration as the Mark leached energy from the Rift until it finally imploded with a dull rumble. The recoil threw her on her back and she lay there for a moment, stunned and disoriented, until she was aware of hands helping her to rise and a voice speaking to her.

Aleska shook her head to clear the mist of pain and confusion that always descended afterwards; aware of bright green eyes regarding her with questioning concern, Fade-Green, she found herself thinking and the voice began to solidify into words.
“Are you alright?”

Her vision gradually cleared. Lord Trevelyan stood inches from her, one hand on her arm and another at her waist to steady her; close enough for her to catch his scent.

“Are you alright?” he repeated, and she nodded in reply; stepping away from him and clearing her throat in an attempt to find her voice.

“I... I’m fine” she stammered, “It… it’s been worse”

He frowned in mild disbelief but obligingly removed his hands as she stepped further back, feeling surer on her feet.

“I told you I’m fine” she insisted, her voice stronger and steadier “Go with Varric and Seeker Pentaghast, check out the path ahead. Solas and I will deal with what needs done here”

Solas waited until the others had crested the low ridge before coming over to examine her hand; the Mark now little more than pale sparks glittering in the creases of her skin.

“You are not fine.” He said softly, still scrutinizing her palm like one of the old women who pretended to tell fortunes in human markets “Even for a powerful Mage it would be challenging to handle such levels of raw power.”

“The perhaps you can find one who’s willing to take this off me!” she snapped, instantly regretting the flaring of her temper “Ir abelas, Hahren… I know you’re trying to help…”

“Ir abelas, Da’len. It is a heavy burden you have been given to bear” he sounded mournful, almost the way Bae had when he asked her to come here; fearing what the Chantry Conclave might mean for the People. “I can teach you some methods, basic meditations, that could help you better control and channel this power; at the very least it might help with the pain.”

Aleska stared down at her hand; the curving, interlacing lines of the Mark were hypnotic if she looked at them too long and she forced herself to meet Solas’s gaze.

“Would that work?” she asked, dubiously. Despite Bae’s power she’d never given the slightest hint of having inherited his talents. If that had disappointed him, he’d never shown it. Solas gave a small, dry laugh – almost as if he’d read her thoughts.

“Magic was as natural as breathing to the Ancient Elves. Who knows whether some hint of it may lie dormant within your blood? Anyway, these are simple methods that anyone might benefit from. They might not even be dissimilar to the ones that Seeker Pentaghast and Commander Cullen use; without the centuries of accumulated Chantry doctrine, of course.”

“ Anything to try and keep this under control…” Aleska sighed “Ma serannas, Hahren”

“De da’rahn, Da’len. It is a small thing I offer, but I hope it will help. When we return to Haven we can find somewhere quiet to begin your lessons. It would not do to have the Seeker think I was teaching you unholy arts.”

It took a moment for Aleska to realise his final comment was a joke and her laughter lifted some of the gloom she felt.

“I imagine she thinks that already…”

###
“I don’t think the Lady Herald likes me much…” Anselm mused, to no-one in particular, as he crouched to examine the trail. Seeker Pentaghast glared at him through narrowed eyes.

“Oh, really? I wonder why…”

“Maybe she’s heard the rumours…” Varric grumbled, adjusting one of the screws on Bianca’s sights. Helping the Inquisition was all well and good, but did it have to involve so much trudging though mud, ass-high nettles and wet grass to track sheep? You shouldn’t need to track sheep, for the Sweet Baby Andraste’s sake! They were fat, stupid, woolly things that munched grass and went mmmmmmeeeeeeerrrrrrhhhh!

“And what rumours would those be?” Anselm asked, picking up a pellet of dung and rubbing it between thumb and forefinger. “That I’m handsome, witty, good company; have a large…”

“That’s enough!” Cassandra snapped.

“Repertoire of songs and anecdotes…” Anselm finished, looking up at her with an impish smile. “Why must you always think the worst of me, dear cousin?”

“Because I imagine the worst is usually true,” she retorted. “And do not call me that!”

“Well what should I call you then? ‘Seeker Pentaghast’ seems excessively formal, given our circumstances.”

Anselm returned to his investigation of the pellet and its consistency. Varric gave a grunt of disgust as he sniffed at it to confirm its freshness.

“Refer to me as Lady Cassandra, if you must.” She uttered, through gritted teeth. Skilled hunter and fighter Lord Trevelyan might be, but he delighted in being exasperating. “And perhaps you would be better engaged concentrating on finding the food and supplies the refugees need than thinking about… other things!”

“Relax… Lady Cassandra.” Anselm laughed, standing up and wiping his fingers on a clump of wet grass. “This spoor’s been laid in the last hour or so. No-one’s going to bed with an empty…”

He stopped, cocking his head and raising a cautionary hand; his stance poised and alert. Signalling Cassandra and Varric to remain where they were he moved forward, swiftly but with a sure and silent tread. Dangerous prey lay ahead but the terrain, rocky and thick with scrub, stood in his favour. This was more of a challenge than snaring a few sheep, and he could feel himself smiling in anticipation.

There were four of them, camped with a view of the road below but plainly unaware of the herders’ track winding up from the other side of the ridge. To the casual observer they looked like bandits – a problem for the unwary traveller in any part of Thedas – but their weapons were too good, and too uniform; while the rest of their gear appeared deliberately ragged. Part of a mercenary company, he guessed, but wearing no colours. That was… interesting. It wasn’t unknown for mercenaries to turn bandit during lean periods, but with violence spreading across half of southern Thedas even second or third-rate companies could command high prices from nobles and rich merchants anxious for the safety of their lands and goods. Something stank, and it wasn’t just the sheepshit on his boots.

Aleska and Solas had joined the others by the time he got back.

“Four of them, half a mile that way on the hill above the road…” he whispered “They look like bandits, but…”
Aleska nodded. One of Harding’s scouts had reported something similar and expressed her own doubts about their nature and motivations. Investigating those could wait; right now, they were just one more problem to be dealt with…

###

The fight was short and brutal, surprise and the terrain giving them the advantage and the supposed bandits were quickly overwhelmed. A search of the bodies uncovered a note tucked into one of their tunics. Varric examined it with an angry snort.

“Carta cipher” he muttered, handing it to Aleska. “Not one I recognise, but I’m sure Nightingale’s people can make something of it.”

“Carta? What would they…? Oh, Lyrium.” Aleska’s surprise faded, they should have expected something like this. The Chantry retained its official monopoly on the substance, but the Templars and the Rebel Mages needed it more than ever. It was inevitable that would draw in the smugglers. Varric nodded with a deeply disgruntled look on his face.

“They must be using human mercenaries to hide their presence. Another bunch of bastards the folks here don’t need.”

“We can worry about that later” Anselm interrupted, pointing further along the hilltop to where half a dozen or so sheep wandered aimlessly into view “I spy tonight’s dinner!”

###

Aleska had to admit that, after a morning of fighting demons and bandits, an afternoon’s sheep-hunting had been welcome comic relief – especially the sight of Varric running from an enraged, or possibly aroused, ram. Corporal Vale’s men set up a watch camp near where the ‘bandits’ had been; taking her advice and placing it where approaching enemies had less potential cover. With their assistance the sheep-carcasses were swiftly butchered, and the meat carried down to the Crossroads, where three massive cauldrons of mutton stew now simmered. It might not seem much but, with the other supplies foraged by Inquisition patrols, it was the first proper meal some of these people had eaten in days.

She could hear Varric and Lord Trevelyan talking nearby; the familiar lilting, fluid, sounds of Marcher standing out against the throatier backdrop of Ferelden and the Trade Tongue, bringing a pang of homesickness. The clan would already be moving to their Summer campsite in the wooded hill-country along Markham’s northern borders. Closing her eyes, she could almost smell the cedar-trees and hear the Halla calling to each other at sunset. Aleska dispelled the image with an irritated shake of her head, this was no time to get lost in nostalgia. Rounding the corner of the infirmary-house she found them lounging on a pile of sacks, finishing their meal. It was no surprise the pair had laid their hands on a bottle of wine. Even on short acquaintance, she’d learned Varric was a master when it came to sourcing his comforts.

“Would you care to join us, My Lady?” Lord Trevelyan asked, hauling himself to his feet and bowing with undeniable grace “We were just discussing the strangest meals we’ve ever eaten.”

“Sautéed fillet of Wyvern versus Despairing Ham.” Varric added, running a piece of bread around the inside of his bowl. “That’s gonna be tough to beat!”

“I doubt I have either of your gourmet exper…” she began, before curiosity got the better of her “I thought Wyvern was poisonous?”
Anselm nodded, laughing.

“Every bit, but Baron di Vasari had a Tevinter chef – Astragali – who could prepare it so only the slightest hint of poison remained; just enough to give you a faint tingle in the nerve endings. He used to serve it at his ‘Perilous Suppers’…”

“I should mention, Ezio di Vasari died of food poisoning eight months ago” the dwarf interjected, popping the gravy-soaked bread into his mouth. Anselm merely shrugged.

“He probably should have been a bit more careful about sleeping with Astragali’s wife. Unwise, under the circumstances.”

Aleska was unable to keep the annoyance out of her voice.

“While it’s good to have my opinion about human nobles confirmed, there’s still some work to be done while you’re sober. The scouts need help bedding down the horses. I imagine that’s not beyond your capabilities?”

Lord Trevelyan responded with another courtly bow.

“My apologies, I shall see to it right away. A little exercise after supper does wonders for the digestion.”

He wasn’t wearing his tunic, and his shirt was unfastened almost as far as Varric’s. It was impossible not to notice the other tattoo, the one on his chest; black lines sharp against his tanned skin. Her eyes only flickered there for a moment, but she could tell he’d seen it by the way he smiled. He opened his shirt a little further, so she had a clear view of the stylised oak-tree. She knew the design; Fervanis, the Oak.

“It was rising at my birth.” He told her, by way of explanation “I had it done for luck.”

“Fascinating, Lord Trevelyan” she retorted, looking him straight in the eye “But that isn’t getting the horses dealt with.”

With another smile and a nod, he picked up his tunic and headed off towards the paddock. Aleska could feel Varric grinning at her.

“You have something to say?”

The Dwarf laughed deep in his chest, taking a swig of wine and offering her the bottle.

“We both know the scouts are more than capable of looking after the horses themselves. You just want to see how much Charmer’s willing to take before he throws a tantrum and rides off!”

Aleska sighed, taking the bottle from him and swallowing a mouthful.

“Great, he’s already got a nickname!”

“This isn’t some court hunt with a masked ball to round off the evening” she said firmly, handing the bottle back “He’s got to pull his weight if he’s going to be of any use.”

Varric gave her a long, thoughtful look.

“He’s been doing his share so far. Give the kid a break, he’s actually pretty good company once you get to know him.”
Aleska laughed sharply.

“I’ve got a good idea what sort of ‘company’ Lord Trevelyan’s looking for; and I’m not interested in going down that path.”

Her tone made it clear the topic was closed and Varric decided to change the topic to something marginally less touchy.

“So, any more news about Val Royeaux?”

###

It was well past sunset by the time Aleska ventured over to the paddock. Lord Trevelyan still hadn’t returned, and they would have an early start the next morning. She could see a group of people sitting around a makeshift table by the fire and recognised the voices immediately.

“You have the Dreadwolf’s own luck, milord!” Charter laughed, throwing her cards down. Trevelyan chuckled in response, leaning in to light his cigar from one of the candles.

“Skill, my dear Charter…” he replied cheerfully “It’s knowing when to fold that counts! Another hand before bed – Aces high and Mages wild?”

“We got enough sodding wild Mages around here” the Dwarf, Butcher, fired back “How about a bit of good old-fashioned Diamondback for a change?”

“I imagine your purse is heavy enough already, Lord Trevelyan” The scouts leapt to their feet as Aleska emerged from the shadows. Anselm turned to face her with a slow, lazy, grin.

“I’m actually a score of shillings lighter…” he said, with the faintest of slurs in his voice “Scrivener here is a damn sneaky player for a former Chantry Brother. Would you care to inspect the horses, My Lady? They’re all tucked up with warm blankets and fresh hay.”

Biting back the sharp response that threatened to leap from her tongue, Aleska looked over to the stalls. Sure enough, the horses had all been tended to; most of them slumbering peacefully while their stable-mates stood watch. Something relaxed inside her as she turned back to the group around the table. Even Trevelyan’s mildly inebriated smirk was a little less aggravating than it might have been. There was a difference between being firm and being unreasonable, and she had to admit Varric was right about one thing; so far, Lord Trevelyan had been pulling his weight. She shook her head, now more amused than annoyed.

“Try not to get too drunk…” she cautioned “We ride back to Haven early, and I’ve got little patience for hangovers!”
Aleska clawed at the collar of her waistcoat. The dust filtering through the cracks in the walls threatened to choke her as the small room at the rear of the Chantry seemed to close in; her eyes focussing on one of the candles, it’s flame barely clinging to life, as she struggled to catch her breath. It flickered once more then vanished into the pool of melted wax, leaving only smoke in its wake.

“Is everything all right, Herald?” Cullen asked anxiously, placing his board upon the edge of the table.

“I can’t breathe,” Aleska unbuckled the belt running across her upper chest. “I… I can’t breathe.”

Aleska ripped the belt away, throwing it across the room; the shoulder guards which it held dropped to the floor with a heavy clang. Her fingers struggled with the buttons of the coat, sweat beading her forehead as her breathing turned to panting.

“How is everything all right, Herald?” Josephine turned to her in alarm. “What is wrong?”

“Did you not hear me?” Frustration forced Aleska to rip the coat open, tearing some of the buttons off. “I need… I need to get out of here.”

She flung the door open, her brisk walk breaking into a run; the coat clinging to the sweat soaking her shoulders and arms. She burst through the Chantry doors, hair now plastered to her forehead.

*I need to get out of here.*

Aleska stepped into the pouring rain, the feel of it on her face barely reducing the rising pressure and panic she felt. Lightning lashed across the sky, followed by a rumble of thunder as she ran down and through the gates; the rain soaking her to the skin, bringing a welcome coolness. She didn’t care about the mud ruining her boots, or the footsteps following her as she ran towards the treeline at the edge of Haven. She came to a stop at one of the bigger oaks, her nails digging into the trunk as she clung on for support.

“My Lady,” Lord Trevelyan called to her. “What happened?”

“Go… go back,” Aleska attempted to command him, her voice shaking.

*Who would take that seriously? I can’t even take myself seriously.*

“No,” Trevelyan’s voice came clear, as firm as hers was uncertain.

Aleska turned, the rain still soaking into her clothes and hair, and struggled with the coat constricting her movements. Trevelyan took hold of her shoulders, pulling the too-tight leather and
velvet back and away from them. A sigh of relief escaped her lips, followed by a sharp inhale as his hands glided down her bare arms, easing them out of the sleeves.

“Thank you, Lord Trevelyan.” Aleska began stepping out of his reach. “You may go back now.”

“What about you?” He asked, anxiously examining her until he shook his head with a faint smile. “You feel like you can’t breathe? Tight chested?”

Aleska simply nodded, not wanting to look into his eyes. “How did you know?”

“Come with me,” Lord Trevelyan led her towards the abandoned cabin, the very one where she found the notes for Adan.

She followed him into the small cabin, the tight feeling returning as the door closed behind her. Walking over to the window, she opened it to let in some fresh air.

*I can’t breathe, and his grand idea is to force me into a smaller room?*

Aleska rubbed her hands upon her shoulders; trying to generate heat as realization of the cold and damp sank into her, watching as Trevelyan got a fire started in the hearth.

“What do you think you’re doing?” She eyed him cautiously as he took the blanket from the bed, laying it carefully on the floor before the fire.

“We can’t walk back in this rain,” he said, standing up and dusting off his hands. “and the reason you can’t breathe is because your waistcoat is laced too tight. I could help you with that, and I’ll even be a perfect gentleman about it.”

Aleska let out a sharp laugh, even that constricted her breath, the leather waistcoat pinching harder at every movement. What choice did she have? Reaching behind her, she could barely touch the strings, let alone undo them. Accepting defeat, she peered into his eyes; for once no mischief danced there, only a look of concern.

“If your eyes, or your hands, wander—” She warned.

“I shall behave as dutifully as a Chantry brother.” Trevelyan bowed, watching her walk towards the bed.

Aleska scoffed, placing her hands upon the bedpost, the same way she did when Leliana first helped her with the laces. She shuddered as his hands loosened them; his fingertips brushing her cool skin every so often and sending tremors through her body – true to his word, he kept his eyes upon her shoulders; his head never lowered, and his touch remained chaste.

*Of course, it isn’t the first time he’s done this...* she thought as his hands delicately repositioned the waistcoat along her shoulders, the fine down on her skin standing to attention at his touch. Aleska swallowed the lump forming within her throat; teeth grazing her bottom lip as she felt the tightness about her chest ease and relax, allowing her to breathe freely and without effort.

Despite his promise, it was impossible for him not to notice the faint lines of a tattoo along her spine through the fine fabric of her chemise. That was intriguing; he knew the Dalish marked themselves for some religious reason but thought it was only their faces. This wasn’t the time to raise the subject, though.

“Not too tight?” he asked, his hands effortlessly working on the strings.
The waist coat still hugged her body closely enough to retain its shape, but now allowed her to move and stretch freely. His hands travelled slowly down her waist, making minute adjustments to the fit as her heart beat faster. Her mouth felt dry and a soft breath, almost a sigh of relief, left her parted lips. *This man is barely touching me, and it feels like he has massaged every inch of me.* Aleska shook her head, feeling the ends of the strings being tied together just above her hips.

“Finished! Does that feel better?” He asked, stepping back to let her turn around.

“That is… perfect,” she admitted, a tremble flowing through her arms and hands, even down to her stomach, tying it knots tighter than the ones Lord Trevelyen had loosened.

“The rains seem to have let up,” His voice was no more than a gentle whisper. “Shall we go back? We could stay… the fire beckons.”

“Perhaps,” Aleska moved away from his grasp, remembrance of his touch still tingling upon her skin. “Stay if you must, but what transpired here can never happen again. I hope you enjoyed yourself, Lord Trevelyen; for that is the closest you shall ever come to undressing me – physically at any rate.”

She walked towards the door, a hint of a smile graced her soft lips as she listened to his parting words. Closing her eyes and shaking her head, she opened the door; vanishing into the sharp sunlight and leaving Trevelyen to his own devices.

***

Aleska paced beside Cullen as he strode along the ranks. His tireless efforts were beginning to pay off with the troops. She watched him intently; observing the ferocity with which he commanded the simplest of things, the determination to turn every new recruit into a skilled and capable warrior. *Even I would stand to attention at his command.* She thought as they came to the end of his inspection.

“I grew up near a village south of Redcliffe.” Cullen continued as he glanced through a report from one of his lieutenants. “but rarely left until I went to join the Templars, so I’m afraid my knowledge of the Hinterlands is limited to a very small radius.”

“Do you still have family there?” Aleska asked, placing her hands behind her back and lacing her fingers together.

The Commander shook his head.

“They moved to South Reach after the Blight,” Cullen glanced at her, noting her eyes fixated upon the training troops. “What of you? Any family to speak of?”

“Yes, they move around the Free Marches a lot,” Aleska laughed. “See, even I can play that game?”

“What game would that be, Herald?” Cullen turned to face her, his arms folded and the hint of a smile playing about his lips.

*He has a nice smile, he should smile more often.*

“The one of vague answers,” Aleska kept her focus on the recruits. “You don’t have to tell me. I just thought—”

“If we are to work together, we might benefit from knowing one another?” Cullen finished her
Aleska turned her head, nodding. Out of the corner of her eye she noticed Trevelyan coming from the direction of the cabin. She glanced up, judging from the sun’s position; he’d been there for quite some time. *He must have incredible stamina,* Aleska pondered, watching the smile upon his lips broaden as he walked by, time seeming to slow as he passed.

Annoyance caused her to tap her temples; shaking her head as she pushed the thoughts far from her mind. Despite her best efforts the physical remembrance resurfaced. How his hands glided along her shoulders in the pouring rain, the feeling of his warm breath caressing her cool skin; how the tips of her fingers brushed along her back – even the sound of his voice commanding her body in ways she would never admit.

*Stop it, even thinking those things means he has won. I will not give him the satisfaction of thinking that*

Aleska cursed inwardly, running her fingers through her damp hair as she realised the Commander was still talking to her.

“There is something I have been meaning to bring to your attention,” Cullen rested his wrist against the pommel of his sword although she could see his eyes following Trevelyan with an expression of distaste. “Quartermaster Threnn has asked if we could locate a source of iron and good logging site. She claims it would aid the Inquisition with better weapons.”

“Of course,” Aleska agreed, focusing her attention upon Cullen. “I think I saw some iron deposits across the lake, and with all this forest there have to be at least some trees that are of use.”

“Just make sure—” Cullen began.

“I know… I know, I won’t leave Haven unescorted.” Aleska drew in a deep breath. “I shall let you get back to your training, good day, Commander.”

Aleska smiled, walking towards the stables, the sound of the horses neighing broadening her smile. They were magnificent beasts, taller than the Halla she grew up around but lacking their spread of interlacing horns. Taking an apple from the tray upon the table near the training grounds, she wandered over to her own horse. Vesenya watched Aleska, her big brown eyes following as she came closer to the pen. Aleska extended her hand, holding out the apple for Vesenya; the fuzz upon the horse’s lips tickling her palm.

“Gross, girl!” Aleska laughed, wiping the saliva off. “We need to teach you to eat like a lady.” Placing her hand under Vesenya’s face, Aleska placed her forehead against hers. “Hey, if I have to learn then so do you. Do you think I revel in learning how to ride side saddle?”

Aleska washed her hands in the bucket beside the pen, her eyes caught a white towel being extended to her; accepting it, she began to dry her hands before realising who had handed it to her. She looked up at him, Blue eyes gazing into green, as he smiled at her in silence. Aleska scanned every inch of his face, from the reddish-brown hair to the tattoo upon his chin and the faint scar bisecting one cheek.

“Did I hear the Commander ask about logging sites?” Trevelyan broke the silence, taking the towel from her hands. “I believe I might be able to help you there.”

“Shall I add eavesdropping to the list of your less entertaining talents?” Aleska rested her hands upon her hips. “How do you know about this?”
Trevelyan shrugged, his eyes glimmering with mirth. “I heard a few scouts talking about it, and I’ve already made some acquaintances who know the area well; but this information does not come free…”

Aleska pressed her lips into a thin line, closing her eyes and trying to keep her temper under control.

“All right!” She snapped. “What exactly do you want?”

“To come with you, when you go to Val Royeaux” Trevelyan leaned against the fencepost, folding his arms and smirking down at her. “For reasons are my own. Do we have an accord… My Lady?”

Aleska pondered his request. She had to admit he had an impressive command of High Orlesian and his presence might suggest the Inquisition enjoyed his family’s support. Josephine kept telling her how much appearances mattered.

“Done,” the tip of Aleska’s tongue lingered behind her teeth, emphasising her acceptance. “But if you’re wrong?”

“Then, My Lady” Trevelyan pushed himself off the post and leaned in towards her ear. A whisper left his lips. “Your wish is my command.”

***

Aleska closed the Chantry door quietly behind her, only a handful of candles still burned in front of the image of Andraste, but her eyes soon adjusted to the darkness.

She passed quickly along the length of the aisle to Josephine’s office, where the Chantry library was kept. Sleep evaded her, and reading was better than tossing and turning until sunrise, fretting over the journey to Val Royeaux and what might await them there. The library itself was a motley collection of prayer-books, mismatched volumes of sermons, and Andrastian morality tales – none of which held any appeal – but there were a few novels scattered among them, mainly Antivan or Orlesian romances but also a couple of copies of ‘Hard in Hightown’ and a single, battered-looking, edition of ‘The Tale of the Champion’. Aleska took the last one down from the shelf and flicked through the pages. Some were water-stained, and it looked like someone had tried to stab it at one point.

I might as well see what sort of a writer Varric really is…

As she left, she noticed the door of the council room was ajar and a light burned inside. Looking through the gap she saw Commander Cullen bending over the map-table, moving some of the map-markers with a look of intense concentration on his face. It was fascinating to watch, although the placement didn’t seem to correspond to the positioning of Inquisition troops. After moving another couple, he leaned over and flicked one onto its side with a smile and a murmured. “Take that!”

She couldn’t hold back a small laugh and immediately the Commander straightened up with a startled look.

“Who’s there?” he called. Aleska pushed the door open with an apologetic look.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to disturb you. I was just getting a book from the library. Another sleepless night unfortunately.”

“It’s alright, I was just… I was… erm…” he hesitated, rubbing the back of his neck with his hand.
as he looked down at the markers spread out across the map “…examining some strategic options.”

“In case things don’t go as planned in Val Royeaux?” she asked with a resigned sigh. The Commander glanced up sharply and she could see the dark, heavy, bags under his eyes.

*He’s not been sleeping well either.*

“I wish you would agree to taking a larger escort…” Cullen grumbled as he started to reset the markers, pulling a length of measuring cord from the pouch on his belt “I could have Rylen and a squad ready by daybreak.”

Aleska shook her head. They’d already had this argument; Leliana and Cassandra believed arriving with any significant force would only provoke the remaining Grand Clerics. Privately she shared the Commander’s anxiety, a few more swords would make her feel less vulnerable, but the Left and Right Hands presumably knew the mood of the clergy better than her or Cullen.

“There’s enough of us to be safe on the road; and Leliana believes a small group has a better chance of evading any trouble they try to throw at us in the city.”

The commander grunted dubiously.

“Leliana may be right, but are you sure you can trust Trevelyan?”

Aleska put the book down on the chair by the door and folded her arms, leaning against the doorframe.

“You have doubts about him?”

Cullen nodded, adjusting another marker.

“He might just be an overdressed wastrel, but his family are dangerous and powerful. Their influence reaches far beyond the borders of Ostwick and his uncle does nothing without an agenda. I don’t trust him…”

The Commander’s words gave her pause. Trevelyan did mention he had reasons for wanting to accompany her to Val Royeaux. Perhaps the game he was playing ran further than his attempts at seduction. If that was so, this might be the opportunity to draw out what he was really up to.

“You’re not exactly making a case against him.” Aleska replied eventually “Despite his failings, if his family’s that significant…”

“If it was anyone else I might be inclined to agree with the Lady Ambassador; but that… that…” Cullen shoved the cord back into his belt-pouch as he struggled for the right words “… pampered pipsqueak? I guarantee, if he isn’t spying for his uncle, he’ll vanish into the first brothel you pass by.”

Aleska laughed. the Commander rarely ventured a personal opinion; however, it was clear he found Lord Trevelyan something of an irritation.

“If that happens then he can stay there, the whores are welcome to him! But, if not, he could be a valuable asset – even if he is a bit too fond of himself!”

“Asset? He’s unreliable, and undisciplined…” the Commander huffed “and I wish he’d stop calling me Old Man! I’m barely thirty!”
“He only does it to get a reaction; believe me, he tries it with me all the time”

Cullen paused in his grumbling and frowned, unfolding his arms and placing his hands on the table.

“Has he been acting inappropriately?”

His tone implied there would be serious consequences for Trevelyon if the answer was yes.

“He’s stayed on the right side of appropriate so far” Aleska assured him “and if he ever crosses to the wrong side he’ll regret it; but, thank you for your concern. I appreciate it.”

Her expression of gratitude seemed to take him by surprise.

“I… Thank you, Herald. If there is ever anything I can do to help…”

“You do more than your share, Commander…” Aleska smiled, picking up her book “and I’ve taken up too much of your time. I’ll leave you to your… strategic options.”

The faintest flush of embarrassment tinted Cullen’s cheeks.

“Erm… yes… of course… Good night, Herald. I hope you manage to get some sleep. It will be a long day tomorrow.”

*They always are…* Aleska thought as she closed the door behind her, tucking ‘The Tale of the Champion’ under her arm *and I don’t see them getting shorter for any of us.*
Chapter Summary

After a challenging day in Val Royeaux, Lord Trevelyan decides to distract Aleksa by showing her the city he knows. A diverting evening which takes an unexpected turn when she's confronted with one of the less pleasing realities of the society Anselm moves in.

Anselm lay back, draping a warm flannel over his face and resting one leg casually along the edge of the copper tub. The baths in this Val Royeaux inn might not be large enough to fully stretch out but he couldn’t complain too much. This was the first decent soak he’d enjoyed in longer than he cared to remember. The few tubs at Haven were little more than converted barrels, every drop of water needing to be heated over the fire and hauled in by the jugful; enough to keep clean, but hardly qualifying as a bath by any civilised standard. It was over three months since he’d set sail from the Grand Harbour at Ostwick; a brief courtesy visit to Alistair and Olivia in Denerim and then the long ride across Ferelden to end up stuck in the arse-end of Nowhere. He’d almost forgotten what a city sounded and smelled like and, despite everything, the Orlesian capital remained brazen and brilliant.

Music and laughter drifted up from the street below the open window, along with the scent of hollyhocks from the balcony; heavy and sweet in the warm evening air. This was what he missed the most. Apart from a few hardy souls at the Maiden and the guards on patrol, Haven was mostly silent and asleep by the time darkness came; a rustic hamlet living from sunrise to sunset. It was at night when a city truly came alive, however; as the business of the day concluded and Dame Pleasure ruled from the palaces of the great to the meanest backstreet tavern. Even the death of the Divine and the tear in the sky did little to diminish the delights of the demi-monde; if anything, it gave them an added frisson. Who knew if this would be the last dance before terror claimed them all?

He pulled the flannel from his face and took a sip of wine, rolling it around his tongue to properly savour the complex notes; a rich, fruity, claret from the vineyards by Lake Celestine. He made a mental note to take a case or two back to Haven, it would make a pleasant change from the acid swill that was the best on offer there. Anselm closed his eyes again, enjoying the heat of the scented water soaking deep into his muscles until the clock chimed eight and he stood, stretching his arms before wrapping a towel loosely around his hips and stepping out of the bath.

He stopped to admire his reflection in the full-length mirrors. He’d lost a little weight since leaving Ostwick and it suited him, emphasising the trimness of his waist and the breadth of his shoulders.

If I were a woman I wouldn’t be able to resist me right now... he thought, toasting himself with a sly wink and padding over to the wardrobe to choose his evening outfit. Let’s see what delights this gilded harlot of a city has for me...
Anselm paused at the top of the stairs, one hand on the bannister, hearing a door slam in Aleska’s chambers. He stood there, listening to the floorboards creak as she paced back and forth; a door opened and was slammed shut again before the pacing resumed. He thought for a moment, one finger tapping his chin, before sighing softly and walking across to her door.

There was no immediate answer to his knock, but after a few seconds her voice called “What?”

Even through a closed door it was easy to recognise the sound of someone trying to disguise they’d been crying.

“It’s An… Lord Trevelyan.” He said, “May I come in?”

There was a short silence before he heard footsteps and the door opened. Aleska stood back, allowing him to enter and closing the door behind him. She appeared composed but with a hint of redness around her eyes.

“It’s been a difficult day. I wanted to see if you were alright.”

Aleska let out a harsh laugh, running her fingers through her hair.

“I’m still half-expecting to be lynched at any moment, so the answer to that question is a definite no!”

She ought to be grateful to this Lord Seeker Lucius. His arrival with the Templars had, intentionally or not, defused Mother Hevara’s attempt to whip up a mob against the heretics from the Inquisition; although that didn’t mean some other opportunistic priest, eager to make a name for herself, might not try something similar. The back-alley encounter with the girl, Sera, hadn’t helped ease her nerves either. Another ally was good, and the name ‘Red Jenny’ not unfamiliar, but the notion that the Inquisition already had well-entrenched enemies in Orlais was unsettling. Her hope of being able to disappear back to the hills and woods of the North-Eastern Marches once the Breach was closed was rapidly fading.

“The first lout to try and lay hands on you would be looking for them in the gutter” Anselm assured her, tapping the hilt of the long-bladed knife at his waist, an unexpectedly serious look in his eye. Suddenly his mood changed; coughing to disguise a laugh, he indicated her robe “You’re… ahem… ‘coming undone’… My Lady”

She hurriedly refastened her belt; blushing furiously as he politely turned his back. His gaze had only flickered downwards for the briefest moment, and fortunately the robe hadn’t come completely open, but surely the Creators could have spared her this embarrassment?

“I thought Vallaslin was normally worn on the face. Is that a Lavellan custom?” he asked conversationally, still pretending to study a detail of the candelabra mounted on the wall.

Of course, he knows I saw him look, she thought, making certain everything was secure, it was inevitable he’d notice the tracery of the tattoo on her stomach; and he’s not stupid enough to pretend he didn’t

“My father thought it wise if I could pass for human when necessary. It made us less likely to be cheated by human traders. You can turn around now.”

Anselm turned, trying to keep his smile to a minimum. It hadn’t occurred to him before, but she was right; with her hair loose, she could easily be taken for a human woman, an extraordinarily beautiful human woman, and an idea began to form within his mind.
“I’m keeping you from your pleasures, Lord Trevelyan…” she commented, noting the way he was dressed. Gold buckles glinted against the deep crimson brocade of his waistcoat, tightly fastened over a shirt of richly embroidered white silk; adorned with lace at the cuffs and open at the throat far enough to show a sharp vee of well-muscled chest. “The brothels must be missing your company.”

“Doubtless they are!” he laughed. “And they’ll need to keep missing it. Come out with me?”

His question stunned her into silence and he repeated it.

“Come out with me? Let me show you the real city and what it’s like; not hysterical priests, arsehole Templars and insane Jennies, but real people enjoying what life has to offer. It’s not so frightening once you see it up close.”

“I’m not…” she began, then cleared her throat. Damn him for seeing through her so easily! Of course, she found it frightening. The Clan always stayed well away from the cities and their immediate environments; even when she’d taken ship to Ferelden, it had been from a small port-town on the mouth of the Minanter. Highever was the first real city she’d ever been in and that was intimidating enough, although she was told it was small even by Fereldan standards. Nothing could prepare her for the sheer size and scale of Val Royeaux, even though Bae had told her tales of the great cities the Dalish once had in their own lands, a confusing labyrinth of stone, gilt and glass with more people than she believed could ever gather in one place. Kayden’s words came back to her through the storm of her thoughts ‘If they see you’re scared, they’ve already won…’. If only he was here right now. Trevelyan was still looking at her with that smile and bright, questioning eyes “I’m not sure that’s such a good idea.”

“I know it isn’t; it’s an insane idea! But no worse than fretting the night away in this place. Cassandra is asleep and dreaming of punching things, Varric’s getting drunk somewhere with that Sera girl and Solas is probably off for a stroll in the Fade. This might be our only chance to escape and, Maker forbid, actually have a bit of fun for once!”

Aleska hated to admit it, but the thought was tempting. If she stayed in this room she wasn’t sure how much longer she could go without starting to scream at her own reflection.

“What if I’m recognized?”

Anselm looked thoughtful for a moment.

“Hardly anyone really saw you in the Bazaar and you said yourself, you can pass for human if needed. Keep your hair down and wear one of those dresses that Madame du Fer sent. No-one will be any the wiser.”

Aleska took a deep breath. It was an insane idea but somehow that only made it more appealing, as long as she remembered not to get too entangled in Lord Trevelyan’s charm. He might not be obviously attempting a seduction but that didn’t mean it wasn’t on his mind.

“Fine, I’ll come out with you” she said finally, “but I’ll need your advice on what would be appropriate to wear. This isn’t exactly something I’m familiar with.”

“I’m at your service, My Lady…” he gave a ridiculously elaborate bow, which she couldn’t help laughing at, before strolling over to the wardrobe

“I’ve been looking in there all evening…” Aleska admitted “I wouldn’t even know where to begin.”
Madame du Fer had sent quite a varied selection, Anselm observed, some more suitable than others and he began to suspect this might be a subtle test on the part of the Imperial Enchanter. He’d never paid much attention to politics, much less Circle politics, but he’d heard Sophia mention her name a few times, usually with a note of distaste, as a skilled and manipulative player of the Game. Eventually he came to a conclusion, presenting his choice to Aleska.

She tried not to show her surprise. It was one that kept catching her eye, but she would have thought it rather restrained for Lord Trevelyman’s taste; an open necked, high-collared bodice in dark blue velvet with silver trim, the skirts flaring out only slightly as they dropped.

“What do you think to this?” he asked. “Neither of us could pass for Orlesian, even if we wanted to, and this is quite the style in the Free Marches at the moment. People will assume we’re just wealthy tourists. The worst that’s likely to happen is we get pestered to buy vulgar souvenirs…”

Aleska took the dress from him. It fastened up the front of the bodice, which would make it easier to put on, and didn’t feel as heavy at it looked. She had to acknowledge this was a good choice.

“It’s less… revealing… than some of the others” she said, with a wry smile. He laughed at her obvious implication

“I don’t know if you’re familiar with human proverbs, but there’s a saying in the Marches ‘Only a desperate merchant puts all his wares on display’.”

Aleska laughed in response as she went behind the screen in the corner of the room.

“I wouldn’t want anyone to imagine I’m desperate; least of all this Mme Vivienne.”

She poked her head around the edge of the screen.

“Could you do me one other favour and pick out a piece of jewellery? I think you’ve proven I can trust your taste.”

“My pleasure…” he chuckled, turning to the casket that had accompanied the gowns. It caught his eye immediately and he reached down slowly, picking it up with both hands, scarcely aware of the lump forming in his throat. It was an unusual piece, and hadn’t been in fashion for some time; a single marquise-cut ruby in a diamond setting hanging from a black velvet choker.

*Mama wore jewels just like this…*

It was almost the only thing he could remember of her; the way the stones caught the light and sparkled as she bent to kiss him goodnight before leaving for the opera or some grand function at the Palazzo Comital. Strange, to have that as his clearest memory…

He cleared his throat and cast a cursory glance over the rest to distract his thoughts. Expensive commonplaces, nothing that wouldn’t be gracing a hundred different necks at tomorrow’s Salon. Aleska deserved to be memorable.

“I think you’re right. This is the best of the lot.” she said, stepping out from behind the screen and smoothing the skirts with the flat of her hands. Anselm nodded appreciatively; the gown was cleverly cut so that it resembled a fitted jacket with separate skirt, showing off her figure without flaunting it. He smiled at her encouragingly. With her hair spilling down over her shoulders she looked magnificent; a young lady of the highest rank, ready for her first taste of what the world had to offer. Those powdered old crones at the Salon tomorrow would be bitter with envy.

“You look perfect, and I thought this might be the ideal piece for you to wear” he held out the
Aleska shook her head, turning and lifting her hair to let him place it round her neck, buckling the strap so the gem sat lightly in the hollow of her throat. A sense of excitement began to take over from her previous apprehension. It felt like the games she would play when Bae first taught her how to act and speak like a human; running around the camp with her hair down while the grandmothers asked each other where this pretty little Shemlen girl had come from. A pair of soft kid gloves, and a sable cape around her shoulders completed the outfit, although she frowned in surprise as Anselm handed her a black velvet domino mask.

“This as well?”

He held up his own to his face, eyes twinkling merrily through the holes.

“We want to blend in, don’t we? And everyone in Orlais hides their real face.”

“Not just in Orlais,” she replied, with a dry laugh, tying the ribbons of the mask behind her head.

Aleska hated to admit Lord Trevelyan was right, but night-time made Val Royeaux a different and less intimidating city. Multi-coloured light shimmered from the torches and lanterns illuminating the streets and plazas around the Miroir de la Mère; glittering off the clothes and jewels of the evening revellers. Many of the finer shops remained open, doing every ounce of business they could manage; while musicians, jugglers and street-conjurers strolled about earning coin and applause from the patrons of the cafés and restaurants that abounded in this quarter of the city. The atmosphere was festive and the lamps so bright they almost dimmed the stars, distracting attention away from the baleful green glow in the eastern sky.

“Is it true the Empress has a teapot enchanted to keep her tea at the right temperature?” She asked suddenly as they wandered past a group of players performing scenes from some musical play. It was a strange idea and observing how so many of lanterns were clearly lit by magic had brought it back into her mind.

“I’ve no doubt she does, they’re quite popular if you can afford them.” He laughed. “The Formari will make anything for the right price; heated teapots, bathtubs, glasses that keep your wine cool – even chilled cabinets so you can have ice-cream in the middle of the desert; if that’s your pleasure…”

Aleska gave him a puzzled glance.

“Ice-cream… what’s that?”

He looked at her with surprise before a slow smile crossed his face. Of course, growing up in the remote forests and hills it was unlikely that she would be aware of the latest delicacy to be found in every fashionable establishment across Thedas.

“Permit me to show you, My Lady…” he said, offering her his arm “I think you may well be in for a treat.”

The café he led her into was small, brightly lit and decorated in pastel colours; the words Heladeria Padrillo inscribed in flowing, gilded, script above the door.

“Antivans make the best,” Lord Trevelyan murmured in her ear as the suave, moustachioed waiter showed them to a table “even the Orlesians have to admit that.”

Despite its size, the café was opulent; walls lined with gilded-framed mirrors, the chairs...
upholstered in subtle shades of peach and lavender velvet, while soft candlelight refracted through the crystals of the chandelier overhead. The patrons were no less magnificent; any fears Aleska had about appearing overdressed faded at the sight of the lavish brocades and furs, the ornate masks, and the glittering jewellery – the men no less sumptuously dressed than the women. There could be no doubt that this place was for the elite of the elite; all of them enjoying dishes of what appeared to be some kind of buttery dessert, decorated and embellished in more ways than she could count.

It took an effort not to stare, like a child confronted with marvels from the Beyond, and to maintain her composure as she and Lord Trevelyan were seated at one of the central tables; a prime spot it appeared. He waved away the menu-card the waiter offered

“*Deux Bisous Doux-Amers et un demi-bouteille de Muscat,*” he ordered, with the faintest of smiles in her direction. “You deserve something special for your first time.”

Aleska smiled in return, but said nothing, as the waiter bowed and left; concentrating instead on unfolding her napkin and spreading it over her lap the way *Maela* showed her. Her grandmother served as maid to a noblewoman of Ostwick before leaving the cities to join the Clan and had taught her the manners humans valued. Josephine needn’t have been so fretsome about how she should conduct herself – as if she would grab at the food with bare hands or blow her nose on the tapestries!

“You’re very confident in your choice, Lord Trevelyan. I’ll assume you know what you’re doing.”

“I usually do…” he laughed, unfolding his own napkin with a practised flick of the wrist “…and when I don’t; I bluff magnificently.”

The waiter returned swiftly, setting down two cut-glass bowls filled with pale-green scoops of ice-cream. At a nod from Lord Trevelyan, he sprinkled a spoonful of crystallised lime-peel over each and drizzled honey from a delicate porcelain jug; all with the solemnity of a man making a sacred offering. Uncorking their wine, he bowed again and left them to their treat.

“You first, My Lady,” Trevelyan indicated her spoon “I’m eager to see what you think…”

She threw him a glance and took a spoonful of the dessert. It cut, and looked, like soft butter; she steeled herself for something cloying and sickly but found it melting away the moment it touched her tongue, leaving only a tantalising chill, the tartness and light sweetness of the taste urging her to sample more.

“It’s…” she found herself lost for words “It’s incredible. What did you order?”

Lord Trevelyan gave her a satisfied look, taking a spoonful of his own dish before answering

“It’s called a ‘Bittersweet Kiss’; candied lime and Nevarran heather-honey. It takes a truly discerning palate to appreciate the combination.”

Aleska tried some more, the second mouthful as enticing as the first.

“So, you gambled on my sense of taste? Bold of you…”

He poured their wine, that insolent little smirk of his still playing about his lips.

“I always play to win, or hasn’t Varric warned you?”

She laughed sharply, raising her glass to him in an ironic toast.
“Then I hope… My Lord… that you prove to be a good loser.”

“Always…” he chuckled. “Only an oaf is graceless in defeat.”

This man was hard to resist, Aleska admitted to herself as Lord Trevelyan bantered on; each word laced with intricate double and triple meanings. He might have one thing firmly on his mind, even though he conducted his hunt with elegance and courtesy, but it was the odd touches of kindness that chipped away at her armour. He had been genuinely concerned for her well-being earlier, with an attention to the shifting of her moods that few others showed. There was a complexity about him going far beyond the simple satiating of lust, and that was what made him so enticing and so dangerous.

Laughter nearby caught her attention and her gaze flickered over to the couple in a booth underneath one of the mirrors; the woman wore her hair up and back, flaunting the delicate sweep of her ears, while the stylish young man in military uniform offered her a spoonful from his own dish. Too elegant and richly dressed to be a common whore, unlikely to be admitted to a place like this if she were, and the only obvious Elf in the café other than some of the waiters.

If an Elven woman was beautiful and lucky enough, a rich patron or lover could be her escape from the Alienage into a life of relative ease and luxury. According to Kayden it was quite the thing for some of the more daring young Free-Marcher lords. Her brother had visited Ostwick and Wycome a few times, and said it wasn’t uncommon to see some fine young Signor scandalising society by appearing at the Opera with a lovely Elf on his arm. She wondered if Orlais had imported that fashion along with the craze for ice-cream. The woman noticed her looking and gave her a conspiratorial smile. Elves were harder to fool than humans, and the woman’s smile the acknowledgement of a sister as ‘fortunate’ as her.

She stood, placing her crumpled napkin beside the now-empty dish, cutting Lord Trevelyan off in the middle of his anecdote.

“We should get back to the inn” she said firmly “Thank you for showing me the real Val Royeaux. It’s been very instructive.”

“Already?” Anselm looked up at her, puzzled by this sudden change of mood. They’d been getting along so well “But I thought we might…”

“It’s late, and we have a full day ahead of us.” She signalled to the waiter to bring her cape “I appreciate the distraction, but we have to remember we’re here on business.”

They walked back in silence; Anselm replaying their conversation in his head to try and work out what he might have said or done wrong. At the door of her room he stopped for a moment

“Have I…” he hesitated “Have I done something to cause offence? If so, it was not my intention and I’m truly sorry.”

Aleska sighed quietly. What could she say – ‘You might be charming but everything your kind represents offends me’? That would be cruel and unfair; but whatever else might happen, she would never end up as some rich boy’s mistress for a season.

“You’ve been, as you always are, an entertaining companion” she spoke slowly, emphasising her words so there could be no misunderstanding “But this isn’t a holiday and I am not one of your conquests. Goodnight, Lord Trevelyan. I hope you sleep well.”

She closed the door without waiting for his answer.
Chapter Summary

The night at the cafe allowed Aleska a glimpse into her reality, it wasn't a reality she would want for herself. Trevelyan's attempts to reconnect with her were all met with the same coldness as before, but there was someone in Trevelyan's corner, someone he did not expect.

A surprise waited for both Trevelyan and Aleska when they returned to Haven, but is a visit from relations enough to heal the rift between Trevelyan and Aleska? Or will this cause more issues than before?

The Salon of Mme de Fer proved to be everything that was promised and more, the sights were unforgettable; wine flowed through various ice sculptures which acted like fountains, soft and melodic music enchanted the guests on the dance floor, and the food was something straight from the legends of the banquets of Arlathan. To Aleska, there were all extravagances she could have done without, despite Mme de Fer’s compelling company and offer to join the Inquisition to restore order to a world gone mad. Aleska would forever feel out of place in that world; especially when being escorted by Lord Trevelyan.

Aleska sat on the ground by the flames of the campfire; the makeup which painted her face still remained, the spell which stopped smudging was taking its time to wear off. The sickly fumes of the perfumed oils mixed with the perfumes of the Salon guests made Aleska feel ill, a nausea she still felt. Blue eyes focused on the flames dancing before her, none of her companions dared ask about the rift now emerging between her and Trevelyan. Her skin still tingled from their evening at the café; how he graciously took her out to ease her mind and how one glance from another elf changed her entire perspective of why he’d done it. She pushed those thoughts from her mind, even at the Salon he tried to engage in conversation, offer her something to drink and eat; he was a good escort, a true gentleman.

*Men like him, don’t get fairy tale endings with elven woman.* Aleska reminded herself as the crackling of the fire broke her focus. Beside her, an extended hand held a mug, steam rising over the rim.

“What is this for?” Aleska asked, returning her gaze towards the flames.

“The headache you undoubtedly have,” Lord Trevelyan placed the mug within her hands. “My cousin Sophia taught me how to brew it, it is meant for hang overs, but it should do the trick. Being in a room with all that perfume mustn’t have been easy, you carried yourself well – even Josephine won’t be able to complain about the shining report Mme de Fer will be sending.”

“I thank you for your concern, Lord Trevelyan,” Aleska inhaled deeply, the scent from the mug floating towards her. “But you needn’t concern yourself with my general wellbeing. It isn’t what you’re here for, now if you’ll excuse me.”

Aleska rose, dusting the grass which clung to her trousers. *I need space, from you, from everyone,*
from this forsaken situation. Aleska walked towards her tent, pulling upon the strings which secured a rolled material which served to cover the entrance, the material dropped; giving her some much-needed privacy. Aleska ruffled through a small travel bag, it contained a second change of clothing, a case of scented soap and her hair brush. Perhaps a soak in that heated spring that Varric found will calm my nerves.

Aleska took the entire sack with her, slinging it over her shoulder. “I’ll be at the heated springs, try not to need me.”

“My Lady,” Trevelyan stood up. “At least allow me to walk you there, it is dangerous to wonder by yourself at night.”

Aleska’s hand rested on the hilt of her blade resting neatly in the sheath strapped to her thigh. “I don’t always need you to fight my battles for me.”

Aleska walked towards the springs, the reference of how Trevelyan defended her honour from one of Mme de Fer’s guests came rushing back to both of them; how he bravely offered to duel him, a duel would certainly have ensued had Mme de Fer not stepped in.

Creators, what have I gotten myself into.

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Aleska brought her knees up to her chest, grateful her hair was long enough to cover her bare torso. Closing her eyes, she inhaled the steam from the springs. Varric was right, this was relaxing. Aleska’s hands ran along her legs, her skin was smooth to the touch, the mage assigned to her to keep her dressed used some kind of spell to rid Aleska of any unwanted hair. No one would dare catch her saying it, but she enjoyed the feeling of soft legs. Aleska remembered a mage she had befriended in the clan did the same thing to her face, but her spell was permanent.

“I know it seems extreme,” Maela smiled down at Aleska. “But human girls have this done all the time. If you want to pass for one, this is a must.”

Even now, Aleska could still hear her grandmothers voice as clear as day, the day her Vallaslin would be branded on her stomach and spine instead of her face. Another one of her fathers brilliant thoughts, to make Aleska seem as human as possible when trading with the merchants within the cities, they would never suspect her for an elf, but a beautiful human. Aleska remembered her lessons with Maela well, how to walk, act and speak with the fluency of a Marcher lady, Maela’s time as a servant served Clan Lavellan well, only Aleska’s mother didn’t see the necessity of such measures.

“Are you going to cut Charmer some slack?” Varric said. “He really isn’t as bad as you think he is… or have been told.”

Aleska peered over her shoulder, Varric sat on the rockface beside the springs, his back turned to her to give her some semblance of privacy. Aleska pulled her knees tighter up towards her chest to cover any of her nakedness from Varric. What is he now? Lord Trevelyans’s best friend? Aleska rolled her eyes.

“I never claimed he was,” Aleska sighed softly. “I just know what is constantly on his mind, he may be able to cover it up with clever hidden meanings, but it is clear as day. Once he gets what he wants, he’ll move onto the next woman who catches his fancy; I would just prefer he do it now.”

“I meant in general,” Varric chuckled, then paused, carefully considering his words and how close
her blade lay to her hand. “Listen Sapphire, I don’t pretend to understand what is going through Charmers head, but perhaps it isn’t going to end as badly as you think it might.”

“I know how these kinds of relationships go Varric,” Aleska said firmly. “I know it never ends well, especially for the elven woman involved; friendship or otherwise.”

“Who ever said it has to end?” Varric allowed his words to sink in. “I have written enough tragic romances to know where the two of you are heading, perhaps you’re right and it all goes shit faced, but there is also a possibility it won’t. You could potentially be giving up a chance to gain a powerful friend.”

*Or something more meaningful,* Aleska ran her fingers through her hair. “Thank you for your council Master Tethras, will there be anything else?”

“Charmer wants to know when you’re done,” Varric got off the rocks. “He says he liked your idea of a soak in the hot springs, but doesn’t want to disturb you.”

“Tell him I’ll be out in ten minutes.”

Aleska took the bar of soap from the case, working it into a rich lather to wash the stain of the last few days off her skin. Even she knew it wouldn’t work, but there was always hope.

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Aleska’s fingers worked the buckles of her waist coat, in her absentmindedness she had unbuckled and fastened the same buckle five times. Aleska ran the conversation between herself and Varric. *Am I being too harsh?* Aleska wondered, placing the shawl over her shoulders. *Despite all his flirting, he has been a gentleman through to the end.* Aleska’s eyes scanned the floor at her feet, shifting her gaze to a pair of rabbits hopping before her, rubbing their noses against one another. *Even they seem to have a better grasp of love than I do.*

“My Lady?” Trevelyan broke her focus. “I thought Varric said you’d be done in ten minutes, if you’re still—”

Aleska held up her hand, preventing him from uttering another word. “No, I am done. I shouldn’t have lingered, enjoy your soak, Lord Trevelyan.”

Aleska turned her attention towards him, he stood before her, his shirt within his hand and his trousers loosened. It was dark enough, so she didn’t see anything below his torso. The tattoo upon his chest truly captured her interest, he tried to show her before; but she refused to listen to his anecdote. This time would be no different, but even she could no longer deny it; that man was beautiful. A thousand words threatened to leave her lips, a thousand time she prevented herself from ushering a single word.

Time seemed meaningless to both of them, they could have stood there for hours and it would not have made a difference. Aleska’s eyes scanned his torso taking in every inch of his musculature; the broad shoulders and long powerful arms of a trained archer. Her teeth grazed along her lower lip, her restraint chipping away by the second. *Conceal it, don’t feel… don’t feel.* Aleska reminded herself, she walked past Trevelyan, forcing herself not to look back. *If you look back, he has won. He doesn’t get to win!* Aleska repeated over and over in her mind, attempting to push Trevelyan out of her mind; this was wishful thinking on her part, for the thoughts refused to leave her head, regardless of how much she wanted them gone.

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Packing up camp was always the bane of Aleska’s trips, she despised folding everything precisely
and packing it in such a way that they could easily take it back to Haven. Aleska glanced up, her
eyes resting upon Trevelyan who seemed too focused in his task to notice her. Probably a good
thing, Aleska reassured herself, clipping the tent onto her rucksack, Aleska ensured it was secure.

Flashes danced before Aleska’s eyes, the soft touch of his hands fastening the necklace, his
demeanour to make her feel better. Even down to that ridiculous, grandiose bow. Aleska found
herself smiling, her mind wondered to what could have happened had she not seen that elven
woman with her lover, what if she had been just another woman? What would have happened?
Aleska thought to herself, Trevelyan’s intentions were as plain as day, he intended to show her
more of Val Royeaux; to whisk her away and forget her troubles even for one single night. No…
this is part of his plan! Aleska placed the rucksack upon her shoulders.

“You’re deep in thought,” Varric broke Aleska’s concentration. “Anything you want to share with
the rest of us?”

“Not particularly,” Aleska kicked some sand upon the dying embers of the camp fire, how
Trevelyan managed to keep it burning all night was a mystery to her.

“Would you like me to carry that for you, My Lady?” Anselm extended his hand for her rucksack.

Aleska inhaled deeply, sliding the rucksack off her shoulders, she placed the straps within his
hand. The tips of her fingers brushed along his wrist, a small electrical surge travelled through her
hand and up to her wrist. Stop. It. Now! Aleska cursed, walking towards the Kings Road. How can
one simple evening change my feelings so drastically?

Aleska reasoned, he was no more charming
than usual, what is happening to me?! Aleska internally screamed, she couldn’t deny he was
attractive, charming; any woman would be lucky to have him, but she was not just any woman.

The journey back to Haven would take them a period of a few days, it was a bearable amount of
time; she needed to get her head back to where it was, back to when he was just Lord Trevelyan, a
smart talking, quick thinking, scoundrel who cared more for his woman and wine than he did for
anything else. Why are you letting him become engrained in your head?! This began with the café.
Aleska ran her fingers through her lose hair. One night changed everything, why did I let it? Why
was I weak enough to let it?

Aleska thought back to that fateful night, she had been under a lot of duress from the events of the
morning, seeing Lord Seeker Lucius abandon Val Royeaux, leaving the Chantry dumbfounded.
Aleska remembered how Trevelyan pushed her behind him when the Templars came, making
himself her shield. He didn’t have to do that… yet he did. Aleska remembered the fear which
flowed through her, how daunting it was to have someone like Lord Seeker Lucius call the
Inquisition a bunch of upstarts.

“WATCH OUT!” Trevelyan called, pulling Aleska into his hold.

Aleska felt her entire body jerk back, her hands upon his chest as she noticed the sheer fall of the
ledge she had almost walked off. Heart thudding. Adrenaline surging. Breath quickening. Lord
Trevelyan’s arm rested upon her waist, holding her tightly against his body, even through his
armour, she could feel the muscles beneath.

Blue eyes locked with green, his grasp loosened allowing her the freedom to move away if she
desired, Aleska stepped away from him, the shock of what could have happened still surging
through her, had she taken a single step further, she would have fallen to her death. A sense of
mortality replaced the sensation of shock.
“I need to sit down,” Aleska felt her legs go numb.

Trevelyan placed a hand upon the small of her back leading her to a fallen tree which had been blown over by the storms that overtook the land a few nights ago. With Trevelyan’s aid, Aleska sat down waiting for the shock to leave her system entirely.

“Are you all right?” Trevelyan sat beside her, offering her a sip of water from his flask.

Aleska accepted the flask, she could see it written all over his face, a silent plea for her to talk to him, to let him into what happened that night; why she reacted so suddenly. Aleska swallowed a large gulp of water, the feeling slowly returned to her legs. *If you cannot see why, then that is enough reason not to let you in.* Aleska drew a deep breath, what was she supposed to say? ‘I caught a glimpse of my reality?’ No, that would just force Trevelyan to reassure her, even he would understand the end result if they allowed themselves for even a moment to give in.

“I’m fine,” Aleska handed hi the flask.

“No,” Trevelyan used the same tone as he did before, when he aided her with her waistcoat. “You almost walked off a cliff, I have never seen you like this; tell me what is going through that head of yours.”

“You won’t understand,” Aleska snapped, rising from the log.

“Then help me understand?” Trevelyan stood up, noting both Cassandra and Varric pretending to be busy.

“I can’t!” Aleska found her voice raised, this surprised even her. “If you cannot see the issue, then this just confirms how much of a bad idea this is. I’m sorry Lord Trevelyan, but you’re just going to have to accept that as my answer, or figure it out on your own. I am done spoon-feeding you.”

Aleska walked towards Varric and Cassandra, hoping that would be the last of their conversation about her distance – if only Trevelyan knew how to drop it.

***

The rest of the journey continued in silence, as the large surrounding walls of Haven drew nearer, Aleska’s relief followed with it. Aleska watched as Cassandra and Varric briskly walked towards the gates, she couldn’t blame them, the tension rising between her and Trevelyan would make anyone uncomfortable. Even she was surprised by her own actions, she had never once raised her voice to anyone – but she had finally reached boiling point.

“May I speak with you?” Trevelyan deliberately held back, waiting for Varric and Cassandra to get a reasonable distance away.

“About what?” Aleska turned around, her hands rested on her hips.

“I am not about to just accept what you told me in the Hinterlands,” Trevelyan led her to a quiet corner of Haven. “If I have done something to offend you, said anything; let me know so I can fix it! I don’t want to go the rest of our journey thinking every time I open my mouth I might offend you.”

“You did nothing to offend me,” Aleska folded her arms, the bushes rustled beside them. “Why do you automatically assume that?”

“For one,” Trevelyan extended his thumb. “We were having a pleasant evening at the café, I’ll
admit it was nice to see you relaxed. Then all of a sudden you want to leave, no warning. Then,” he
extended his index finger. “You pass some comment about not wanting to be one of my conquests.
I don’t know if an anecdote offended you or led you to believe I thought of you in such a light. So
just tell me, so I can proceed to fix it.”

Aleska could scarcely believe her ears, had he been replaying the conversation over in his mind the
same as she had? Except he didn’t see what she saw, he only assumed she was in a bad mood. He
didn’t see how an elven woman, no older than herself, was draped over her lover, accepting the ice
cream off his spoon; all the while knowing he probably had a high-born wife at home. How she
raised her glass to a fellow elf, assuming Aleska was in the same position as she was. Was her
anger misguided towards Trevelyan?

Offend. Me. I know how this game goes otherwise, I may have grown up sheltered… but I know
what happens the day I give in, the day you get what you want. Can’t we just go back to you being
all charming, pretending to be interested, passing a comment which a thickly layered double
meaning. Forget the café, forget Val Royeaux; imagine it never existed.”

“Is that what you really want?” Trevelyan ran his fingers through his reddish-brown hair.

No. “Yes.” Aleska said, noticing the bushes rustle once more.

Before she had time to react, a massive hound leaped out and pushed Trevelyan to the ground; a
fearsome bark erupting from its mouth as Trevelyan struggled. Aleska froze on spot, not knowing
how to react, she responded in the only way she knew how.

“ANSELM!” Aleska screamed, hoping someone would hear her, the only thing she heard was the
sound of Trevelyan laughing and footsteps coming closer to their location.

“It’s all right,” Trevelyan laughed, ruffling the dog’s fur with a bemused expression “Cuddle’s?
What in the Void are you doing here?”

Aleska noted the playful nibbles and licks the huge dog was giving, taking a step back as it turned
it’s attention to her with a cheerful ‘urrf’. Emerging from the gates of Haven were a man, around
the same age as Trevelyan, and an older woman. They had the same reddish-brown hair and the
man was easily one of the biggest humans she’d ever seen. Relations? Sibling perhaps? Aleska
wondered, taking another step back.

As Aleska’s gaze shifted between Trevelyan pinned to the floor by this oversized brute, still
laughing and tussling with it, and the two new arrivals, only one thought crossed her mind; a
thought which inadvertently left her lips.

“You have got to be kidding me!”
Family Matters

Chapter by Lannister418

Chapter Summary

Commander Cullen has a welcome surprise for Aleska on her return from Val Royeaux, and she finally has the chance to be alone and reflect while Anselm copes with the unexpected arrival of his cousins from Ostwick...

Leaving the Trevelyans to their reunion, Aleska continued along the road towards the stables; leading Vesenya by the reins. Her horse, trained to remain calm in the midst of battle, hadn't been anywhere near as spooked as she was by the sudden appearance of the massive dog. She’d witnessed enough of the incessant skirmishes between the City-States to know that humans valued horses for war as much as for transport, and the old tales said the Emerald Knights of the Dalish Kingdom once rode their Halla as mounts into battle; but both the Halla and the Dalish were too few in number for such strategies now.

Jonas, the dog’s equally massive owner, had called him to heel; mumbling red-faced apologies about how “…he were just excited to see his pal again…” and “…he’s just a bloody big pup really… pardon me Orlesian!” while the older woman – Sophia - had looked on with an expression of amused exasperation. Anselm had made introductions, as bemused as her at the unexpected presence of his cousins, but she was too tired and strained to make polite talk with these new dignitaries; needing a bath, a meal and a sleep before she could be sure of not offending anyone and getting glared at by Josephine.

Commander Cullen fell into step beside her as she led Vesenya into her stall and handed the reins over to one of the grooms.

“A little warning would have been nice…” she muttered; the Commander grunted in agreement.

“The messenger from Highever only arrived the day before they did. He said he was delayed on the road…”

Aleska gave him a sidelong glance.

“You don’t believe that?”

Cullen shook his head, patting Vesenya’s flank as Aleska fed her an apple from the bin.

“Even Sister Leliana was taken by surprise, although she’d rather cut her own tongue out before admitting that. Count Boniface must have been arranged with Teryn Fergus to keep their landing discreet; and that almost certainly means Queen Olivia was involved somewhere along the line. The Count was her father’s closest friend…”

“Wonderful…” she sighed, brushing the hay from her hands. “This causes even more complications, I imagine?”

The Commander pondered the question as they left the stable together and walked towards the gates.
“I don’t know…” he admitted. “Lady Josephine thinks it’s a sign the Inquisition is being taken more seriously. That isn’t an entirely comforting thought; given our current state, and after everything that happened in Val Royeaux.”

Aleska let out a low groan.

“I’m really too tired to deal with any of this right now. Please tell me we can talk about it later?”

“Of course; the Council meeting won’t be held until after dinner…” he smiled slightly. “I didn’t imagine you would be in the mood for bickering until you’d at least had a chance to bathe and change.”

“That sounded dangerously like a joke, Commander. Are you feeling all right?”

Cullen gave an awkward laugh, fidgeting with the pommel of his sword.

“I’ve been accused of having a sense of humour now and again. Usually by people who don’t know me that well…”

They’d reached the door of her cottage and Aleska paused with her handle on the latch.

“Perhaps you should practice a little more?” She said with a smile. “I could tell Varric you’re looking for lessons?”

The expression on Commander Cullen’s face, before he realised she was joking, was one to treasure. The man looked like he was about to choke.

“That… erm… I… That shouldn’t be necessary, but… erm… thank you for the offer.” As she turned to go inside he reached inside his cloak and produced a small bundle of papers. “There is… erm… one other thing.”

“Can’t the reports wait until later?” Aleska sighed, every bone in her body demanding rest; then she saw the familiar, flowing script on the outside sheet of the sealed letter and everything around her seemed to stop.

“This arrived a few days after you left…” Cullen placed it in her outstretched hand “I thought it wiser to keep it safe for your return, rather than risk forwarding it on. Was… was that appropriate?”

“Yes… yes of course it was. Thank you…” The seal looked intact but that meant nothing; Commander Cullen must have noticed the way she was examining it.

“The letter was delivered directly to me,” he assured her, “no-one else has handled it. Not every piece of correspondence needs to be scrutinised by one of Sister Leliana’s experts.”

Aleska kept her eyes firmly fixed on the letter, determined to retain her composure until she was in private.

“Thank you for keeping this secure, Commander… this… it means more than you can imagine.”

Cullen gave a small bow in response.

“I’ll send a servant to prepare your bath and bring some food; and I’ll ensure you’re not disturbed further until after dinner.”

She nodded mutely as he departed and closed the door behind her; the first of her tears staining the
Aleska read her father’s letter over for the second time as the servant poured another kettle of hot water into the tub. Commander Cullen had been thoughtful to keep it away from the ever-vigilant eyes of Leliana’s agents but, even if they’d been fluent in the elegant and archaic High Elvhen preserved by Clan Lavellan, she doubted they would have gleaned anything useful from Bae’s circuitous and allusive phrasing. Only someone intimate with the life and wanderings of the Clan could understand the true meaning behind his words.

Nothing of what he had to say came as a surprise to her. The destruction of the human’s most sacred temple and the death of so many important people had only brought more chaos and violence. Elves were an easy target, especially as rumour spread of a group of heretics in the Frostbacks proclaiming an Elf to be the Herald of Andraste. Fortunately, the Clan had avoided serious clashes – few men were willing to tackle well-armed Dalish hunters when there were easier pickings in the Alienages – but Bae’s references suggested he was guiding the Clan even further into the wilds, possibly risking the desolate territories fringing the Blightlands; something they only did in the most desperate times.

At least they were all safe, that was something to hold onto; and her father’s words of caution and encouragement fell on fertile ground… Not every human is ill-disposed towards the People; find those you can trust and cleave to them. When the Dread Wolf roams wild we must seek our allies where we can…

Cassandra she could trust… and Cullen. It felt odd to admit that. Any encounter with the Templars was potentially bad news for the Dalish; most of the Order had the common sense not to go searching for trouble but there were always the zealots – for whom any Mage outside the confines of a Circle-Tower was an affront to their Maker. Neither the Seeker nor the Commander had allowed their Faith to blind them to the abuses perpetrated in its name, though; nor had they been afraid to stand up and oppose the corruption they saw. They might not always agree with each other, but she knew she could rely on them…

Anselm… however…

In the field he was lethal, whether with bow or blade, there was no denying that; and he never seemed to visibly balk at the roughest or dirtiest task – though always with a sly comment and that perpetual semi-smirk. She could rely on him in a fight, but could she trust him?

Not within a thousand paces of my bedchamber… she thought, with a dry laugh, while another part of her wondered to what extent she could trust herself around him.

“Your bath’s ready, milady. Do you need anything else?”

The maid; a skinny, nervous, City-Elf with a broad Fereldan accent hovered by her elbow. Aleska shook her head, closing the letter and placing it in the inner-pocket of her tunic. She was getting too used to being served, Kayden would mock her mercilessly for that, but at least she hadn’t become as bad as these noblewomen who needed a dozen attendants just to put their stockings on.

She smiled at the girl, which just seemed to increase her anxiety.

“No, thank you. I can manage fine from here…”

The maid curtsied and scurried out. Aleska bolted the door behind her and rested her head against
I’m home…

###

“Should’ve bloody written…” Jonas grumbled, scratching Cuddles behind the ears as Anselm paced nervously up and down the floor of the cottage Josephine had somehow found for his cousins “We was worried sick…”

“I’ve been busy…” he mumbled, aware of how pathetic that sounded, and the look Jonas gave him showed how little his cousin thought of the excuse.

“Thought you were dead, ’till Liv wrote us…” he growled. “Weren’t right to do that… not to Soph!”

Anselm felt an unfamiliar knot of guilt tangling in his stomach. Joe was right; he should have thought to let them know he was alive, but there were just too many distractions. He glanced penitently at Sophia, sitting beside her younger brother with the same composure she always showed in public. *She is still very pale*, he noted, with dark circles beneath her eyes. It wasn’t fair of him to have caused her needless grief; not so soon after losing Guenther that way…

“I’m sorry…” he sighed at last, running his fingers through his hair. “I was stupid. You know what I’m like…”

“All too well…” Sophia replied, with a gentle smile. She stood and walked over to him, putting her arms around him and laying her head on his shoulder “I’m just happy to see you alive, Tesoro…”

“What are you doing here anyway?” he asked, resting his head against hers. “It isn’t safe for either of you… there’s still fighting in the Hinterlands”

“There’s fighting everywhere” she reminded him, stepping back and drying her eyes, “and nowhere is safe right now. Father needed someone he could trust to find out what’s really going on…”

“And to make sure I’m behaving myself?” Anselm laughed with a hint of his customary sarcasm. “And what about my own darling Papa – no words of concern from him?”

The look Sophia gave him was reproachful, but she was unable to resist a faint smile. Even chaos couldn’t entirely dampen Anselm’s spirits.

“Uncle Giulio is more concerned that you’re going to get yourself tangled up in another scandal. Are you?”

“Course he bloody will!” Jonas chuckled, his bad mood fading. “He’s awake, ain’t he?”

Cuddles’ soft, huffing, bark implied even the dog shared the general opinion of his character.

“If you’re worried about me and the Herald you needn’t be…” Anselm grumped. “She seems determined not to appreciate my charms.”
“Then she’s a very sensible woman,” Sophia responded dryly, crossing over to the table to pour them all a cup of coffee, “but I saw how you looked at her and I know how persistent you can be. Regardless of whether what they say about her is true, this isn’t someone you can have one of your little affairs with. The consequences, especially for her, could be far too serious…”

Anselm took the coffee she offered him; brewed in the Ostwick style, with almond milk and a hint of cinnamon, the aroma made him feel briefly homesick. Aleska would probably like this.

“I’m not sure what you mean…” he muttered defensively, uncomfortable at her scrutiny and the implication of her words.

“You’re not a fool, Anselm; don’t act like one.” Sophia snapped, “I heard what happened in Val Royeaux; do you think the same, and worse, isn’t happening elsewhere? Heretics proclaiming an Elf to be Andraste’s Herald, wild rumours of blood magic and savage Dalish rites – how do you think people are responding?”

“Don’t tell me you believe that nonsense?” Anselm retorted. Sophia took a deep breath to calm herself, pressing her fingertips against her temples.

“Of course I don’t, but there are plenty who do; or who’ll pretend to in order to create trouble. There have been riots in Kirkwall and Ansberg, and father had to send soldiers to stop a mob ransacking the Alienage. Alistair and Olivia already have their hands full trying to deal with the Landsmeet objecting to them giving sanctuary to Fiona and her allies; if things get any worse they could be facing outright rebellion. The last thing we need is you running around trying to bed the woman at the centre of all this!”

“I’m not trying to…” Anselm began; but the look of strain on Sophia’s face, the exhaustion in her eyes, made him stop “Please, Fringuella, let’s not argue. You know I hate upsetting you…”

She kissed him on the cheek and sat back down. Cuddles pawed at her knee with a sympathetic whine and she reached over to pet his head.

“I’m not upset with you. I’m just worried; for you, for her, for all of us. Everything is falling apart and Leliana believes this Inquisition is the only thing that can pull it back together…”

A suspicion began to crystallise in Anselm’s mind. Sophia was no stranger to the Game and had always been an active supporter of Divine Justinia’s attempts at reform.

“Did Nightingale invite you here…?” He asked carefully, and Sophia replied with a sly little smile.

“Fergus’s rangers are good, but not good enough to fool the Left Hand. We didn’t want to advertise my presence on the road, so a little subterfuge was necessary. I would have come anyway, for your sake and father’s, but Leliana said she needed me and that’s not a request she’d make lightly…”

“And I weren’t letting you go anywhere on your own…” Jonas rumbled, looking fondly at his sister. Anselm shook his head, grinning.

“The thought I might be having fun without you didn’t figure into your decision at all?”

The big man sniggered wickedly.

“Heard there’s bloody good hunting here; and ain’t bagged a demon since that time at the Old Tombs.”

“Ugh, don’t remind me…” Anselm shuddered “Both of us needed a change of breeches after that!”
Sophia laughed, extending her hands to both of them.

“My two, sweet, idiots; what am I going to with the pair of you?”

***

Aleska’s fear that the council meeting would descend into a long, circular, argument proved justified; Cullen and Cassandra remained adamant they should try to win the Templars over to their side while Leliana and Josephine were just as vocal about seeking the support of the Rebel Mages. As usual, things had ended in stalemate and it would be up to her to make the decision. For all their skill and training, the leaders of the Inquisition seemed unable to actually lead.

*But what good are hands when the head’s been cut off?* The thought made her smile, it was the kind of thing Bae might say if he was here.

“I apologise for losing my temper…” Commander Cullen muttered to her as they left the chamber. He still looked and sounded irritated; some of Leliana’s comments about the Templars appeared to have been directed at him and had plainly got under his skin “but the Lord Seeker is leading the Order down a dangerous path. There must be a way we can convince them to see reason…”

“He didn’t seem too interested in reason at Val Royeaux” Aleska said; recalling Lord Lucius’s harsh, grating, voice and mocking words “But I know this is important to you. If we can find a way…”

“Thank you…” Cullen paused thoughtfully; not wanting to continue what had become a pointless argument and looking for a way to change the direction of their conversation “The letter you received; I hope it was good news?”

“As good as I could expect” she admitted “My Clan are safe, and avoiding the worst of trouble; Mythal grant it stays that way.”

Cullen breathed a sigh of relief.

“I’m glad to hear that. In all this chaos, it’s good to know the ones we care for are safe.”

Aleska nodded in agreement.

“Your own family; are they well?” she asked. The Commander hesitated.

“I haven’t heard from them in a while; the post in Southern Ferelden is erratic at the best of times, but my sister would find a way to let me know if anything was wrong.”

Aleska thought for a moment. Cullen had mentioned having been absent from Ferelden for over a decade. She wasn’t sure exactly how far away South Reach was but, with a fast horse…

“You know, I’m sure Ser Rylen could look after things if you wanted to take a few days…”

The Commander shook his head, emphatically.

“Thank you, but I’m doing more good for them here. Once all this is settled I can make time for a visit.”

It sounded to Aleska that the Commander was avoiding something but trying to push the subject would only aggravate him. A murmur of conversation caught her attention and she glanced towards the far end of the Chantry; she could see Lord Trevelyan’s cousin, Lady Sophia, talking to
Mother Giselle and a comment of Leliana’s returned to mind.

“Would you excuse me? I was a bit short with Lady Sophia when we first met. I ought to greet her properly; it might put Josephine in a better mood!”

Cullen laughed softly.

“It might indeed! And I need to get these reports finished off…” he began to leave but paused mid-stride and turned back to her “The… erm… training sessions… we spoke about?”

Aleska recalled she’d agreed to demonstrate some of the Clan’s fighting techniques to the recruits; skills that might well save their lives in the field.

“We’ll start as soon as I get back from chasing Grey Wardens and Qunari mercenaries,” she promised. “You should start some of the men on dual-blade combat if they don’t already know it; that way, I won’t have to cover the basics.”

“Of course. I’ll have Rylen put a schedule together,” Cullen nodded gratefully. “Thank you, Herald, and good evening.”

###

Aleska had begun to appreciate the long summer evenings this far south; the business of the day might have wound down but there was still enough light to enjoy a moment or two of solitude, despite the Commander’s constant concern about her leaving the walls of Haven without an escort. The Chantry bells called the faithful to Vespers, while raucous laughter echoed from the open windows of the Maiden. She recognized Sera’s infectious, nasal, giggling and Varric’s deeper rumble; no doubt Lord Trevelyan and his cousin Jonas would be there, the Dwarf delighted with two new cronies for his evening game. The temptation to join them was strong but she fought against it. There was too much she had to think about and couldn’t afford distractions.

She nodded a greeting to Harrit, banking the fires of the forge for the night, as she passed by and continued on to her favourite spot by the lake; far enough away to feel she was alone but only a short run to the town if necessary. She sat, looking out over the quietly rippling waters, as the shadows lengthened; replaying the conversation with Lady Sophia in her head.

It was a relief not to be burdened with someone else’s opinions and good advice; the older woman had restricted her comments to some useful observations about Grand Enchanter Fiona and what Aleska might expect from a meeting with her. She’d expected another Vivienne; but Lady Sophia was less caustic, and more conciliatory in her feelings about the Rebellion, than the Imperial Enchanter. The fresh perspective was valuable, even though it added even more layers of complexity to the situation. One thing she had gleaned was that even the Rebel Mages were not united in their stance – either about independence from the Chantry or the course they should take from here. That might make them easier find an accord with than the Templars; especially if the Inquisition could offer them a viable third option.

It was the woman’s eyes that caught Aleska’s attention most as they spoke; a deep, rich, violet – according to Dalish lore, the mark of one in whom Magic ran deep and strong – and shadowed with sadness. Aleska knew enough about grief to tell Lady Sophia still nursed a profound loss; and the man’s ring she wore on her thumb, unconsciously touching and turning it as they spoke, hinted at its nature…

Her thoughts were interrupted by something knocking against her foot; a small, well-chewed, leather ball. She looked up to see the massive Mabari-hound, Cuddles, standing a few yards away
and watching her expectantly. She picked up the ball carefully and he tensed, eager for the chase. According to Cullen these dogs were as intelligent as a human child and could understand language; she might as well give that a try.

“Do you want me to throw this?” she asked, holding up the ball so he could see. Cuddles barked gleefully in response.

“Well, since you asked nicely…” Aleska shrugged and threw the ball as hard as she could. The dog raced after it and, a few seconds later, came proudly trotting back holding it between his teeth. He stopped at the same place and dropped the ball, nudging it with his nose so it bounced across the grass to her feet – as if he could tell she was nervous of his size and power and didn’t want to intimidate her. She patted the log on which she sat.

“It’s all right, Cuddles; you can come and say hello.”

Cuddles gave a happy little ‘urf’ and wandered over, flopping to the ground beside her and resting his head on her knee. She scratched him behind the ears and his eyes closed in canine bliss, his stumpy tail pounding the grass. Aleska recalled something else Cullen told her about the Mabari. They didn’t have owners, the way most dogs did; instead, one would sometimes bond with a human – in a kind of partnership – but apart from that they remained free creatures, choosing to cooperate with humans rather than be mastered by them. It sounded much like the relationship between the Dalish and the Halla; perhaps their two races weren’t so different as some liked to pretend. From what Leliana said, this one was a pup of the Cousland Mabari that accompanied the Hero-Queen Olivia during the Blight…

“Perhaps they should put you in charge…” she pondered aloud, still scratching his head, “you’d probably do a better job than I am.”

Cuddles gave a disdainful snort and nuzzled closer to her.

“You are a smart dog.” she laughed “No-one with any sense wants to deal with this mess.”

He sniffed at the palm of her hand, the one that bore the mark, and looked up at her with a sympathetic whine.

“I know…” Aleska sighed “I don’t exactly have a choice.”
Chapter Summary

Tensions rise within the Inquisition, a night with Anselm proves to help break the ice, but the comradely was not to last. In the Hinterlands, wolves threaten the local farms; but wolves aren't their only concern. Boiling point hits and Aleska makes a deal that she could end up regretting.

The moon rose high against the night sky, the rays illuminated the town of Haven. Clouds swirled along the night sky, small bolts of lightning drew upon the magic of the Veil, bolts of green lightning dances along the massive tear in the Veil; it was both beautiful and dangerous. The moons rays fell upon the lake, the waters were all but still in one spot, for the Herald of Andraste decided tonight would be the night she needed her escape from the world.

Waters crashed all around Aleska’s body, floating in the depths of the lake, her eyes closed, her lungs begged for air; but she refused to listen. Aleska’s eyes shot open, her vision hazed within the murky waters, she saw only darkness before her; no signs of life within that lake. She kicked off the rock by her feet, making her way to the surface of the lake. Gasping for breath, Aleska’s lungs rejoiced in the fresh air filling them. Running her fingers through her wet hair, Aleska smoothed the loose strands.

Commander Cullen will not be pleased if he saw me out here. Aleska swam to the lakes bank, grabbing the material lying by her armour. The fuzzy material tickled Aleska’s cheeks, it sufficed to dry her body enough to put her armour back on. She made her way to Haven, noticing a shadow walk down the path. Shit, Aleska ducked into the bushes, crouching low within the foliage to avoid being seen. I said Cullen’s name too many times.

Aleska joked, watching Cullen walk towards the stables.

“Knight-Lieutenant,” Cullen beckoned a man closer. “Have you seen the Herald? She left this in my quarters.”

Aleska looked at the silver pendant between Cullen’s fingers, her hand immediately went to her neck, only the chain remained. Shit! Aleska silently cursed, listening to both men converse. A lifetime seemed to pass from when Cullen had begun the conversation to him venturing back into Haven. Aleska took this as her cue to go back to her quarters. Hopefully no one will spot me, she hoped, thinking of Cassandra or Cullen catching her sneaking around town.

The town itself had settled down for the evening, only a few lights flickered in the windows, one window caught her eye in particular. As per Josephine’s request, Anselm had been afforded one of the cottages to stay in. Looking up at the stars, Aleska searched for one specific constellation. He is up rather late, especially with us travelling tomorrow, before Aleska could realize what she was doing, she made her way towards the door.

Opening the door, Aleska stepped into the scented room, the perfumed oils drifted towards her, reminding her of Mme de Fer’s salon. Two wine glasses lay neatly upon a silver tray, along with
an assortment of Orlesian cakes; Anselm turned to face her, his breeches loosened around his waist. The shirt upon his chest complimented his physique, a loose collared shirt unbuttoned to his naval, his tattoo visible through the thin material.

“That should teach me to knock,” Aleska closed the door behind her, leaning against the cool wood. “Are you busy?”

“My Lady?” Anselm questioned if what he saw before him was real or a figment of his imagination. “What are you doing up so late?”

“I could ask the same of you,” Aleska watched his movements intently. “We are travelling tomorrow. I need you in at your best.”

There was that word, need, as if she couldn’t do it without him; as if him being there made these journeys more tolerable. With a quick and witty word to make her laugh, despite all her attempts to not crack a smile; a smile still happens when she thinks no one is looking.

“I was hoping to talk to you—” Aleska began.

The door opened upon her, losing her footing the tip of her boot caught in the carpet, had it not been for Anselm’s quick reactions, she would have fallen to the floor. One arm firmly around her waist, holding her against his warm body, the other around her shoulders, giving her the support, she needed to regain her footing.

“Apologies, my Lord,” a serving girl curtsied. “Your… erm… guest is waiting for you.”

Of course, she is, Aleska rolled her eyes, before she moved out of his grasp, his scent travelled to her nose. The subtle scent enticed her senses, her hands rested upon his chest, but only for a moment; moving out of his arms, she folded her arms. The serving girl’s gaze glanced between them both, curtsying before Aleska.

“My lady, Herald.” She lowered her eyes. “Had I known you were with Lord Trevelyan, I wouldn’t have disturbed you. Shall I tell your guest to wait?”

“No,” Anselm produced a pouch of coins. “Kindly give this to her, with my sincerest of apologies.”

Aleska watched as the serving girl bowed out of the room, her gaze still refused to meet Aleska’s. A pang flowed through her, her lips pressed into a thin line. Was this jealousy? Don’t be ridiculous! What do I have to be jealous of? Aleska regained her composure, watching as Anselm closed the door.

“What was that about?” Aleska attempted to smile, placing her hands before her.

“Just paying a debt I can’t attend to in person right now.” Anselm poured them both a glass of wine, placing one within her hand.

“Don’t let me keep you from your evening,” Aleska placed the glass upon the desk, heading towards the door. “Good night, Lord Trevelyan.”

Aleska felt his hand in the crook of her arm, a silent plea for her to stay with him, turning around; she gazed at him. His hand travelled up her shoulder, noticing her skin was cold to the touch. I had a dip in the lake, Aleska’s eyes caught the wet patch on his shirt where her head touched. Aleska’s hands rested upon her hips, her index finger tapping along the leather of her waistcoat.

“An hour talking with you is preferable to a night with anyone else,” Anselm placed the glass
within her hand once more.

The corner of Aleska’s lips formed a smile, one of the blankets from the bed had been placed around her shoulders. Anselm’s deep green eyes looked into Aleska’s, how they mirrored concern. As if to beg her to talk to him, *how can I guarantee you will even understand? Not reassure me this will be different?* Aleska wrapped the blanket around her shoulders. Flickering her gaze towards the bed, Aleska noted the guitar resting upon the sheets.

“You play?” Aleska placed the glass down on the table, carefully picking up the guitar and admiring the fine craftsmanship.

“Indeed, I do, My Lady.” Anselm smiled, extending his hand for the guitar. “Would you permit me to play you a song?”

“Please,” Aleska handed him the guitar, taking a seat within one of the arm chairs.

Before he began playing, Anselm handed her the wine glass, sitting down on his bed; he made himself comfortable whilst tuning the strings. Aleska awaited with anticipation, her eyes watching intently as his fingers worked the various knobs of the guitars neck. To her astonishment, Anselm’s fingers strummed effortlessly against the guitar, creating a beautiful melody. Closing her eyes, Aleska allowed the music to overtake her. Then came the singing.

“You came back to find I was gone,” Anselm’s voice carried around the cottage, “and that place is empty, like the hole that was left in me. It’s not what you meant to me—”

Aleska placed her hand on the neck of the guitar, preventing him from strumming another note. “You can’t start in the middle of a song, you have to go to the beginning.”

Aleska looked around, noticing a piano in the corner of the room, finishing her wine, she got up. Sitting at the piano, her fingers ran along the various keys. Aleska cleared her throat, remembrance of the lessons which Maela taught her came rushing back. Fingers ran along the ivory keys, creating a tune. Aleska hit the wrong note, silently cursing. Regaining her composure, Aleska tried again, noticing Anselm sit beside her with guitar in hand.

“Love that once hung on the wall,” Aleska began, remembering the love ballad her grandmother taught her as a young girl. “Used to mean something, but now is means nothing. The echoes are gone in the hall, but I still remember the pain of Umbralis.”

The guitar strumming began again, Aleska’s fingers ran along the piano keys, chiming in with her lines when appropriate. *He really sings well,* Aleska smiled as he came to the end of his verse, the guitar strumming slowed as her next verse came close. Clearing her throat, Aleska began singing again, she hadn’t sung in years. The song ended, with both Aleska and Anselm singing the final verse together, panting for breath; Aleska looked at Anselm sitting beside her.

“You play really well,” Anselm caught his breath. “Perhaps we should do this again sometime.”

“I’d like that,” Aleska smiled, running her fingers along the keys until Trevelyan’s hand placed over hers.

Aleska’s eyes glanced at his hand now taking hers, closing her eyes, she realized she hadn’t been fighting him. *Maybe just once,* Aleska licked her dry lips, noticing Anselm lean in closer. Aleska’s heard thudded heavily within her chest, the pounding travelled through to her stomach. As if fate had decided this, the door burst open and Cuddles placed his paws upon Aleska’s lap; licking her cheeks.
“Cuddles, no!” Aleska laughed, trying to push him off her. “Come on, you know that doesn’t wash off easily.”

Cuddles gave a happy ‘urff’ jumping around them wagging his tail, soon Jonas followed him, smelling faintly of alcohol. *Probably coming back from a night of drinking.* Aleska smiled, taking this as her cue to get some sleep.

“My Lady,” Anselm stood. “You needn’t go just yet.”

“I should,” Aleska smiled softly. “I need to get some sleep, it is quite late, thank you for an enjoyable evening, My Lord.”

Aleska walked out of the cottage, heading towards her own quarters. In the moment she had forgotten her troubles, the Breach and persuading Horse Master Dennett to supply the Inquisition with fresh mounts. The only thing to bring her to reality was the sensation of someone violently pulling her back. Aleska nearly lost her footing for a second time, regaining it quicker than before.

“Listen here,” the woman before her spoke. “I ain’t losing out on a chance with Lord Trevelyan.”

“Excuse me?” Aleska looked at the woman, clearly seething with rage. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t play stupid with me,” she raised a finger in Aleska’s direction. “He was my most loyal client, never missed an appointment, then you show up and all I got was the gold and nothing else.”

Aleska realized she happened to be the woman from earlier, the one Anselm meant to give the money to. *It took guts for her to come find me.* Aleska folded her arms, waiting for the woman to finish her ramblings. *So, you bother me for this trivial nonsense, if you want him; than have him.* Aleska cocked her hips, resting her hands upon them.

“I’m losing enough business to pretty elves,” she finished off. “I ain’t losing Lord Trevelyan to some elven harlot.”

“Commander Cullen,” Aleska beckoned Cullen closer. “Kindly escort the lady out of Haven, she seems to have lost her way through the town.”

“Of course, Herald.” Cullen lowered his head.

Aleska watched the woman’s face grow pale, the corner of her lips twitched as her eyes shot to her glowing hand. *Care to rephrase the harlot comment?* Aleska thought, watching Cullen step closer and placing a hand upon the woman’s arm.

“Get your bloody hands off me,” she demanded, storming out of Haven.

“Are you all right?” Cullen ran his fingers through his hair.

“It won’t be the first time someone will call me a harlot,” Aleska inhaled deeply. “Nor will it be the last.”

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Anselm looked round at the Inquisition scouts setting up the campsite by the pond at Redcliffe Farms.
“So, what’s the first order of business?” he grinned, unslinging his bow and setting it carefully down beside his pack “Wolves or Watchtowers? I call wolves!”

“Neither,” Aleska retorted, handing him an entrenching spade “These camps will need to serve Inquisition patrols as long as we’re needed. Camps need latrine trenches. Enjoy getting down and dirty.”

*Now we’ll see just how committed this smooth-tongued Lord really is,* she thought; as Anselm looked at the spade in his hands, nodding quietly to himself.

“Fair enough, just one question...” He glanced at her with an innocent expression. “How deep would you like it?”

“That’s...” She glared, knowing full well his intention but unable to find anything in either his expression or tone to call him out on. “Speak to the requisition officer, she can give you the specifics.”

Anselm gave a courteous little bow and strolled away whistling, tossing the spade casually from hand to hand.

“You have to admit, Boss, he got you with that one!” Bull slapped his knee, laughing as he settled himself down and pulled a bottle out his pack.

“He’s infuriating!” Aleska exclaimed, throwing up her hands in frustration. “It’s like he knows exactly how to pull my strings without actually saying or doing anything out of line!”

Bull laugh rumbled deep in his chest. The young Ostwicker had spent a few nights drinking with the Chargers and was good company – even Skinner was forced to admit he was ‘alright... for a Shem!”

“Keep on at him with the tough jobs for a while...” He advised. “I’ve run across plenty rich kids like him in the past – daddy buys them a mercenary company, so they can play Captain and wave the family colours. The bad ones either run home wetting their breeches at the first sign of trouble – or end up getting their throat cut by their own men...”

“What about the good ones?” Aleska asked.

Bull tugged the cork out of the bottle and took a long drink.

“They’re the dangerous ones -the ones you don’t want to go up against. Thing with Nobles is, when they know what they’re doing they REALLY know...” He took another swig. “That kid’s either going to be a serious liability or a major asset.”

“Well... someone’s not been able to take her eyes off his major assets all morning...” Sera smirked, grabbing the bottle from Bull. Aleska glared at her.

“There’s still plenty of space on latrine duty!” She warned, the edge in her voice making it clear the joke stopped now.

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She had to admit he’d made a good job – by midday there was a six-foot by two-foot trench staked out and already dug to a two-foot depth; downwind of the camp and well away from the water. Not bad work for a man unused to manual labour. By the time she arrived he was sitting on a boulder, shirt hanging on a nearby bush, and washing down a slice of pie with a jug of cider
“And where did that appear from?” she asked, trying not to let her gaze linger obviously on his broad shoulders and long, powerful, arms. In addition to the tattoo on his face there was a stylised tree on his chest while on his left bicep a snake coiled about a chalice— the same design that appeared on his signet ring.

“Master Dennet’s daughter brought it, she thought I looked in need of refreshment...” He extended the Jug to Aleska. “It’s a little sharper than I’m used to, must be the apples here, but it’s good.”

Aleska accepted the jug and took a drink, crisp and cool—it was definitely refreshing on this hot afternoon.

“Did she bring this before or after you took your shirt off?” she asked, wiping her mouth on the back of her hand and passing the jug back.

“Just after, strangely enough” Anselm grinned “Has she asked you to try her course yet?”

Aleska sighed.

“Will you stop that...?”

“Stop what?” he asked innocently “A bit of horseracing might be fun after dinner—we could put some money on it...”

“And I imagine you always let the lady finish first...”

Anselm roared with laughter.

“Not when there’s a bet involved! My Lady, you have a filthy mind!”

“I have a...?” Aleska gasped. “You may not be leering or smirking, Lord Trevelyan, but we both know exactly what you mean!”

Anselm was still laughing.

“Then I apologise for any unintentional offence I may be causing” he folded his arms across his chest with a stern look on his face “In future I’ll restrict myself to scowling—perhaps muttering “Maker’s Breath!” in a sharp undertone...”

Aleska couldn’t stop herself from laughing. The impression of Cullen, even down to the flat Fereldan vowels he tried so hard to hide, was perfect.

“That... won’t be necessary, Lord Trevelyan, but I would appreciate a little less innuendo—whether ‘unintentional’ or not.”

Anselm placed his hand solemnly over his heart.

“I shall watch my words as diligently as a Chantry Sister!” he promised “I take it this means it’s time to start digging again?”

Aleska shook her head. He’d taken on a tough task without complaining and done a far better job than she expected, and it was time to find out what else he was good at.

“The sappers can finish that off. I think you mentioned something about going after those wolves?”

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Sneaking away from the camp proved more challenging than Aleska thought, crouching lower, she ensured that neither she nor Anselm were spotted. Watching the guard rotations carefully around the encampment, she had to time it perfectly to ensure no one spotted them. Drawing a deep breath, Aleska caught a familiar scent. Damn, he smells so good. Aleska’s teeth grazed her lower lip.

“That scent,” Aleska turned, whispering. “What is it?”

“Do you like it?” Anselm smirked at her.

“It suits you,” Aleska stood up. “If your aim was to draw the wolves right to us, then you are doing a really good job.”

Aleska kept silent, watching the wolves enter a cave not far from their camp. The wind caressed her cheeks, then it ceased. A shrill shriek echoed towards the caves entrance. Neither Aleska nor Anselm could quite place the sound. It’s not human, Aleska thought, that is for certain. Glancing at Anselm, it seemed he had no answer as to the sound they heard.

Taking one step at a time, Aleska ensured her tracks could not be traced from any wolves lingering at the entrance. Anselm followed her suit, stopping as she stopped and moving as she did. Heart thudding. Adrenaline pumping. Breath quickening. Aleska moved as if she was stalking a deer in the forest. Holding up her hand, Aleska signalled Anselm to not take another step forward.

“Wolves have an acute sense of smell and hearing,” Aleska warned. “We’ll only have once chance to make this work. Let’s make it count.”

“I’ll follow your lead, My Lady.” Anselm winked, following her through the entrance.

The root cause of Master Dennet’s wolf problem appeared to be a Lesser Terror demon, it had somehow commanded a pack of wolves. Aleska stood atop one of the smaller rock formations, ensuring no wolves would swarm Anselm. The man is as quick with a blade as he is with his bow. Aleska watched Anselm’s movements intently, one last shriek left the demons maw before it sank into a cloud of green smoke and vanished from sight.

“Can you get down, My Lady?” Anselm looked up at her, dusting the green blood now clinging to his hand.

“I hadn’t thought that far yet,” Aleska laughed.

Stepping onto an old bridge which connected the rock face with another, the wood creaked under her weight. Remember what Bae taught you, Aleska placed her hands along the old and mouldy rope. She couldn’t see from where she was standing, but the bridge sloped upwards instead of remaining vertical. One final creak was heard before the bridge gave way, Aleska came crashing down to the ground.

Hitting the ground with a sickening thud, Aleska rolled down the slope. A pain shot through her leg and towards her ankle, a small tear fell down her cheek as she sat up, clutching her ankle. Ow! Ow! Ow! Aleska winced at the touch of her own fingers along the tender muscle.

“Are you all right?” Anselm rushed towards her. “Let me see it.

“No,” Aleska pushed his hands away. “I’m fine.”

Aleska knew he wouldn’t be taking no for an answer, lifting the leg of her breeches up, his fingers felt around the tender muscle; forcing her to wince in pain. She closed her eyes, her teeth clenched to prevent her from crying out in pain.
“It isn’t broken,” Anselm placed his one arm beneath her legs.

“What do you think you are doing?” Aleska panicked.

“I am going to have to carry you,” Anselm slowly lifted her, to ensure he didn’t move her ankle.

Aleska shifted her weight to ensure he put her down, with her arms still around his neck, her own temper seethed. I am not some princess who needs the strong Knight to carry her! Aleska cursed, ignoring Anselm’s protests. Taking a step forward on her damaged ankle, her knees buckled, and she collapsed to the ground.

“I am carrying you,” Anselm moved towards her. “You cannot walk.”

“I will be fine, you go ahead if you don’t want to stay behind.” Aleska sat up, wondering how she would explain this.

It appeared Anselm wasn’t taking no for an answer, with one swift movement she found herself in his arms, her one arm around his neck, his concern replaced with annoyance. Put me down! Now! Aleska lips pressed into a thin line, this only made Anselm’s grip on her tighten.

“You want me to leave you alone and barely able to walk this close to sunset? Don’t be stupid! There’s worse than wolves out here and an injured woman on her own is going to be easy pickings, no matter how good she is with her bow!”

Anselm’s sudden change in tone surprised even Aleska, not another word ushered between them; Aleska exhaled deeply, resting her head upon his shoulder, for a moment she could have sworn his cheek rested against the top of her head.

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Listening to Cullen rambling about the watch tower locations droned on in the background, Aleska seemed too lost within her own thoughts. He could have called for help, he could have done a thousand things; but he had to play the valiant Lord to save the helpless elf. Aleska quietly fumed. Next came Josephine about Mme de Fer, Aleska had seemed to master the art of pretending to listen, none of her advisers realized she was in her own world.

“Sounds good,” Aleska responded upon impulse. “Do what ever you feel is best, I have to go and deal with someone.”

Aleska stormed up the aisle of the chantry, her nails clenched so deeply into her palm, ankle still aching; a grim reminder of how she had to be rescued by some perfumed noble Lord. Opening Anselm’s door, Aleska walked into the room with little care for his guests.

“I do not need to be rescued, not by you, not by anyone in this Inquisition.” Aleska’s tone raised. “Do I make myself undoubtedly clear? I. Don’t. Need. To. Be. Rescued!”

Storming out of the room, Aleska slammed the door behind her, walking along the pathway and into her own chambers, she slammed the door. Running her fingers through her hair in frustration, her fist collided with the stone wall. Then her door opened and slammed behind Anselm.

“I did what I had to!” Anselm’s tone matched hers. “I couldn’t let you just become bait for some hungry wolf… or worse.”

“Oh, get off your high horse.” Aleska laughed, opening one of her sealed letters. “The only reason you did it was because I was a pretty woman in distress, and you needed a new tale for your
gambling buddies. The only reason you have taken such an interest in me is because of my looks, let us not for a moment kid ourselves that if I was wrinkled and old. You’d have taken my offer to go back to Ostwick.”

“I am not the only vain one!” Anselm grabbed the letter from her hands, placing it on the desk. “Don’t pretend you haven’t looked at my arse and chest when ever you had the opportunity; your attention would have faded had I been some fat, bald old man!”

“Don’t you dare hold me to those standards,” Aleska took a step closer to him. “You cannot even sleep at night without some pretty whore to warm your bed!”

Even Aleska realized that was a low blow, both of them breathing heavily; had they been an inch closer to one another, they would have been kissing. Green eyes met blue, matching the frustration within Aleska’s eyes. \textit{Even you cannot deny that,} Aleska averted her gaze towards the shadows now gathered outside her door. \textit{Great, wonder how much they all heard?} Aleska’s pride had gotten the better of her.

“I’ve kept my interest in you haven’t I?” Anselm resorted. “You are no conquest, yet my interest has never faded.”

“Because I am the one woman who won’t jump into bed with you,” Aleska scoffed. “I am a challenge, you want to figure me out, what makes me tick; so your conquest will be that much sweeter when you get what you want. I am not stupid, I saw the elven woman at the café, how she was draped over her lover like some accessory. I refuse to be that for you. Some trophy you can dangle and take out when it suits you!”

\textit{Don’t even try to deny it,} Aleska walked towards her desk, leaning against the edge. \textit{Maela warned me about charming men like you, I will not become some mistress.} A mind had been made up, but she was about to find out just how deep Anselm’s pride ran.

“What will it take for you to see that I am serious about you?” Anselm turned to face her, “to prove I don’t think of you as some elven conquest? I clearly cannot come to the answer on my own, tell me what you want me to do!”

Aleska thought for a moment, her eyes wondered to the fire place and then back to Anselm. \textit{I could just say nothing, but he needs to learn he cannot just walk out of here and carry on with his philandering ways.} A smile graced Aleska’s lips, the perfect trial crossed her mind.

“Go without the touch of a woman for six months,” Aleska said, observing Anselm’s reaction. “No whores, horse masters daughters, none of it.”

“If I succeed?” Anselm swallowed the lump in his throat.

“Then,” Aleska’s voice dropped, walking towards him; a hand caressed his chest, clenching his shirt and pulling him closer. “You can have me, in what ever way you desire. Do we have a deal, My Lord?”

“You are playing a dangerous game,” Anselm’s hand tucked her hair behind her ear. “Are you sure you want to play?”

“Getting cold feet already?” Aleska smirked, \textit{two can play at the seduction game.}

“Never,” Anselm’s hand placed upon her waist. “You have a deal.”
Locking Horns

Chapter by Lannister418

Chapter Summary

As the Inquisition plans it's assault on the Carta mercenaries in Hafter's Woods, Aleska and Anselm deal with the aftermath of their impetuous bargain - while Commander Cullen says a little more than he intended...

It seemed like a good idea at the time, Aleska thought as the meeting dragged on, but many things did when she lost her temper. In hindsight, her challenge to Lord Trevelyan may have been a mistake. No-one had mentioned it – yet – but that wouldn’t last much longer. In the meantime, she focussed her attention on Sister Leliana’s report about the decrypting of the Carta cypher found on the dead mercenaries. Some of Varric’s old contacts back in the Free Marches had come in useful and now they had a location; an abandoned summer-villa belonging to the Arls of Redcliffe, in the hills above Hafter’s Woods.

“It looks impressive from the front…” Cullen said, shifting the marker a fraction of an inch to the left, “but the place was never intended as a fortress, there may be weak points we can exploit…”

“We may have a source of information about that; but it would require a brief recess...” Leliana interrupted, earning a glare from Cullen which she carefully ignored. The Commander’s mood appeared worse than usual this morning and Aleska couldn’t fail to notice the pointed glance Cassandra gave him as they agreed to reconvene in a couple of hours.

Looks like Cullen drew the short straw; might as well get this over with.

She lingered at the map table, examining the layout of the woods around the villa, as the others left except for Cullen – who also hung back, re-arranging the order of his papers. After a couple of nervous coughs, he began to speak.

“Herald, might I… erm… have a word… in private?”

Alaska sighed; crossing to the chamber door she closed it firmly. There was no point in beating about the bush.

“This is about last night, isn’t it?”

Cullen nodded, carefully folding the papers and tucking them into his belt. He plainly found the situation just as uncomfortable and she decided to make things easier for both of them.

“It isn’t the smartest thing I’ve ever done…” she admitted, “but it knocked the wind out of his sails and I seriously doubt he could go more than a week without seeking alternate company…”

Cullen scratched at the side of his neck, unsure of why he’d agreed to be the one to raise this with the Herald; perhaps he should have insisted harder that Leliana or Josephine… No. This was a matter of discipline, and better if it was treated as such.

“I’m sure you’re right, and I wouldn’t presume to comment on your… erm… personal business…”
he hesitated, taking a breath and then plunging straight in, “but Trevelyan is a potentially disruptive influence. It would be better for him to be sent back to the Free Marches; if Ostwick is eager to have representation in the Inquisition, Enchanter Sophia and Lord Jonas are more than adequate for that purpose.”

Aleska shook her head. Sending Anselm packing was a temptation, but both of them would know it meant he’d won.

“I agree he has the potential to be disruptive but, so far, he hasn’t. You said yourself that we lack fighters trained in stealth combat and his skills in that area are considerable…”

“It’s not his combat skills that worry me…” Cullen grumbled, his hand freezing in the act of adjusting his scabbard as he realised he’d spoken aloud. “Herald… I… I apologise. That was inappropriate, I shouldn’t…”

“If you have an opinion I would like to hear it, Commander…” Aleska interjected folding her arm, “I get my fill of tact and diplomacy from Josephine, a little old-fashioned directness would be a nice change.”

Cullen looked at her steadily for a moment, weighing his thoughts. The Herald’s personal life was her own, but her actions and associations could still impact on the future of the Inquisition. At the very least, she deserved to know the full character of the man pursuing her. Perhaps once she knew, she might be less eager to have him around. That growing certainly fuelled his confidence.

“Trevelyan has a reputation for creating scandal wherever he goes. After only three weeks at the University of Orlais he was expelled after being caught in bed with the wife of one of his tutors…”

Aleska listened as Cullen reeled off Anselm Trevelyan’s exploits; doubtless drawn from Leliana’s exhaustive reports, and impressive for a man barely 24 – a string of mistresses and casual lovers, gambling debts and duels that stretched his family’s patience to it’s limit. The Count sending him to the Conclave began to sound more like temporary exile than a lesson in practical diplomacy. It did make her feel better about her challenge and she smiled quietly; someone with that taste for indulgence would never be able to last the course she’d set him. Cullen’s next words caught her off guard though.

“He’s everything I find contemptible about the nobility…” the Commander growled. “A woman like you deserves better than…”

He caught himself mid-sentence, shocked by his own bluntness, and turned his gaze away from her; one hand rubbing the back of his neck as the other tugged at the papers from the belt.

“I… I’m sorry. I wasn’t implying… I mean…”

Aleska managed to find her voice.

“I’m… I’m gratified by your concern, Commander…” she grabbed up her gloves from the side of the table. “Thank you for your frankness…”

She hurried out the door, barely registering Cullen’s mumbled response, and along the gloomy nave of the Chantry out into the bright morning sunshine. She needed a ride to clear her head, but that would have to wait until later. At least she could spend a little time tending to Vesenya; Creators willing, she could get to the stables without interruption.

###
“I knew you wouldn’t be able to resist me…”

Anselm tried not to sound too smug as Aleska closed the door behind her and walked over to the bed; carefully loosening the lacing of her waistcoat.

“You’re not a man who’s easy to ignore…” she conceded, coming closer until he could smell the hint of ripe summer cherries in her hair “and you have a talent for getting under my skin…”

“Only in the most delightful way, I hope;” Anselm murmured, sliding one hand along the curve of her waist and drawing her slowly against him “I thought you said this would be a mistake?”

“Some mistakes have to be made…” she leaned her head back, eyes closed and deep-red lips slightly parted. “Kiss me… My Lord…”

“As you command… My Lady…” He bent his head to kiss her but pulled back laughing as she licked at his face with a playful noise “My Lady…? Is this a Dalish custom…?”

Her only response was to lick at his face again - with an impossibly large, wet, tongue – and to boff her forehead off her chin…

“Urrff!!”

Anselm forced his eyes open with a groan as Cuddles headbutted him again. Of all the ways of waking known to Humans, Elves or Dwarves; the single most effective was undoubtedly a hungry Mabari. If the licks and nudes didn’t do it, the breath eventually would.

“Sweet suffering Andraste; have you been eating Varric’s socks?” He grumbled, rolling onto his side and trying to tug the covers back around his shoulders. Cuddles barked again, bouncing his forepaws off the mattress so the whole bed shook. “All right! I’m awake… give me a moment at least!”

Eventually he decided that getting up was less trouble than having the bed shaken to pieces by an impatient dog. Throwing back the blankets, he surrendered to the early morning chill; ambling over to the washstand, while Cuddles took the opportunity to claim the warm hollow in the bedclothes. The mornings this high up in the Frostback Mountains were crisp, even in early summer, and a thin layer of ice had formed on the water in the jug. Sighing quietly, Anselm cracked the ice with his knuckles and emptied the whole jug over his head with a sharp curse.

“I assume Joe is still comatose; otherwise you wouldn’t be pestering me to be your breakfast chaperone?” He asked, in a conversational tone, as he pulled on a pair of clean drawers.

Cuddles snorted, not bothering to lift his head from his paws. Most people didn’t mind him wandering around Haven freely; but, after that misunderstanding over a side of smoked bacon, the woman at the tavern insisted he wasn’t allowed in without a companion – like a pup who couldn’t be trusted not to do his business inside.

“It’s your own fault…” Anselm chuckled, picking a clean shirt out of the clothes-chest. “But, if you do me a favour, I’ll get you a nice big bowl of that nug stew you seem so fond of…”

Cuddles opened one eye with a cautious growl. Anselm sat down on the bed beside him and scratched the back of his neck.

“It’s alright, I’m not going to ask you to piss on Cullen’s tent; that was a joke anyway… well… mostly…” He tugged the shirt over his head and began lacing it up. “Supposedly there’s some hot springs somewhere in the hills around this dump. Next time you and Joe are out slaughtering the
local wildlife, keep your nose open and see if you can find them... Deal?"

The dog pondered this for a moment and then barked, twice. Anselm shook his head with a wry grin.

“Two bowls then, really big ones...” He stood, patting Cuddles on the head and grabbing his tunic from the back of a chair. “Come one, let’s go face the world!”

###

Anselm was slowly getting used to the rural Fereldan idea of breakfast. The thick gruel of oatmeal, lentils, peas and bacon was rough on a digestion used to a lighter diet, but it did set the body up nicely for long tough days in the damp, chilly climate of the far south. It was a mercy the coffee was tolerable. When Sister Leliana engaged a tavern-keeper for the Inquisition she’d at least taken care to find one who could make a decent brew. She had grown up in Val Royeaux after all...

On the floor beside him, Cuddles’ muzzle was buried in the bucket-sized bowl Flissa had provided for him; it looked like she’d forgiven him for the bacon incident and the bowl made a quiet scraping noise as the Mabari’s determination to reach every last scrap slowly inched it in a wide circle around the tavern floor. Anselm chuckled quietly to himself as he caught the glances and whispers in the busy common-room. Gossips, at least, were the same wherever you went in the world and his argument with Aleska last night hadn’t been the most discreet. He was still surprised he hadn’t found himself on the road to the coast with his arse still smarting from the imprint of the Commander’s boot.

The whole situation puzzled him, if he was honest about it. Normally he bored very quickly if a woman showed no interest in his attention, he never lacked for eager companions and only a lout persisted in the face of refusal, but Aleska seemed unable to decide whether she wanted to punch him in the face or rip the shirt off his back. The Game of Seduction had its strategies of course; often the Hunted would tease the Hunter with a pretence of refusal, turning the tables and making them the one to beg. That was often the most enticing part; Anselm had learned early that submitting to the Lady’s whim held a particular delight for him and Aleska, despite Josephine’s persistence in treating her like a novice requiring constant instruction, was no stranger to the subtleties of Human society. He might event be tempted to think this was part of some Game of her own, making the proud young Human lord come to her on bended knee – not an unpleasant thought, but...

There’s always a ‘but’ with her, isn’t there, Trev?

Her challenge was so demanding it was plain she expected him to fail, tumbling some tavern-maid or camp-follower before the first week was done; perhaps even hoping the embarrassment of failure would send him skulking back to Ostwick with his tail between his legs... Six months though... damn! That was going to be... difficult. It was certainly a more intense punishment than the ones the ladies at the House of Seven Lanterns normally devised. He wasn’t even sure if he’d be able to last this particular course, but he was damned if he’d fall at the first hurdle. Anselm smirked, wiping a piece of bread around the inside of his dish; perhaps he’d surprise himself – and her – by meeting the challenge head on. It would be interesting to see if she proved herself a woman of her word.

And if I fail – I might as well make it a worthwhile one...

“Could’ve bloody woke me!” Jonas grumbled, thumping himself down across the table from Anselm.
“But you looked so sweet and innocent; lying there snoring and drooling over the pillow,” Anselm laughed, filling a cup with coffee for his cousin, “anyway, Cuddles already tried. If he couldn’t wake you, what chance did I have?”

Cuddles gave a hurt whine, looking at Jonas with an expression that would have suggested a neglected and hungry puppy if it wasn’t for his gravy-stained face. The big man reached over and scratched his head.

“Awww, poor little chap. I’ll make it up to you later…”

“There you go, Messere; just how you like it!” A blonde-haired serving-maid with a pretty, freckled, face and a shapely figure laid a plate heaped with food in front of Jonas. Anselm gawked at it in disbelief.

“You’ve got bacon… and scrambled eggs! Why didn’t I get scrambled eggs? And… is that…?” he leaned over and sniffed at the steaming platter. “You Arse! That’s Ansberger Sausage!”

Jonas winked at the maid as she returned to the kitchens and shovelled a forkful of food into his grinning mouth.

“You ain’t the only one got a way with the ladies…” he chuckled. “Cept this time, I ain’t the one making a bloody fool of meself!”

Anselm sighed and put his fork down. Of course, it would be Jonas who’d step up to say something; his cousin had always been more like a brother and never afraid to tell the truth, even if it wasn’t a welcome one. Sophia would be just as blunt in her own way, she’d never made any secret of her fear that he’d end with his throat cut in a back alley somewhere.

“You gotta be careful, Ansie. Pa ain’t happy; he were ready to have you packed off to the Templars after the last time…”

“That was a fair duel!” Anselm interrupted, a touch defensively. “And Du Barras insulted my companion.”

The duel might well have been fair, and the Marquis had eventually recovered, but Count Boniface was distinctly unimpressed with his nephew fighting a cousin of the Empress Celene over the question of whether a certain lady was a courtesan or merely a common whore. There was the uncomfortable suspicion that it was only the growing crisis in the Chantry that had saved him from being marched off to cool his heels in the most inhospitable Abbey his uncle could find.

“Dunno what he’ll do when he hears about this mess…” Jonas mumbled around a mouthful of bacon.

“Probably leave me here to fight demons and stew in my own juices! I certainly couldn’t think of a worse punishment…” Anselm laughed, then dropped his voice and leaned over the table towards his cousin. “Joe, I can’t get her out of my head; she intrigues me and infuriates me at the same time and I’m damned certain she knows she’s doing it. I’ve never met someone who…”

“Who didn’t jump into bed with you at the first opportunity? I imagine that must be a disappointment…” Anselm looked up with a start to see Commander Cullen standing there. For a man in half-plate he moves surprisingly quietly “When you gentlemen have finished breakfast, the Herald has requested your presence at a strategy meeting. Apparently, you might be useful…”

He turned on his heel and strode out without waiting for a reply.
“You put Cull in a bad mood as well…” Jonas muttered, draining his coffee.

“Well, I’m sorry for upsetting your new friend; but I’m reasonably certain that man emerged from the womb with a scowl on his face…” Anselm stood up, privately glad that the Old Man had interrupted before he dug himself even deeper. “Finish up; sounds like we might get to kill something. That always brightens up the day!”

###

Cuddles obediently flopped himself down outside the Chantry doors, chewing happily on a small branch he’d picked up. Mother Giselle smiled at the two men as they entered the building.

“You can bring him inside, if you wish. He is very well behaved…”

“Ta, Mother G, but the little ‘uns like to play with him when they get out of classes.” Jonas nodded towards the makeshift schoolroom, set up for the children among the refugees. The old priest’s smile deepened.

“And to share their lunch with him as well, I have seen. A wise balance of compassion and self-interest. Maker go with you both…”

Anselm bowed his head courteously in acknowledgement of her blessing and they continued on towards the council chamber. Mother Giselle was the type of cleric he could tolerate; the sort who worked to help make life better, rather than spouting fairy-tales about an absentee Maker who might come back if they were good enough. He recalled reading Genitivi’s account of the rediscovery of the Temple during the Blight; the sect who’d originally built this Chantry believed Andraste was reborn in the form of a High Dragon that nested further up in the mountains - at least they could see their Goddess. Maybe the old Imperium hadn’t been so wrong to worship dragons; they were raw elemental power in physical form. He laughed softly to himself as he walked in to the meeting; the Chantry might regret naming this the Dragon Age.

He could tell the meeting had been going on for some time. The focus of attention was the rough plan of a building laid out in place of the usual map. Leliana looked up as they entered, jumping straight into the business at hand.

“Lady Sophia tells me you both attended a hunting party at the Forest Villa two years ago. Do you remember anything of its layout?”

It took a moment for the memory to come back; he’d gone with Joe to the annual Memorial service at Ostagar. The whole thing was depressing for everyone, especially Alistair and Olivia, and someone – it might actually have been Alistair himself, now he thought about it, had suggested a hunting trip to lift their spirits. Arl Teagan had offered them the use of one of the Guerrin’s summer-houses; an elaborate folly in the hills, built by some earlier Arl for his lover in a less troubled period of Fereldan history.

It had been an entertaining hunt, he recalled. Alistair seemed more than happy to shed the trappings of royalty and get his hands messy in the woods; for the bold hunter there were bears aplenty, even a couple of Greatbears if you fancied the risk, and the Villa had a more than ample wine cellar to compensate for its isolation. He tapped the massive claws, polished to the lustre of obsidian, set into the hilts of his knives as a trophy of the event.

“That’s where I got these…” he glanced across at Aleska “You might want to pack some broadhead arrows. Normal ones are worse that useless against that hide…”
Some of the older hunters had told tales of the massive beasts, two or three times larger than a fully-grown Brown Bear, but it had been generations since the Clan had last roamed this far south. Aleska had to admit even that one bit of information was useful.

“Thank you, I’ll pass that along to Threnn…”

Anselm gave her a quiet smile. The politeness in her voice was strained and he could guess he wasn’t the only one who’d been getting a talking-to about their ‘bargain’. He turned his attention back to the plan of the Villa; it’s outline becoming clearer in his mind.

“The place looks impregnable from the front but most of it is just façade, dug into the hillside. The main level, here… there’s a gallery open to the gardens that leads straight into the main Hall; even a small force could give them a very nasty surprise, especially if we arrange for them to be distracted.” He looked up at Cullen with his best poker-face. “How comfortable are you taking it from behind?”

He kept his expression resolutely bland and questioning as the Commander’s eyes narrowed a fraction and Leliana appeared to suppress a slight cough. Aleska’s head shot up, her nails tapping against the wooden edge of the War Table, automatically glancing towards Cullen. Other than a deepening of his scowl, he showed no sign of rising to the bait.

“My men will be able to deal with the main force of the mercenaries; as long as the right distraction is provided. I’m sure that’s well within your capabilities…”

“It were bloody easy sneaking down to the kitchens after lights-out…” Jonas chuckled, intent on his own memories. “Al showed me this little side-door he remembered as a kid…”

“That could be very useful…” Leliana interjected “People always forget about the servants’ staircases…”

###

“That was illuminating…” Anselm commented to Aleska as the meeting ended and the chamber emptied. They had a clear strategy for dealing with the Carta mercenaries; a feigned assault from either flank while the main body circled round and down through the hills. Not without its risks, but Leliana’s best scouts would be checking out the rear defences in advance. “I wish you’d invite me to more of these meetings.”

Aleska gave him a sidelong look.

“Only when your presence is relevant and only if you stop taunting the Commander like that…” she held up a warning finger as Anselm opened his mouth, “Don’t start! We both know you weren’t checking that he wasn’t intending a frontal assault on the gates.”

“Then I shall endeavour to amend my ways… My Lady” Anselm replied, with a mock-penitent tone. “But the Old Man does seem to have a particular dislike of me at the moment. Am I detecting a hint of jealousy; a potential rival perhaps?”

Aleska glared at him. Cullen’s slip of the tongue earlier in the day still had her unsettled; it had likely meant nothing serious – his concern for her getting a little carried away – but Anselm’s jibe steered her thoughts towards complicated and uncomfortable notions.

“That would imply there was something for him to be jealous of; but Commander Cullen’s concerns are for the well-being of our mission, not his personal whims. Perhaps you should learn from his example and concentrate on your own challenges, unless you think these fantasies will
make the next six months easy for you.” She paused before leaving; he had provided some useful information, details that might even save a few lives, and she couldn’t refuse to acknowledge that “I am grateful for your assistance though, please don’t think otherwise…”

Anselm leaned against the doorway of the council chamber; watching as she walked away, gradually becoming a dark silhouette against the light streaming through the open chantry doors, his expression unreadable save for the hint of a smile playing at one corner of his mouth.

*Well, this is becoming VERY interesting…*
A Shot In the Dark

Chapter by x_bellaczarina_x

Chapter Summary

The assault on the Carta wracked more than nerves among the Inquisition members, Anselm saved Aleska’s life, only to endanger his own. A well placed shot can be the difference between life and death; as Aleska struggles to come to terms with Anselm’s wounds, the next twelve hours are the most crucial and what has been said can never be unsaid.

The sun filtered down through the trees, reflecting off the calm surface as Lake Luthian caught the glistening rays. All around her, birds chirped away within their nests and stray rams came to drink the cool waters. If the Carta base wasn’t a looming threat, it would be a serene place to relax.

Inquisition flags rose high into the sky and the camp bustled with chatter as men put up tents and tended to their arms and armour. Commander Cullen stood in the centre with his usual confident stance; one hand resting upon the pommel of his sword, the other hanging at his side as he barked orders at the soldiers passing him.

“Can’t we just go sneaking in?” Anselm watched the men erect the encampment. “We could be in and out before people know we are gone.”

“No,” Aleska shook her head, leaning against a fallen log. “Commander Cullen said to wait here until Leliana’s scouts return.”

A pad rested upon her leg, within her hand rested a quill that Josephine had given her, her wrist flowed upon the paper. Why do I need to practice my signature? Aleska’s wrist flicked back and forth, she wasn’t used to writing anything, let along signing her name. Dipping the pen within the inkwell beside her, Aleska ran the tip along the edge to no excess remained upon the nib.

Anselm extended his hand, offering her a a flask; looking up into those familiar green eyes, bright with humour, she accepted and took a sip. It surprised her how crisp and cold the water was, with a slight taste of fresh mint, but then she recalled the ice-cream café in Val Royeaux, This probably uses a similar enchantment….

“Thank you,” Aleska returned the flask, wiping away a droplet of water which travelled down her chin.

“What are you doing?” Anselm sat beside her, peering at the paper resting on her leg.

Aleska glanced at him, a small smile played upon her lips. “Josephine wanted me to practice my signature, I don’t even have a signature!”

She crumbled up the paper as a breath of exasperation left her lips. Dipping the quill in one last time, the tip tapped against the bottom of the inkwell. Great, I have used all this ink and I am still unsatisfied. Her nails ran along her neck, something about the Hinterlands always made her itch.
“Actually,” Anselm retrieved the crumpled-up paper. “This one here is very good; I love the way the lines flow. It’s strong… and graceful.”

Looking at where his finger had pointed, Aleska followed the way it trailed along the paper. It just looked like another inky mess to her, but there was no hint of mockery about him. *If you say so.*

She closed the inkwell, placing the blank papers within her pack. Claiming back her paper from Anselm, she crumpled it and tossed it into the fire as Jonas came ambling up with Cuddles trotting happily beside him.

“He wants to walk,” The big man grumbled, tossing the battered leather ball from hand to hand as the dog snapped lazily at it. “I told him I ain’t going off on me own… not this late.”

“Maker! You’re still not afraid of the Nug-King are you, Joe?” Anselm laughed, getting a glare from his cousin.

“Course I bloody ain’t!” he muttered, a little shiftily “Just don’t wanna go wandering, that’s all…”

“The Nug-King?” Aleska looked at them both, questioningly “This I have to hear”

“It’s just a stupid story Cousin Marcus used to scare us when we were small” Anselm was still chuckling, and ignoring Jonas’ continued scowl “About a giant nug who stole naughty little boys and turned them into Nuglings which it sold to Dwarves for their stewpot…”

“Loada bloody nonsense… and Marc’s a little shit!” Jonas muttered, red-faced, fidgeting with the ball as Cuddles tried to nudge him towards the track. It would be too dark for playtime if he didn’t hurry up!

“I’ll join you,” Aleska’s hand stroked Cuddles head, as she tried not to laugh too much. “A walk could do us both good; and I think Anselm is probably more at risk from the Nug King than you are, so he ought to stay here.”

Anselm stuck out his tongue and winked as the pair of the as Aleska stood, dusting off the grass which stuck to her pants. A happy ‘urrf’ echoed through the encampment, Cuddles dancing around Jonas and Aleska as he led them down the path towards the smaller lake below.

“Thanks for doin’ this,” Jonas tossed the ball for Cuddles, who jumped and caught it easily in his mouth.

“Anytime,” Aleska took the ball from Cuddles, throwing it as hard as she could, watching as he galloped through the long grass. “Truth is, I needed a break, Commander Cullen refuses to let me go anywhere by myself. As much as they allow me to roam freely around Haven, it still feels like I am a prisoner.”

Realization hit Aleska, she hadn’t told anyone that, *shit! She scolded herself as the Mabari came racing back, dropping the ball at Jonas’ feet with an expectant look, watching Jonas throw the ball farther than she could. *Just take it back, and hope he doesn’t tell the Commander!* As Aleska opened her mouth to retract her statement, Jonas’ question took her aback."

“Why don’t you have them Dalish marks on your face… Val… Vallass…?” Jonas’ tawny eyes watched her reaction carefully as he tried to form the word, and he blushed suddenly as her silence appeared to unnerve him “Sorry… sorry… not meaning to be rude… Big thick Joe’s just a bit bloody blunt at times”

Aleska found herself laughing
“It’s called Vallaslin…” she repeated it for him so he could get it right “and you’re far from thick! My father thought it would beneficial for me not to have them…”

She removed the pins from her hair, fluffing it down to cover her ears.

“He thought if I appeared human, perhaps the merchants in Kirkwall wouldn’t try to cheat us.”

“Andraste’s knickers,” Jonas gaped. “You look like us. Does your hair cover everything?”

Aleska nodded, pirouetting. “My hair is thick and long, when my hair failed, I have a hooded cloak I wear. Most merchants just think I am a pretty human girl, so my father’s plan worked. He has always been a pragmatic man.”

“Pa is like him,” Jonas nodded, petting the top of Cuddle’s head. “Ansie’s uncle. Bloody cunning, but he has to be. Ostwick’s rich, see, but we ain’t big; so Pa’s gotta be smart or we’ll have the Orlesians or the bloody Nevarrans smashing our gates down”

“Oddly,” Aleska continued to walk along the embankment. “He rarely mentions his family, except for you and Lady Sophia.”

“How much time you got?” Jonas laughed. “Ansie ain’t a bad fellow, he can be really stupid, but he is a good bloke. Me and him… well… it’s kinda like having a brother me own age, someone who don’t make me feel like a bloody idiot”

Aleska opened her mouth to say something, but the sound of Commander Cullen’s voice stopped her; Cuddles gave a happy bark and raced off to say hello, wagging his tail and sniffing at the Cullen’s jacket in the hope there might be treats hidden there. *I swear that dog will wag his bum off at this rate.* Aleska laughed, watching Cuddles waddle back to his owner.

“Everything all right Cull?” Jonas stroked the big Mabari’s head, scratching behind his ears.

“We’re ready,” Commander Cullen nodded. “Leliana’s scouts have confirmed what we already know, and there is something else the Herald needs to know.”

“What is it?” Aleska scratched Cuddle’s other ear, watching his foot thump on the ground.

“Red Lyrium.”

***

“You ready for this, Boss?” Bull rested his axe across his shoulders. “Me and the boys will follow Cullen’s lead.”

“Ready as I will ever be.”

Aleska’s fingers slick with oil, running them up and down her bowstring. *In truth, I should have done this last night.* Frustration bubbled within her, she’d always been religious with maintaining her bow, but even her own absentmindedness had gotten on her nerves.

“Now both of you be careful,” Aleska heard Lady Sophia warn Jonas and Anselm. “I don’t need to tell father you both got severely injured, or worse.”

*Helping the healers was kind of her,* Aleska couldn’t deny that Lady Sophia’s knowledge of herbs and her considerable healing skills were a great asset. It had been a surprise, albeit a welcome one, that the woman had insisted on accompanying them into to the field. The elegant and refined
Enchanter seemed even less suited to the wilderness than Mme Du Fer, although refreshingly less opinionated.

_She probably won’t stay, despite Josephine’s endless begging._ Aleska joked, fastening the quiver to her back. Neither Anselm nor Jonas seemed happy with her being at Haven, and there were moments where Aleska could see that Sophia’s health was not as good as she pretended. Her fingers combed through her hair, tying it up with one of her hair ties. _Better than the pins, the pins hurt when I leave them in._

“You be careful as well,” Lady Sophia caught Aleska’s attention. “For all our sakes, you are the only one who can fix this mess.”

“I’ll be fine,” Aleska acknowledged Lady Sophia’s words. “Thank you for your concern, my lady.”

***

The grey, pre-dawn light filtered down over the mountains and into the woods as they took position in the heights overlooking the Forest Villa. A thick ground-mist was rising, but their own field of vision was clear. The mist was a blessing from the Creators, making it harder for the mercenaries’ watch-camps to realise what was going on until too late. Aleska turned from her vantage point to join Commander Cullen, listening in silence to the final stages of his plan; her eyes still focused on the crystals of Red Lyrium growing at the base of the mountain. As Commander Cullen gave the order for everyone to take up positions, Aleska held him back for a moment.

“Will you be all right?” Aleska’s voice lowered. “Being a Templar and around the Red Lyrium, it won’t affect you?”

Cullen paused, unsure of how to respond. She could see a faint sheen of sweat on his forehead despite the morning chill, and the stress-lines of his face seemed deeper than usual.

“I… I remember what it did to Knight Commander; Varric is right, that stuff is evil…’’ He cleared his throat, rubbing his hand across his neck. “Thank you for your concern, Herald, I shall be fine. I am more concerned for your safety… not that I don’t think you can’t handle yourself, I—”

“I’ll be fine,” Aleska smiled, walking to the position Commander Cullen had assigned to her.

Observing the men get ready for battle, Aleska admired their discipline; each man more fearless than the next, this was the first time the Inquisition had properly engaged an enemy and their determination was impressive. The sound of metal unsheathing rang through her ears, its high pitch forced her to groan in pain, rubbing her finger along the entrance of her ear canal, attempting to drown the sound out proved moot.

“Are you all right?” Anselm stood opposite her, his bow resting between his fingers.

“Yes,” Aleska sharply shook her head to the side, hoping the ringing would subside.

Anselm nodded towards the archers patrolling the outer galleries of the villa. The lower gates were only lightly defended, presumably the Carta believed the outlying barricades and encampments would be sufficient. The strategy had an elegant simplicity; draw the attention of the guards down to the forecourt, allowing Cullen’s men to make a direct assault through the gardens and into the heart of the complex before the mercenaries.

“How about a bet My Lady?” Anselm suggested, with a wry grin “One Sovereign for every archer we take down – winner takes all?”
Aleska raised an eyebrow. In all fairness, it wasn’t a bad bet, her Dalish training would prove superior to some middle aged Nevarran tutor who had never used a bow in proper combat.

“Oh, in that case,” Aleska laughed. “You’re on!”

***

Jonas and Anselm had been right; despite its impressive exterior, the Forest Villa was designed for pleasure, not war – it’s towers little more than ornate pavilions linked by arching bridged and galleries along which the battle now raged, Aleska and Anselm neck and neck in their wager. Spotting an archer, Aleska took careful aim as - out of the corner of her eye - she noticed Anselm racing along the bridge towards.

Not a chance Trevelyan!

As she prepared to fire, Anselm’s his body collided with hers; knocking her off balance and sending her sliding along the blood-slick bridge. Before she could realize what had happened, Aleska tumbled off the side, reflexively grabbing the vines dangling along the edge and wrapping them around her wrist.

Her glance shifted down, the ground invisible beneath the thick fog at least forty feet below, the muscles of her shoulder straining as she hung from one arm. The sounds of vines snapping caught her attention.

They weren’t meant to take such a weight…

Aleska attempted to pull herself up but it proved hopeless, her arm too badly strained to be of any used.

“Boss!” Bull peered over the edge, seeing her dangling there. “Stay still! I’ll get Cullen and some rope.”

All Aleska could hear was the sound of the vines snapping until, only a few remained, it was a wonder that they kept supporting her wright. She held her breath, not wanting to put any more weight on the vines than she had to. Snap, snap, snap. Only one vine remained, unravelling at the full burden of her weight.

It couldn’t take much longer; the vine snapped and she dropped, her scream choked off as powerful hands grabbed her arm. She looked up into Jonas’ blood-smeared face, with what looked like half the army holding onto his legs as he hung over the edge. He seized her other arm as the last of the vine unravelled and she swung free, held only by the sheer strength and will of the others.

“I got her,” Jonas called up to Bull, and they heaved until both of them were back on the bridge.

Dizzy relief dissolved into anger. She could see Anselm slumped against one of the bridge supports; this was his fault! His tomfoolery had almost got her killed… she drew in a breath to unleash her full fury… but then she saw the arrow firmly embedded within his side, his hand clutching it as he struggled to keep himself upright.

“Don’t,” Aleska rushed beside him, removing his hand from the arrow. “We don’t know how deep it has gone. I know it hurts, but I need you not to touch it.”

Aleska placed her hand against his side, careful enough not to move the arrow. I’ll need to cut this off him. “Bull, can you pick him up extremely carefully, we don’t want the arrow head to shift. Take him to one of the healers tents.”
Bull did as he had been asked, cradling the man in his arms with surprising gentleness. Anselm beckoned her closer and she took his hand within hers, his eyes glistening with the pain surging through his body.

“I win,” Anselm pointed at the archer lying face down on the ground, blood seeped all around the corpse.

*That isn’t how I wanted you to win,* Aleska fought the tears welding into her eyes, refusing anyone to see her moment of weakness.

***

Even with all the Elfroot potion they could safely force down his throat, it had taken Bull, Cullen and Jonas all their strength to hold Anselm down while Stitches and Aleska cut into his side to remove the arrow. It had gone deep; missing vital organs but causing a lot of bleeding. He’d stayed conscious all the way through, passing out only when Stitches emptied a whole flagon of some clear Qunari spirit into the wound to clean it out.

They’d secured the Villa and dealt with the mercenaries, so that was a victory even if the Carta leaders were still at large. The piles of documents, and the surviving mercenaries would provide them with all the information they needed, once Leliana’s people had finished with them.

*I almost feel sorry for them,* Aleska thought, recalling her own interrogation

The encampment filled with chatter, tales of the battle had already being spun. A group of men sang some Fereldan victory song around a fire, most of them horribly out of tune. Ale flowed freely; the Inquistion had won its first big fight and no one could deny the soldiers their chance to celebrate for the first time in weeks.

Aleska remained in her seat beside Anselm’s bed as Lady Sophia completed her healing magics; the woman’s poised demeanour giving no hint of her emotions. She worked her magic differently to the way Bae did, with little ritual, and Chantry prayers instead of the songs to the Creators, but Aleska could feel the hairs rising along her arms the way they did when her father cast his spells. Bae once said that the chanting and offerings were just there to give the onlookers something to do, so they didn’t bother him with stupid questions. Standing beside the bed, Jonas kept watch over his cousin, unaware of whether to be angry or relieved; while Cuddles curled at his feet, silent but for a soft whine every time Anselm stirred or moaned

A gentle hand upon her shoulder made her jump, peering into the familiar amber eyes of her Commander; he beckoned her to follow him.

Leaning over, Aleska whispered something within the nurses ears, barely audible to anyone around them, she rose from her seat and followed Commander Cullen through the encampment. Something appeared to be on his mind.

“Are you all right?” Cullen asked, looking for any sighs of discomfort.

“Yes… wait, you dragged me out here to ask me if I was all right?” Aleska laughed, *it is better than crying.* “I am fine. Or do you mean the mishap with the bridge?”

“Of course I do!” Cullen’s fists clenched, the muscles along his jawline tightened. “Had Lord Jonas not been there, you could have died! Don’t you understand that? Trevelyan acted with haste, it is because of that haste that you nearly lost your life; surely that must upset you!”

“No,” Aleska shook her head. “Initially it did, I thought he did it to win some bet we made, but
looking at where the arrow pierced him… had he not done what he did, I would have died. He risked his life to save mine Commander. That arrow would have pierced my heart, or throat.”

“Surely there were other means,” Cullen regained control of his temper. “Calling out to you could have been one?”

“Do you trust my judgement as an archer?” Aleska kept her tone even.

“Of course.”

“Than trust me when I say that what he did, was the only means of saving my life,” Aleska felt an odd sensation flow over her, this had been the first time she defended Anselm to anyone, even to herself. “I owe him my thanks, he deserves that much, this doesn’t erase who he is or what he had done; but he risked his life to save my own.”

“Herald—” Cullen stopped, he saw no reason to argue, a sigh left his lips as he simply nodded. “Forgive me, you’re right. Lord Trevelyan did what was necessary; blaming him for the consequences is unjust… Should you need me, I will be with Sister Leliana.”

Aleska nodded, standing still within the calm night as Cullen passed her, he didn’t have to say what was on his mind for Aleska to know what he was thinking. He didn’t do it to play hero, she reminded herself; the slow autumn chill setting in. The leaves will be changing soon, smiling to herself, Aleska remembered the times when the clan moved from Ferelden to the Marcher states; the sight of the leaved changing colour.

“My lady,” A healer came towards her, blood stained upon her apron. “Lady Sophia asks for your presence.”

Without saying a word, Aleska walked back towards the healers’ tents. Throwing the material covering the entrance back as she entered. Lady Sophia sat beside Anselm, her composure unchanged despite her evident exhaustion.

She needs to teach me how to do that. I feel it might be beneficial

Lady Sophia rose, gesturing for Aleska to sit in her seat.

“I’ve done what I can, but I’m sure you know… these things…”

Aleska nodded. Magic, no matter how powerful, was not infallible – she knew that all too well – it might speed the body’s own healing process but Fate, or whatever name you wanted to give it, had the final say.

“You oughta rest, Soph…” Jonas mumbled, putting a gentle hand on his sister’s shoulder. The big man seemed close to tears “You know you ain’t well… shoulda let one of the others do it…”

Sophia smiled up at her ‘little’ brother

“You know I couldn’t have…” she said softly, her voice weakening “It’s Ansie, I had… I had to…”

Jonas caught her as she slumped into unconsciousness, lifting her carefully in his arms with her head pillowed against one massive shoulder. Cuddles sniffed at the hem of her gown, whimpering plaintively. Jonas glanced apologetically at Aleska

“She ain’t been well… not since…” he paused, biting his lip and turning to go “Never mind…”
The tentflap closed behind him and Aleska took her seat beside Anselm, placing a hand over his as his eyes flickered. “How are you feeling?”

“I feel—” A cough erupted from Anselm’s throat, a small bit of blood trickled out of the corner of his mouth.

Taking a cloth from the basin beside the bed, Aleska squeezed out the excess water from the material, wiping away the trickle of blood from the corner of his lips; as she finished, she heard a noise outside and could see Jonas settling himself down outside the tent. He must have returned as soon as he’d taken Sophia to her quarters.

*He is going to remain close, in case Anselm needs him.* Aleska shifted her position.

“Can I tell you something,” Anselm’s thumb caressed her fingers, running along her nails.

“Sure,” Aleska ran the cloth along his forehead, wiping away the excess sweat.

“This is *not* how I envisioned we’d spend our first night together.” Anselm looked up at her, the same mischievous look he’d given her when she tasked him with latrine duty.

Aleska shook her head, *he is using humour to deflect from the pain,* she exhaled deeply. Despite her own shoulder being in agony, she paid no mind to it, the ointment that the healer rubbed along her shoulder and arm helped dampen the pain. Using the back of her hand against his cheeks and forehead, the warmth registered against her hand. *He can’t take a fever!* Aleska wet the cloth once more, running it along his face and neck.

“I know it is uncomfortable,” Aleska ran her fingers through his hair, “but we can’t have you take a fever now. How else will Haven live without your humour, imagine leaving Varric without a diamondback partner? The scandal!”

The words caught within her throat, she struggled to accept that this could be Anselm’s last night, if the fever didn’t subside, he would die. A shuddered breath left her lips, soft enough that he wouldn’t hear it, tears ran freely down her face as she watch him drift off to sleep, his breathing laboured, a mixture of pain and exhaustion.

“Listen to me,” Aleska whispered, knowing in his slumber he could not hear her. “I forbid you to die, please don’t die… I’m sorry, I am sorry I didn’t give you a chance to prove yourself before. I am sorry for every cruel word I uttered; every thought I had, even the things you weren’t aware of… please, don’t die.”

Aleska sobbed softly, knowing anything louder would wake him from the sleep which he desperately needed. *Creators help him!* Aleska rested her head on her arm, her free hand still within his, exhaustion from the day overtook her. The tears fell onto the sheets, a soft lull of him stroking her hair caused her to close her eyes, before she did; she could have sworn she saw Anselm smiling.
The Games Begin

Chapter by Lannister418

Chapter Summary

As Anselm recovers from his injury, he and Aleska finally have the opportunity to talk about their bet; while Aleska discovers that even the exalted House Trevelyan has not remained immune from the tragedies of recent years.

A shocking discovery at Redcliffe prompts a course of action which will have profound consequences for all involved...

“It were bloody amazing! There was Darkspawn too…” Jonas bounced in his seat with excitement as he recounted the battle in the Valamar Caves “… even one of them big Hurlocks with a warhammer. It were half a Hurlock by the time I were done with it…”

“Sounds like someone’s having all the fun!” Anselm muttered with a dry laugh. “Make sure and leave some for me, would you?”

Missing out on the final fight against the Carta operation because of his injury rankled, and – despite his best efforts – a hint of petulance crept into his voice. Jonas’ face fell slightly.

“You was sick for three days, Ansie…” he objected. “We thought you was gonna… anyway; Soph said you weren’t to go anywhere until you was all healed proper…”

Anselm snorted, much more time caged up in Haven and he’d end up going batty.

“I’m fine!” he insisted “This is just Sophia inflicting some subtle punishment; or, more likely, the Old Man doesn’t want me anywhere near Aleska…”

Jonas’s eyes narrowed slightly.

“Fine, are you?” He feigned a punch at Anselm’s injured side, causing the other man to twist away and yelp at the pain of the sudden stress on his wound. “Don’t sound bloody fine to me!”

“All right… point taken!” Anselm grumbled, adjusting his bandages with a wince. “I’ll just sit here, twiddling my thumbs and sipping hot milk, while the rest of you win the war without me!”

Jonas opened his mouth but hesitated, biting his lip with a nervous look.

“Maybe… maybe you could help me write a letter to Liv? I wanna tell her I been fighting Darkspawn in the Deep Roads… she’ll be bloody chuffed! If I tell you what to say, will you write it for me?”

Anselm resisted pointing out that the abandoned trading post at Valamar, although Dwarven, hardly qualified as ‘Deep Roads’. That would just be mean-spirited. Instead he uncorked a bottle of port and poured them both a drink. According to Mother Giselle, a glass every day promoted healing. If he kept drinking at this rate, he’d be turning cartwheels tomorrow.
Jonas looked at him in dismay, his bottom lip sticking out ever so slightly.

“But… Ansie… you always help me with me words. You’re good with ‘em…”

Anselm sighed and then laughed, running his fingers through his hair.

“I surrender; just stop giving me sad-face! It’s bad enough when Cuddles does it!” He glanced down at the dog, sprawled on the rug and chewing happily on a large bone; for a moment Anselm wondered if that was all that remained of one of the Carta Bosses. “Get a pen and paper; but you’re going to write it! I’ll just help you with the spelling.”

###

Once his cousin had left, satisfied with his efforts and grinning from ear to ear, Anselm settled back down and refilled his glass; picking up the letter he’d received that morning and re-reading the terse expression of his father’s disappointment at the continued embarrassment he was heaping on the family.

I think Pa thrives on spite… he thought, as his eyes flicked over the words one last time. It wasn’t even his father’s handwriting. Baron Giulio must have dictated it to a secretary, doubtless in moments snatched between examining the latest specimens in his collection, before dashing off a signature and applying his seal. At least it’ll give the servants some decent gossip…

A lesser man might have been satisfied with the prestigious Barony of Tresaque, a beautiful Nevarran bride and a healthy son bereft of ‘disadvantages’. Mama would never have needed to worry about the malicious whispers that haunted Aunt Catarina; ‘Two Mages and a halfwit…’ he’d heard his father grumble to a crony ‘Papa should have known the Amell line was tainted!’

Satisfaction didn’t appear to be in Giulio di Trevelyan’s nature, however; preferring instead to brood over the injustice of not being Count of Ostwick, passing his days with preserved insects between sheets of glass while waiting for some accident of fate or ill-health to pass the Throne to him in the absence of any suitable heir. If he had an ounce of backbone, Uncle Boniface might have cause for concern – but the Baron’s sense of self-preservation was too strong for him to indulge in the traditional Marcher means of speeding up the Succession.

Maybe if Mama...

Anselm shook his head with an irritated grunt. If wishes were sausage, every beggar would be fat.

His agile fingers rapidly folded the letter into a dart. Aiming carefully, he launched it towards the hearth where it landed on the coals; the fading embers flaring brightly for a few seconds as the paper flamed and crumbled into ash.

“That’s an interesting filing system. Do you think they’d let me do that?”

Anselm looked up to see Aleska leaning in the doorway with her arms folded. He laughed.

“I was thinking of donating it to latrine duty, like the rest of my correspondence; but, father’s writing-paper is as sharpened edged as his tongue…” he gave her an apologetic look “I wouldn’t want to be the cause of any more injuries…”

Aleska shook her head with a sigh.
“A strained shoulder is preferable to the alternative. Commander Cullen just likes to grumble, as you’re fond of pointing out…”

She walked over to the table and poured herself a drink, firmly corking the bottle and placing it to one side. Anselm looked mildly affronted.

“Don’t I get one?”

“Mother Giselle said ONE glass a day…” Aleska replied firmly. “You’re meant to be convalescing, not drinking yourself into a stupor”

He gave her a sly look in response.

“Weeell; the bottle is made of glass so, technically…”

“No” she said, trying to sound and look stern, the rim of the glass touched her lower lip. “There’s tea if you’re thirsty, or the infusion Adan made up…”

“That tastes like swamp water!” Anselm huffed. “Just one more glass, then I’ll be good?”

“Anselm, you were burning up for three days, that wasn’t some scraped knee in need of bandages and antiseptic ointment. You nearly died!” Aleska reminded him, the fear still brittle in her voice, her nail tapping against the glass. The Apothecary had used up almost every ounce of Ghoul’s Beard in his stores brewing up potions and washes to try and bring Anselm’s temperature down to normal. “They even talked about giving you the Last Rites…”

A choke stopped her from speaking; had it not been for Lady Sophia explaining the significance of the ritual, Aleska would have remained oblivious of how near to death the charming scoundrel truly was. A sip of her drink eased her nerves. Anselm snorted with amusement. “That would certainly have brought me back; the cheap incense they burn here is an affront to my sense of smell. Now a decent benzoin or copal, that would be worth dying for…”

“You must be feeling better…” Aleska interrupted, refilling his glass with an exasperated sigh. “If you can avoid getting drunk every day, you should be fit for duty by the end of the week…”

Aleska dangled the glass before him, as he reached to accept it, the tips of his fingers brushed hers. A soft tingle travelled through her hand.

“A man has to entertain himself. I can’t gamble all the time – and Varric refuses to play until I can convince him it was pure luck I had all four Aces right after a run of Trumps.”

“There’s always the Library… unless you had other pastimes in mind?”

“You’ve seen the selection on offer; seven hundred volumes of sermons on the significance of the semi-colon in verse 178 of the Canticle of Transfiguration, and one suspiciously stained copy of ‘The Rivaini Bride’. As for other pastimes – even without our agreement I’m not sure the stitches would survive the strain.” He hesitated, shifting his position slightly and glancing out of the window. Aleska could swear he looked almost embarrassed “We haven’t really spoken about it since that evening and there’s… well there’s… something I have to say…”

Aleska sat down opposite him and took a sip of port with a quiet smile.

“Feeling the strain already? Is these where you gracefully concede defeat?”

Anselm chuckled softly, saluting her with his glass.
“I will admit that it’s proving to be an… interesting experience; but I don’t give in that easily. It’s just…” He put down his drink and glanced away again; uncharacteristically awkward “I’ve never lain with a woman who didn’t want me. I’m well aware that the material advantage of bedding a noble has sometimes played a part, but the desire has always been there…”

He took a deep breath and looked her straight in the eye.

“I don’t want you to come to me if that’s not what you truly want. I’m not going to hold you to that part of our bargain.”

Aleska looked at him in astonishment. This was certainly not what she’d expected.

“It wouldn’t exactly be a fair challenge if you didn’t get something in return.” She said eventually. Anselm shook his head emphatically.

“This isn’t like betting on a race, or one of Bull and Joe’s eating contests. This is something that… well… it should never be an obligation. If you wish to consider some less intimate reward for my persistence it would not diminish my opinion of you in the slightest.”

Aleska let out a long, slow, breath.

“I can see why you have a reputation for being such a success with women. I honestly can’t tell if you’re being genuine or if this is one of your seduction games…”

Anselm gave her a serious look.

“I’ve never taken a woman against her will, nor used my money or title to coerce one; I may like my pleasures, but I have a few scraps of decency. Do you believe that of me?” Aleska nodded. If she had even the suspicion that Anselm was that sort of man she wouldn’t have tolerated his presence in the Inquisition for a second. He gave her a sly smile and leaned forward, dropping his voice “I’ll let you know my secret – it must always be by the Lady’s command, otherwise it’s no fun at all…”

Aleska leaned back in her seat, folding her arms across her chest. These might just be clever words designed to wear away at her resistance or convince her to surrender early, or it might be a hint of something more than just a charming seducer behind the witty and facetious façade. It was impossible for her to be sure, but she’d keep playing for now.

“You are a scoundrel, Anselm Trevelyan, but an engaging one. If you last the course, then we can discuss your reward. You only have five and a half months more to go – give or take a day…”

He gave her a questioning glance with a slight tilt of his head.

“That’s not exactly an answer, My Lady.”

“Perhaps not…” she agreed, “but it’s all this Lady is willing to say, for now…”

A knock at the door interrupted them, and a harassed-looking scout poked his head around the door.

“P-pardon me; m-m-milady…” he stammered breathlessly. “Seeker Pentaghast asked me to remind you; they’re ready to leave when you are…”

“Tell her I’ll be there shortly…” Aleska said, dismissing him with a nod and turning back to Anselm “I need to go, before Cassandra runs the poor man ragged.”
“Going off without me again…?” Anselm pouted. “Much more of this and I’ll start to think you don’t like me.”

Aleska laughed at his look of mock-misery.

“Nothing exciting this time; you’ll be glad to hear. Just down to Redcliffe to speak to Fiona.”

“Now that I’m happy to miss – trying to convince a bunch of argumentative Mages that we’re not the Templars under a different banner. Hopefully, dear Cousin Cassandra doesn’t punch any of them…” he paused, and frowned slightly. “Is Sophia going with you?”

Aleska shook her head.

“She exhausted herself badly healing you and some of the others after the fight at the Villa. I’ve seen healers do that before and I don’t want her put under any more strain…” There had been a healer with the Clan who’d possessed similar talents. Like Sophia, Illuren had worked through a benevolent Fade-Spirit to repair damage to organs and tissue that went beyond regular salves and potions. It was a valuable gift, but a dangerous one; the effort of channelling from the Fade draining and damaging to Spirit and healer alike if not managed carefully. Illuren had been incautious in her desire to aid others, and her weakened body had been succumbed too soon. “She argued, of course, but Leliana convinced her to rest.”

The news appeared to relax Anselm and he leaned back in his chair.

“Thank you. Sophia hasn’t been well for a while but when she sets her mind to a task, she can be very insistent. It’s a family trait.”

“Now that you mention it, I had noticed…” Aleska laughed, finishing her drink and standing up. She hesitated before leaving; her curiosity fighting with the desire to respect the privacy of a woman she could imagine being a friend. “Jonas also mentioned that Sophia had been ill. Is there something that one of our healers could…?”

Anselm ran his fingers through his hair with a low groan and looked up at her standing there.

“Not unless they know a potion that can heal a grieving heart. Someone she cared a great deal about was murdered in front of her, trying to protect her. Sophia barely escaped with her life. Her injuries healed but…”

He left the sentence hanging and Aleska felt a chill running down her spine. She didn’t need words to tell her what that felt like; the memory of blood on her hands and Mae’s last, choking, cry would never leave her…

“I noticed she wears a man’s ring,” Aleska said carefully, putting all her effort into keeping her voice even. “Some sort of Chantry insignia?”

“I always thought Guenther was a stuffy ass, like most Templars…” Anselm grunted, “but he was a decent sort, one of the best, and kind; he and Joe used to spar a lot. Officially he was her ‘Templar Escort’ but it was no secret the pair of them had been lovers for years…”

Anselm pulled the cork out of the bottle of port and took an angry swig, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, Aleska’s hand grabbed the bottle from his grasp, replacing the cork in the neck.

“You said only one more,” Aleska reminded him, returning the bottle to its place, sensing the anger burning deep within Anselm.
“This fucking war is stealing the best of us…”

“I can’t disagree with that…” Aleska replied quietly, “but, if the Mages see sense, hopefully we can bring it to an end before more good people are lost.”

###

“Are you and Anselm really related?” Aleska asked Cassandra as they rode through Redcliffe Crossroads in the direction of the town. “Or does he just call you ‘Cousin’ for the sake of annoying you?”

It was a simple question, and one she’d been meaning to ask for some time but asking the Seeker anything of a vaguely personal nature still felt intimidating; even though she was learning that the older woman’s bark was frequently a lot worse than her bite. Cassandra gave a disgruntled snort.

“Both, unfortunately! He is a… distant… cousin. His mother was a Pentaghast; from a branch of the family much closer to the Throne than mine, naturally. The Trevelyans have a long history of securing Ostwick’s independence, and their own disproportionate influence, through a policy of marrying into every major royal and noble house in Thedas.”

They rode on in silence for a few minutes, Aleska still inwardly amused by Cassandra’s definite emphasis on ‘distant’.

“He never mentions his mother; did you know her?”

Cassandra shook her head.

“I was only a child at the time; but the Lady Elizaveta had the reputation of being pious and of generous spirit. Her father was Duke of Hasmal and the marriage part of an attempt by Count Aurelio – the present Count’s father - to restore that city’s independence under Trevelyan rule; Aurelio was assassinated shortly afterwards, however, and Duke Francis executed for treason – so that particular plan came to nothing.”

The note of disdain in Cassandra’s voice was evident; clearly this was another example of the perpetual intrigue that helped estrange her from her homeland. There was one more thing Aleska had to ask.

“You keep using the past tense. What happened to her?”

“She died some years ago. Lord Anselm could only have been a child at the time.” Cassandra reigned in her horse and turned to face Aleska. She sounded exasperated, but not exactly annoyed. “Really, Herald, I am not the best person to ask! I understand this is something you would not want to ask Lord Anselm or Lady Sophia, but I am sure either Leliana or Josephine would be able to give you a proper answer.”

“I’m sorry, Cassandra. I just thought…”

She should have known better; Cassandra disliked talking about her family or homeland, but the Seeker just sighed and shook her head.

“No, I am the one who should apologise. I imagine it must seem strange to you that members of the same clan could be so distant. All I know is that she was reportedly a good woman, and well-loved by the people. Perhaps Lord Anselm would have been a different man if she lived.”

Aleska’s reply was cut short by one of the forward scouts riding up with frantic speed.
“Your pardon, Herald… Lady Seeker; we’ve spotted a rift in the road right before the city gates. It’s doing some… strange… things.”

**Fantastic…** Aleska thought as they spurred on their horses. *Just when I thought things were going to be simple…*

###

“Tevinter? Shit… I knew the rebel Mages were in a tough corner, but this? Broody would have a field day!”

Varric shook his head in dismay and drained his mug, signalling to Flissa for a refill.

“That’s not the worst of it…” Blackwall rumbled on. “You know those skulls we’ve been finding on posts all around the place…?”

“Stop! Don’t wanna hear it!” Sera yelped, clamping her fists against her ears and screwing her eyes shut. “Don’t wanna friggin’ think about it!”

“Don’t keep us in suspense!” Anselm said, knocking back a shot of rum. “After Tevinter cultists and time-warping magic how much worse can it be?”

Blackwall set his half-full mug down on the table, the knuckles of both hands whitening as he tightened his grip.

“There’s a reason we haven’t been seeing many of the Tranquil with the refugees…”

“Oh…” Anselm’s jaw dropped “Shit…”

“Tevinter Magister seizing control of a Fereldan city and driving out the King’s uncle-by-marriage changed the game completely. If the situation wasn’t resolved quickly, they’d have a whole new set of problems to deal with. The argument about what to do had been raging in Council Chamber ever since Aleska and the others got back…

“They tell me you know the King…” Blackwall glanced across at Anselm “How bad is ‘very bad’?”

“Sophia knows him best…” Anselm replied, staring down into his empty glass. “But I can tell you that he and Queen Olivia put their necks on the line giving shelter to the rebel Mages; and the one thing Alistair really hates is disloyalty.”

“So, we’re gonna get a pissed-off King at the head of his army? Friggin’ great!” Sera spat derisively.

“If we’re lucky!” Anselm laughed, grabbing a fresh bottle from a passing barmaid and pulling the
cork out “If we’re unlucky he’ll have Liv with him!”

Varric gave him a sidelong look as he took a long drink of ale.

“You sure you’re not related to Hawke…?”

Anselm threw back his head and laughed.

“Wrong branch of the family I’m afraid; but I wouldn’t go mentioning him too much around Sophia – he’s not exactly her favourite cousin…”

He turned sharply at a tap on his shoulder. Another one of Leliana’s ever-present messengers stood there with a note in his hands.

They’re all starting to look the same to me…

He read the brief message and stuck it into his tunic pocket, looking around at the others.

“I’ve been invited to the strategy meeting. I’m guessing they have a plan… or they just need someone handsome and witty to brighten things up!”

###

“This is dangerous, very dangerous…” Anselm said, scratching his chin, as Leliana finished outlining their intentions “Are you sure you want to take the risk?”

“For once, I’m inclined to agree with Lord Anselm,” Cullen said, folding his arms across his chest. “We’ve no idea what this Magister Alexius intends.”

“Probably not tea and little fondant cakes…” the dark-skinned man with the meticulously curled moustache chimed in, “but isn’t that why we’re doing all this sneaking around in the damp and dark?”

Aleska nodded.

“Lord Dorian can get you and a squad of Leliana’s best people past any wards below the castle, and you know the layout of the main keep…”

“And I imagine you’re quite experienced at sneaking around the servant’s quarters,” the Commander added, smirking slightly at the chance to get a dig of his own in at Anselm. Aleska fought down her own smile and carried on.

“…I’ll keep Alexius talking; Bull and Solas will be with me so I’ll have backup if he tries anything clever…”

“He likes the sound of his own voice…” Dorian added. “My guess is that he’ll try and talk you to death first. That should give us time to turn this little trap around quite nicely…”

“I still don’t like it, but it’s better than any of the other options…” Anselm said, looking back down at the rough ground plan of the castle. “When do we do this?”

“We leave in three days” Aleska told him. “That gives us time to get everything in place and you to be fit for combat.”

“And, hopefully, for us to resolve this before Ferelden gets directly involved.” Leliana sounded worried, and that concerned Aleska more than anything else. “I’ve had no response from any of my
messages to Alistair and Olivia. Either the birds aren’t getting through, or…”

“Or they’re already on their way to Redcliffe.” Aleska concluded, and Anselm could see the anxiety in the look she gave him. “and this time, I doubt it’s to go on a bear-hunt.”
Chapter by x_bellaczarna_x

Chapter Summary

The Mage Rebellion had come to an end, Dorian and Aleska had fought through the future to get back to the present; but their reunion was cut short by the Ferelden monarchy demanding answers. The evening lessened the mood of everyone around them and Aleska found an ally in the most unlikeliest of sources, watch duty with Anselm yielded more questions than answers; but the one thing Aleska didn't expect was Anselm's gift to her.

The sharp crackle echoed through the Great Hall, everyone’s attention focused on the rift opening slowly; bathing the stonework in a rich green glow. Demons spewed out, their shrieking striking fear in even the sturdiest of the Inquisition’s soldiers. The orb of light around Aleska dissipated; leaving her and Dorian crouched within the circular scotch mark embedded deep within the fibres of the red carpet, from where they had vanished what felt like days ago.

Her gaze remained glued to the floor, her hands curved around the blood-slick hilts of her daggers. Raising her head slowly, she focussed upon the demons advancing on the soldiers. Cassandra and Anselm stood in the front lines, protecting the injured; Sophia was there behind them, spirit-blade flaming in one hand, bright sparks of mana swirling around the fingers of the other as she summoned a shield of energy around the fighters.

The mark glowed, sparking in response to the rift and a burning raged through Aleska’s nerve endings. Clenching her fist in mid-air, the rift folded inward, imploding in obedience to her command and dragging the demons back to the Fade.

Shrill shrieks bounced off the walls of the Great Hall. The Inquisition soldiers turned to face her, ignoring the demons which clawed at the stone flooring in, a desperate bid to stay within the waking world. A loud bang echoed through the halls, the rift had closed; dragging every demon with it.

“If you intended to kill me,” Aleska turned around, Magister Alexius had gone pale. “You’d have to try a lot harder than that!”

Blood ran down her cheek, her armour and skin slick with blood from the battle she fought within the future. Nothing was as it seemed to be, everything had been turned upside down. Aleska walked up the stairs slowly, every muscle in her body screaming at her to stop. Alexius collapsed to his knees and Aleska dropped a dagger at his feet; her hand wrapped around the collar of his tunic, pulling him closer to her – the blade in her other hand poised and ready

“Aleska!” Dorian appeared beside her. “Don’t, you’re better than this!”

“Am I?” Her voice dropped to a dangerous whisper.

Aleska’s eyes met the brown of Dorian’s; seeing the silent plea within them her grip on the Magister’s throat loosened, and she sheathed the dagger. Inhalng deeply, Aleska turned around to
look at each soldier who fought to protect her; her eyes fixed upon Cassandra, a rare nod of approval making her smile.

With whirlwind speed she spun around, her boot colliding with his jaw and the sheer force knocking him flat. The element of surprise had been on her side and Alexius fell to the ground, clutching his face as blood trickled out of his mouth. As he clambered to his feet, Aleska could see he was in a state of shock; no sign of his former certainty.

“You’re lucky that is all I am doing to you,” Aleska kicked the blade at his feet, the metal rattling as it bounced along the stone flooring.

Aleska walked down the steps as the Inquisition soldiers rushed past her to apprehend Alexius. Grand-Enchanter Fiona stepped forward, desperation laced deep within her eyes. She extended a hand towards Aleska’s wound, touching the blood now drying upon her cheeks. Aleska moved her face out of Fiona’s grasp; whatever the woman’s intentions, her actions had almost brought disaster on all of them, including those she was trying to protect.

The soldiers stepped aside, allowing Anselm to come forward; he said nothing, but she could see a thousand questions in his eyes, none of which she felt capable of answering. A tear ran down Aleska’s cheek, clearing a path amongst the blood and dirt which had caked upon her skin. Be it out of impulse or relief, Aleska’s arms wrapped around Anselm’s neck, pulling herself tightly against his body.

“What happened in there?” Anselm’s tone lowered as he gave her a long searching look. She’d never held on to him like this, with such closeness, but there was no hint of desire here only a desperate need for comfort and reassurance.

She felt one arm strong around her waist, holding her up, while his other hand pressed against the middle of her back – keeping her close while letting her know she was safe. She closed her eyes, inhaling that scent of cedarwood and musk she’d come to know so well, sharpened by the underlying notes of blood and sweat. Aleska broke away from his hold, her hands cupping his face as she ran her thumbs along his cheeks; they were warm and soft, the skin unmarked and untainted. Her hands moved down his neck and arms; not a single trace on him, no hint of the red madness. She knew she was back.

“Nothing of importance,” Aleska smiled, feeling his hands upon her cheeks wiping the tears threatening to fall down her cheeks. “I am back now, that is all that—”

The sound of metal clinking against the stone flooring caught her attention, it wasn’t just noise; this was in a rhythm. Soldiers dressed from head to toe in black armour marched down the aisle, their spears raised high. Aleska’s hand clutched the sleeve of Anselm’s tunic, her eyes noticing the Theirin heraldry shining in the mid-morning sunshine.

“Oh, wonderful…” Dorian observed with acid dryness, “and just when everything was going so well…”

The soldiers took the place of Leliana’s scouts, marching on spot for a few seconds before coming to a dead halt. Their spears resting at their side, their shields raised to their chests; had one not seen them move, one would easily mistake them for decorative suits of armour.

Between their ranks strode a man and a woman in full armour. Aleska didn’t need Josephine’s instructions to know exactly who she was facing. Even in the remote hills and forests of the Eastern Marches, they’d heard tales of the Warden King and Queen; but she’d always imagined them as grizzled veterans, like the Grey Wardens the clan sometimes encountered in their travels.
King Alistair looked around Cullen’s age; tall, handsome and red-haired with a small tuft of beard on his chin, while Queen Olivia’s delicate beauty did nothing to diminish the air of simmering anger surrounding the pair.

*This is the woman who killed the Archdemon…* Aleska thought, *I wouldn’t want to be the Grand Enchanter right now.*

The look of fury on the faces of the King and Queen as they approached gave her a cold chill. What it they decided the Inquisition was as much to blame for this mess as the leaders of the Rebellion? Her hand slid within Anselm’s, standing closer to him in case her legs gave way. Looking down at her with a reassuring smile, he gave her hand a firm squeeze.

“I’ll handle this,” he whispered to her. “They’re not un…”

The commanding voice of Ferelden’s King cut across whatever Anselm was about to say, and even Aleska found herself standing to attention.

“Grand-Enchanter,” Alistair folded his arms, “I hope you have a damned good explanation for this. We offered you sanctuary and this is how you repay our kindness?!"

“Why had you not explained how dire it was?” Olivia demanded, “or did you not trust us enough to help you? I would have thought you’d know where our sympathies lie with mages.”

Before Fiona could begin uttering a single word, both Alistair and Olivia cut her off, their sentence even shocked Aleska; immediate and irrevocable banishment. *Haven is small, but anything seems better than being banished. Orlais won’t accept them, Ferelden was the last major ally they had…*

Anselm stepped forward with an elegant bow, receiving a nod of acknowledgement from Queen Olivia and a questioning look from King Alistair.

“Your Graces; may I speak with you briefly? The situation here in Redcliffe has been… complicated.” He threw an encouraging glance towards Aleska. “You may not be aware of everything that’s been happening in the last few days.”

King Alistair looked at his wife and let out a heavy sigh; even through the ornately chased Royal Armour Aleska could see his shoulders slump a little.

“Very well… but I’m not sure how much more ‘complicated’ I’m in the mood for right now…”

Aleska’s gaze shifted towards Fiona, the pale expression upon her face unmistakable; she knew what their sentence entailed. That the people she swore to protect, would be at the mercy of any Templar which crossed their path; men, woman and children would die – all because of one stupid mistake. She looked over to where Anselm stood with the King and Queen, deep in earnest discussion. Sophia had joined them; Queen Olivia greeting her like an old friend. According to Leliana, Ostwick was a long-standing ally of Ferelden and the Trevelyans had close links to the Queen’s family. Now was the moment she would see how much weight those links really carried.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw the monarchs nod in agreement and walk back over to where the Grand Enchanter awaited their final verdict. King Alistair stepped forward; still stern, but more composed in manner.

“Our sentence of banishment stands; the leaders of the Mage Rebellion must leave Ferelden immediately…” he paused, looking directly at Aleska. “But We are not without consideration for your dependents. We will allow time for proper transportation of the children, sick and elderly to a safe haven; assuming one can be found!”
As hints went, it was pretty broad.

“I’ll take them,” Aleska spoke up. “It is no secret we sought the aid of the Mages to help seal the Breach. Perhaps they can find shelter under the Inquisition banner.”

“What would be the terms of this arrangement,” Fiona seemed to have found her voice. “More enslavement?”

“I think the Inquisition can offer better terms than Tevinter…” Dorian murmured in the background, “or, at least, I would hope so…”

“I would suggest conscription.” Cassandra’s voice was harsh and relentless, what she had witnessed put her in no mood to be moderate. “The Grand Enchanter’s actions merit nothing less.”

Aleska glanced across at Sophia; the woman had a better sense of the mood among the Mages than most, and her opinion was certainly respected by those already serving the Inquisition. Sophia gave the very slightest shake of her head, enough for Aleska to make up her mind.

“Regardless, Grand-Enchanter,” Olivia kept her tone calm. “You are in no position to argue. If you want my advice, take whatever the Inquisition offers; ours will not change, you will be safer under their banner compared to out there on your own.”

Aleska drew in a breath, steeling herself for the biggest – certainly the most contentious – decision she’d been asked to make so far.

“I invite you to join us as free allies. This is your chance to prove that Mages can govern and guide themselves,” Aleska didn’t need to turn around to see Cassandra’s disapproving stare, she could feel it burning into the back of her neck. “My ambassador, Lady Josephine, will settle the details with you on your arrival at Haven. I’m sure the two of you can come to a mutually beneficial arrangement; but, Grand-Enchanter, this by no means excuses what you have done here. There are still many questions that need answers.”

Fiona bowed to the Monarchs and Aleska, walking off towards the small group of mages who remained with Alexius. She doesn’t have to like my arrangements, but it is better than allowing children to be at the mercy of those Templars. Aleska’s brows furrowed, turning towards Alistair and Olivia, she lowered herself into a curtsy.

The Queen smiled at her, relief evident in her face.

“Well said, this might have ended very badly otherwise. Perhaps there is hope for this Inquisition after all.” With the immediate crisis averted Queen Olivia, despite her armour, seemed less intimidating. She turned to Anselm as he approached “Please tell Joe I received his letter, it’s the first thing that’s cheered me up since all this started. I am pleased Cuddles is doing well and I look forward to hearing more of his adventures in Ferelden.”

“Herald,” Alistair gave Aleska a grateful bow. “You have done a service to Ferelden, more importantly to my family. You have my thanks, perhaps the next time we meet; it shall be under better circumstances…”

He gave his wife a glance that had more than a hint of mischief in it.

“Darling, do you think Eamon would throw a fit if we stayed a little longer – to make sure everything’s secure, of course?”

“Yes,” Olivia smiled, kissing Alistair’s cheek. “But I am sure he can hold down Denerim without
us for a few days.”

“I better write to Joe,” Anselm let out a hearty chuckle. “He’ll murder me if I don’t tell him you’re spending time out here! You know how he gets…”

He placed his arm around Aleska’s waist, giving her one last reassuring squeeze

“…My Lady, we shall speak later.”

Aleska curtsied before Olivia and Alistair one last time, returning to her companions. Fiona walked past her, the look of despair still upon her face, as if she was trading one set of chains for another.

“You know,” Varric gave her a sly grin as he reloaded Bianca. “Curly is going to throw a fit when we get back; he’ll have the entire Mage Rebellion in his lap and no means of controlling them.”

“Leave the Commander to me,” Aleska registered the stinging sensation of the cut on her cheek. “I will handle him.”

“Sapphire,” Varric chuckled, patting Aleska’s arm. “We all had every intention of leaving Curly to you.”

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“It shouldn’t scar too much,” Lady Sophia’s fingers gripped Aleska’s chin, turning her head from side to side as best to examine the cuts. “How did this happen?”

“Long story,” Aleska mumbled, inhaling deeply as Sophia placed a piece of cotton with some antiseptic ointment to Aleska’s cheek.

Aleska looked at the soft violet eyes now staring at her, knowing Sophia would not press her for information. Lifting up Aleska’s chin, she examined the blood caked to her neck, assuming it had trickled through the cracks of her armour. A soft breath escaped her.

“Any other cuts you want me to examine?” Sophia closed the tent, to give them a semblance of privacy. “That armour isn’t what you wore when you left, it is too tight.”

“How did you—” Aleska gasped in astonishment.

“The pink lines around your neck,” She turned Aleska around, unclipping the clasps which held the armour in place. “I knew a Templar once, a good man; when he first came to the Circle as a recruit; his armour was three sizes too small, but was all his family could afford. He was in the infirmary at least three times a week.”

“Ser Guenther?” Aleska cursed inwardly as she felt the other woman hesitate. “I apologize… I didn’t mean to pry—Anselm mentioned him; it wasn’t my place to bring it up.”

Sophia shook her head with a thoughtful smile

“Don’t worry, times like this… they bring up all sorts of memories.” She continued to remove the constricting armour as carefully as she could. “I don’t know if they had to buy a used set, or if he’d had a growth spurt after they paid the armourer. He was taller than Alistair, if you can believe that! Poor thing, he looked so miserable I persuaded Papa to donate a set that would fit him to the Commandery…”
Aleska looked down, feeling Sophia unclasp the last of the buckles of the armour, removing the breastplate and placing it at Aleska's feet. Only the very thin chemise remained, now stained with blood. Sophia seemed to sense Aleska’s discomfort, reassuring her that it wasn’t the first time she’d have to do this. Aleska heard the familiar snip of scissors cutting her chemise off, the armour had cut into her shoulders, embedding the fabric into her skin.

“I apologize if I am hurting you,” Sophia tied Aleska’s hair up into a tight bun. “This is just worse than I imagined. If I don’t treat it now, you could risk infection. Please, allow me to help.”

Aleska accepted the robe Sophia had to offer her, placing it around her torso, had it not been for the small clothes which she grew comfortable wearing, she would have been naked. At least my healer is a woman, Aleska shuddered at the thought of anyone else. She is respectful, despite her status. She doesn’t look down on me for being Dalish.

“Elves and humans grew up together in the Circle, we even had apprentices come to us from the Dalish – if they had too many Mages in a clan,” Sophia appeared to have read Aleska’s mind. “No one was above the other, that is what the College of Enchanters tried to teach us. Wealth, power or family ties didn’t make us superior. We were all there to learn.”

“It must not have always been easy,” Aleska sat down in the chair as per Sophia’s instructions. “There must have been conflict.”

“Shove men and woman in a small space,” Sophia laughed, applying the ointment to Aleska’s shoulders. “Things are bound to happen, whether they end up lovers or throwing fire balls at one another. Mostly we all got along, helped one another where we could, but no system is perfect.”

“I have already doomed myself,” Aleska inhaled deeply, she had never experienced a healer as gentle as Sophia. Even the Dalish healers were rough. “What happened to Lord Anselm’s mother? He never speaks about her, even though he’s always talking about you and Jonas. I tried to ask Seeker Cassandra, but she doesn’t know. I doubt he would tell me himself.”

“He might,” Sophia unpinned Aleska’s hair, running a brush through the knotted ends. “But I’ll spare you the task, Aunt Eli was a wonderful woman. She was kind, compassionate and she loved Anselm like no mother has loved a child. Papa always said she was too good for a man like Uncle Giulio…”

Sophia set the brush down and picked up a roll of bandages, beginning to dress Aleska’s wounds.

“There was a terrible Cholera epidemic when I was 13, the worst in years; scores were dying every day in the poorest parts of the city. Papa sent us all to Castrotrevalli, our summer palace in the hills, to be safe but Aunt Eli insisted on staying; to help care for the sick. A message came from the city a few days later to tell us she was dead. Anselm was only five…”

“What about his father?” Aleska asked “Surely he…?”

Sophia gave a disdainful little sniff.

“His sole interest in the marriage was the chance it offered to become Duke of Hasmal. When that never manifested, he returned to his twin passions of insects and spite. Anselm was never more than a nuisance, I think; he neglected him dreadfully and then complained when he acted wild. What education and training Anselm did get was because Papa stepped in, and by then he already had the well-earned reputation for being a rake and a scoundrel. Mama tried her best to be there for him; but she had us to contend with, and many problems of her own. Despite what you hear, or even think; he’s not as bad as some of the stories claim. He might be… dissolute… in many ways,
but I have never known him to be cruel or malicious – and he’s always been a faithful friend to Jonas.”

Aleska took a moment to ponder what she’d heard, knowing how pious Sophia was, she knew that she wouldn’t have said that to try and cover up Anselm’s past nor lessen how Aleska saw him. _He is lashing out then_, Aleska surmised, picking apart Sophia’s statement. _Now most of his behaviour makes sense_, Aleska rose out of the seat once Sophia had bandaged her arms and legs up.

“Thank you Lady Sophia,” Aleska cleared her throat, “for both bandaging me up and offering your council. Perhaps if I made a dash to my tent, no one will see me in this.”

“No need,” Sophia laughed softly, producing a small satchel. “I had your spare set of clothing brought here. A Trevelyan is always prepared.”

Aleska took the satchel with a grateful smile.

“So it would seem.”

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Aleska sat on a fallen log, the waist coat she wore proved more comfortable than the armour, *the King and Queen look like normal people*. Aleska noted, watching Olivia throw the ball for Cuddles and listening to Jonas’ stories about Ostwick, _she doesn’t look like a powerful monarch, she looks like a normal woman_. Aleska’s glance shifted towards Alistair, deep in some story with the recruits, sharing a mug of ale with them and laughing with his men. _Perhaps this is what makes them so successful, they don’t think themselves high and mighty._

The ball rolled towards Aleska, bouncing off her foot, Olivia ran up towards her with Cuddles in toe. Picking the ball up, Aleska looked at the slobber now drying on the leather. Aleska laughed as Cuddles bounced around her, dropping his torso with his haunches high – ready to pounce as soon as she threw.

“Careful boy,” Aleska stood up, “you might wag your arse off at this rate. Go fetch!”

Aleska mustered all her strength to throw the ball across the camp site, watching Cuddles bolt off into the night to find his treasure. Turning to Olivia, Aleska noticed her nodding in approval.

“Not bad,” Olivia wiped the sweat from her brow. “Perhaps next time try moving your arm all the way back, as straight as you can. It should give you further distance.”

“Thank you,” Aleska lowered her head. “Your Grace, I shall remember in future.”

“Not out here,” Olivia rested her hands upon her hips. “I can be a Queen in Denerim,” Olivia handed Aleska a mug of water. “Out here, I am just Olivia; Alistair is just Alistair. Our whole marriage has been full of people kissing our arses in the hopes of advancement, sometimes it is nice to be ordinary again for a while.”

“I know what you mean,” Aleska took a sip of the water. “Even in Haven, people either walk on eggshells or they are afraid to step near me. It can be frustrating when they see you as a holy symbol.”

“To the people,” Olivia smiled, bending down to grab the ball from Cuddles. “You are a holy symbol. To the Chantry, a symbol of everything that’s gone wrong. What you do with your image, is up to you; you can either shape Thedas for the better, or shake it to its very core. No one can decide for you; if you’d be willing to take my advice, find some time to remember you are one
person, even if that means falling in love.”

Olivia shot a glance towards Anselm, laughing with Alistair and the guards they brought with them. A small smile touched upon Aleska lips, she always found it easier to connect with Anselm out in the wilderness; away from prying eyes and from Josephine’s constant hounding about how she was supposed to behave in front of nobility.

“You and the King look happy,” Aleska stated, walking alongside Olivia. “How did you do it? Find a way to stop the Blight, fall in love, be both the hero and the woman?”

“If you think it was always easy,” Olivia turned her head to look at Aleska. “You are mistaken, legends hold what people want to remember; they leave out the real ugliness. It was never easy; I couldn’t have been much older than you when it all started. In a matter of weeks I lost almost my entire family, barely survived the betrayal at Ostagar and saw the man I loved and was going to marry have his throat torn out by an abomination. When Cailan died I thought I would never smile again. By then Alistair was already a friend, he helped me stay focused; along side Leliana and Morrigan. How is my dear friend enjoying her position as your spymistress, by the way?”

“From what I gather, well enough,” Aleska’s hand rested on Cuddle’s head, scratching behind his ears. “If I am not out here trying to give us something to grab onto, I am usually dealing with every other minor thing. Josephine takes up more of my time than anyone.”

“Is Cullen well?” Olivia rested her hands behind her back. “When last I saw him—”

“The Commander is a very reclusive man,” Aleska looked up at the stars. “Mostly keeps to himself, if I can get him to talk about anything other than the Inquisition, it will be a miracle.”

“I can’t blame him,” Olivia exhaled. “I have taken up more of your time, Herald. I need to rescue Alistair from his men, or else he will stay up with them all night and he’s a chore when he’s hungover. It is nice to finally meet the woman behind the legend. Know you have a friend in both of us; if you need anything.”

“You are very kind,” Aleska lowered her head. “I will tell Leliana you said hello. Come on Cuddles, you’re on watch duty with me tonight.”

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Aleska sat with her feet hanging over the edge of the cliff, Cuddled flopped down beside her snoring away. His legs twitching every so often. Probabably dreaming about chasing rabbits, Aleska ran her fingers through his fur, it seemed to calm him down. Her elven sight had adjusted to the darkness, the sound of the babbling stream beneath her had a serene effect.

“There you are,” Anselm sat on the opposite side of her. “I have something for you.”

“Oh,” Aleska turned her attention towards him.

Anselm reached behind him, producing a red rose. “I found this on the way here, the bush had quite a few of them, it took me a while to find this one.”

Aleska accepted the rose, twirling the stem between her fingers, releasing the sweet perfume from the centre. A smile formed, shaking her head and resting the rose beside her. Her hand touched his, lifting it up to examine the cuts he received from picking the rose.

“You needn’t have done that,” Aleska’s finger traced along the fresh cuts, taking out a wash cloth from her pack and wetting it with water from the flask. “Anyone of them would have been fine.”
“Look at it closely,” Anselm urged her.

Aleska lifted the flower up one more time, her fingers touching the soft petals, this had been the first time she saw a rose without a flaw. Usually they had bite marks from insects, this one had none of them. Even the redness was darker than usual as if it hadn’t had too much sun. It was flawless.

“Is this how you see me? A flawless flower?” Aleska teased, sniffing the rose one last time.

“No,” Anselm shook his head, his heel resting against the edge of the cliff and his forearm placed upon his knee. “I see you as a woman, who despite all odds thrown against her, rises above every challenge and shows the world exactly what she is capable of.”

Aleska watched the moon rise over the horizon, resting the rose within her lap, even though she had grown up Dalish; she understood that very few men in this world could place such a significance on a single rose.
Foreshadowing

Chapter by Lannister418

Chapter Summary

As the assault on the Breach finally draws near, no-one knows what the end result will be and everyone is feeling the strain. Aleska is given a chance to escape her worries for a short time but bad memories, and the pressures of the present, push Commander Cullen dangerously close to the edge.

“We can position Mages around the sides of the valley; here, here… and here!” Commander Cullen indicated the precisely arranged markers and Aleska couldn’t help wondering how late he’d been up, putting each one in exactly the right spot. “The archers will provide them with ranged support if needed…”

“What about there?” Aleska asked, pointing at the far end of the valley; past the ruins of the Temple. Cullen shook his head.

“Too close to the Breach for it to be safe, and the remains of the Temple are dangerously unstable.” He stepped back and rubbed his neck with a heavy sigh, “I can only pray this works…”

“Still doubting our new allies?” Leliana asked with a dry smile, not looking up from her scrutiny of the map. “I thought we’d resolved that argument?”

Cullen bristled at her tone.

“I am not...!” He growled then paused, inhaling deeply through his nose to calm himself. “My concerns were solely for the wellbeing of all involved, including the Mages; that is one of my responsibilities, if you recall. I have no intention of undermining the Herald’s alliance.”

The argument had been a passionate one. Despite Varric’s intimation that Cullen would be unhappy, the depth of his reaction shook Aleska. Even the suggestion from Sophia and Vivienne that some of the Inquisition soldiers receive discreet Templar training, as a safeguard, failed to soothe his temper. Only when Cassandra spoke up in favour did he finally back down.

That was the real surprise. The Seeker had been very explicit in her disapproval of the Alliance on their way back from Redcliffe, however she conceded that the decision had been the Herald’s to make and it was their responsibility to make it work. The woman’s willingness to support a course of action she personally disagreed with had won her a new respect in Aleska’s eyes.

Cullen turned to face her. He looked more tired than usual and his voice was weary.

“It’s you I’m worried about...” He said quietly. “You’ll be channelling an immense amount of raw magic, more than anyone could ever imagine even with years of training. The consequences...”

His words tailed off, unwilling to speak of the possibilities aloud. Aleska felt her throat tighten and go dry. There was nothing Cullen, or any of them, could say that she hadn’t thought for herself. She took a drink of water, hoping that her hand wasn’t visibly shaking.
“I know what the consequences could be.” She said, as steadily as possible. “But we knew it would come to this point. Solas has prepared me as best he can...”

“I hope his best is good enough” Cullen muttered, almost to himself. “There are other options, we could...”

“Even if the Templars might still be willing to speak to us, we have no idea where they are!” Leliana interrupted. Messengers sent to Therinfal Redoubt reported the place standing silent and sealed; apparently empty, with no sign of the Templars who had assembled there. “There are no other options left. I’m sorry...”

“I’ve asked Bull to take the Chargers and investigate properly,” Aleska told Cullen. Cullen might have left the Templars, but he still cared about his former order and worried over what the Lord Seeker had planned. If she was honest, Aleska did as well. The man may have dropped out of sight but it didn’t mean he’d forgotten his hostility to her and the Inquisition. “If they left any sort of trail, Bull will be sure to pick it up”

“Ben Hassrath training does come in useful” Leliana agreed, picking up her notes. “Will there be anything else?”

Aleska shook her head. The three of them had, eventually, agreed the strategy they were going to present and anything else was pointless refinement. She finished her water, looking down at the positions marked around the map of the valley.

And, in the middle, just me...

A stray memory from the conversation with Queen Olivia at Redcliffe sprang back into her mind, as if to deliberately distract her from brooding on what was coming. She looked across at Cullen, tapping the edge of his papers on the table to straighten them.

“Why did you never mention that you knew Queen Olivia?”

It was an innocent enough question, but the reaction was unexpected. Cullen seemed to freeze in his place, apart from a tightening of the muscles along his jaw, while Leliana threw her a strangely perturbed look. Somehow, she’d manage to unsettle them both.

“Our paths... crossed... briefly, many years ago...” Cullen spoke slowly, still looking at the neat stack of reports in his hand “I would not have said we knew each other.”

Aleska frowned slightly.

“I must have misunderstood; I thought the Queen said she was glad to hear you were better. I assumed the two of you fought alongside each other or something like that. Perhaps it’s my Ferelden...”

This information appeared to relax the Commander. He ran his gloved finger along the edge of his papers to smooth them.

“I think I understand. She and King Cailan came to Kinloch Hold just after Ostagar. The Circle was facing... difficulties... of its own at the time. With everything that happened I... I’m surprised she remembers me, let alone my name.”

“What happened at the Circle?” Aleska asked. Cullen must have been in Ferelden for the duration of the Blight and yet he’d never once mentioned it. “A Darkspawn attack?”
Cullen carefully slid the reports into the leather portfolio he habitually carried and Aleska became aware that Leliana was regarding him with a careful, almost concerned, scrutiny. Given the near-constant friction between the Commander and Spymaster this was unusual, and she had the sense of stepping near the edge of a shared secret. He cleared his throat and looked up at her.

“Few who survived the Blight have fond memories of that time. I… would prefer not to speak of it. If there is no other business this evening, there are some things I must attend to.”

His tone was polite but the firmness beneath it made it plain the subject was off-limits. She gave a brief nod in response as he left alongside Leliana. Alone in the candle-lit Council Chamber, Aleska exhaled slowly; trying to let go of her thoughts and feelings and simply be attentive to the sounds around her, the way Solas taught her. It was no good, the images and memories of that nightmare future came pouring back in the moment her own thoughts slowed. Those things were never going to happen now; it seemed unfair to remember them with such brutal clarity. She took her waistcoat from the back of a chair and began to buckle it up. Perhaps she should speak to Dorian? He seemed blithely unaffected by what they’d been through. More conversation wasn’t what she wanted, though; not right now.

The summer evenings were long this far south. Even with the baleful vortex of the Breach up above, the shades of colour running through the western sky were breath-taking. It would be hours before it became dark and she felt the urge to leave the confining walls of Haven and run free in the woods for a while; a last taste of solitude before whatever lay ahead. They had a name for their enemy now and a sense of what this ‘Elder One’ had planned. Closing the Breach wasn’t going to make that go away. It might be a very long time before she saw her Clan again, if she ever did.

She dodged swiftly through the town; it took no magic to pass unnoticed, just a quick step and the knowledge of where to find cover. Haven was small enough for her to know every cranny of it as intimately as the lines of the Mark and, within minutes, she reached the narrow alley behind a cabin where there was a loose log in the palisade. Even Leliana’s people didn’t know about this…

“About time too!” A cheerful, familiar, voice called softly from above, “I’d almost given up hope…”

Aleska didn’t know whether to laugh or scream, compromising on a half-groan as she looked up to see Anselm perched lightly on the eaves of the cabin, grinning down at her.

“How did you know about this spot?” She asked, with careful calmness, as he dropped down; landing lightly on the balls of his feet.

“I haven’t been following you, if that’s what you’re worried about.” He assured her. “But you’re not the only one who likes to have a discreet way of coming and going; and when I found this…”

He pulled a small, twisted, silver buckle out of his pocket. She recognized it immediately; one had come off her favourite green waistcoat a week or so previously.

“So, you deduced…. what? That if you lurked around here long enough, you’d be sure to catch me?”

Anselm gave her a wry smile.

“Actually, I got here just before you. I saw you slipping away from the Chantry and thought you might be heading here. I… well, I didn’t want you to miss out on your surprise.”

Aleska shook her head.
“I’m sure whatever you had planned is very thoughtful and charming, but I would really rather be on my own right now…”

Anselm nodded thoughtfully.

“I understand. If fact, I thought you would. This is something you can enjoy in solitude; but I will need to show you where it is.”

Aleska looked up at him with a tilt of her head, the sense of annoyance fading.

“Now you have me intrigued, but if this is some game…”

He stepped back with his hands raised in mock-defence.

“No games, I promise; you only need to tolerate my company as guide – nothing more.”

###

The trail they followed was freshly blazed. Less than a day, Aleska reckoned, judging by the fresh resin seeping from the cuts. Anselm hopped lightly from log to rock as the route up the hillside got steeper. He wasn’t quite as fleet-of-foot as some of the Clan’s trackers, but few humans were; he was undoubtedly one of the most agile she’d met.

“Do we have a destination, or did you just invite me out to admire your arse?” Aleska joked as she followed behind him. Anselm stopped and leaned against a tree, laughing quietly.

“I’ve been told its very admirable, but I wouldn’t intrude on your desire for solitude solely for that” He gestured further up the hill “It’s just over that rise…”

Once past the ridge, the hill dipped down towards a hollow at the foot of a cliff where the pines thinned out into a small clearing. A waterfall tumbled down the rocks from where an underground stream broke through the cliff face, spilling into a shallow pool. The water swirled lazily, and a faint mist of steam rose from the surface. Aleska looked around her, astonished.

“How did you ever find this place?”

There were plenty of hot pools lower down, all of them popular bathing sites, and there were more up in the mountains. This place was so well hidden; she never would have even imagined it existed.

“You have Cuddles to thanks for this, and I owe him a month of breakfasts.” Anselm laughed, tapping his nose. “Mabari have an incredible sense of smell; which does make me wonder how he puts up with Joe at times!”

Aleska stifled a laugh, standing with her hands on her hips, shaking her head in disbelief as he pulled a pack out from it’s hiding place behind some rocks.

“Soap, towels, a nice warm rug… everything My Lady might require…”

She folded her arms across her chest.

“You’ve given this a lot of thought, clearly; but, where do you intend to be during all this?”

Anselm gave her a wink, pulling some thin strips of metal out of a leather case and beginning to fix them to the surrounding trees.
“I shall be further down the hill, practicing my aim, until you’re ready to return and – for your peace of mind – I borrowed some warding runes from the stores. They’ll alert you if anyone comes within range.”

“Borrowed?” Aleska said, with a dry smile as he completed fixing the runes. “Did you actually go through the formality of asking anyone?”

Anselm stepped back from the tree, dusting off his hands.

“They only would have bothered me with all sorts of un-necessary questions; and there are dozens of these sets anyway…” He crouched down to collect his bow and quiver “When you’re ready to go back, I’ll be at the split pine by the rock.”

“Why do you do these things?” She asked, a deep curiosity burning inside her. “This isn’t part of some seduction; even I know you wouldn’t go to these lengths just to bed a woman.”

Anselm remained on his haunches, bow and quiver across his lap, staring straight ahead of him.

“You’re hundreds of miles from your family and Clan; anyone who isn’t worshipping you is plotting to kill you and in a day or so they’ll be sending you against… that…” he glanced in the direction of the Breach “everyone’s laid so many expectations on you, wanting you to be something… other… never asking if that’s what you want, or if it’s who you are. You deserve the chance to be yourself for a while. Everyone does…”

His voice trailed off into a thoughtful silence.

“What about you? Who is Anselm Trevelyan… really?”

He looked up at her in surprise for a moment, then laughed and stood, slipping one arm through the strap of his quiver.

“Me? Just a disappointingly brassy link in a golden dynastic chain!” He gave her an elaborate bow “And I shall leave you to your bath, My Lady.”

He was past the line of the wards and making his way down the hill, whistling cheerfully, before she could say anything else. Aleska turned to look at the pool, the waters warm and inviting, and sighed quietly as she began to unbuckle her waistcoat.

*That’s one way to avoid the question, I suppose…*

###

True to his word, Anselm was at the split pine, and had obviously been practicing his marksmanship for a while. He hadn’t heard Aleska approach and she leaned against a nearby tree; her eyes fixed on his stance and how he held his bow with such elegance and grace, but still a hint of awkwardness. A smile touched her lips and she shook her head.

"You're holding it wrong," The surprise of hearing her voice causing him to misfire. "That would be the perfect stance in the Grand Tourney; but, in a battle? You'd be lucky if it didn't get you killed."

Anselm turned towards her with a mischievous look.

“Perhaps you'd be so kind as to show me how it is done, My Lady?”
She dropped the satchel and walked over to him; her hips cocked to the side and her hands resting upon her waist.

"Well for a start, you’re far too tense, it makes sense now why some of your shots barely connect."

Her hands ran along his shoulders; squeezing them softly until he lowered and relaxed them, while her boot tapped his left leg - a silent indication to move it further back. Her hands trailed along the line of his arms; correcting their position as her chest pressed against his back.

Once more her boot tapped his right leg, indicating he move it forward; her sensitive hearing picking up the thudding of his heart.

"Relax," She teased. "You're an archer, not a swordsman."

Circling Anselm, Aleska noted every inch of his stance; the whites of his knuckles visible as he clutched his bow. Her hand curved over his, easing his grip.

"Too tight." Shaking her head, Aleska re-positioned his hand, her index finger tracing along each one of his, curving them into place. "Imagine you are holding a beautiful white dove, you want to hold her tight enough that she cannot move, but not so tightly that you kill her."

"Anything else?" Anselm's bright green eyes followed her every move intently.

"Remember to hold your breath," Aleska's hand trailed along his chest, pushing his stomach in. Her other hand slid around his back, forcing him to arch it; moving lower until her fingertips brushed the waistband of his breeches.

"Not there, unless you want all of Haven to hear me" Anselm swallowed the lump within his throat. “I’m a little bit… erm… ticklish."

“Oh really?” Aleska laughed quietly. “I’ll need to remember that!”

She moved to stand behind him, hand resting lightly on his shoulder, and leaned in until her lips almost brushed his earlobe.

“Now… release…”

The arrow soared towards its target, striking it full and Aleska took a step back, nodding in approval. Collecting her satchel, she slung it over her shoulder.

"That was…” Anselm exclaimed, looking at her breathlessly “The most… interesting… archery lesson I’ve ever had."

“I’m glad…” Aleska tucking her hair into her hood and heading down the trail. It would be properly dark by the time they reached Haven but, for once, she didn’t particularly care. “Now you know the proper grip, I’ve no doubt you’ll take plenty time to practise…”

###

“You can’t seriously be agreeing with him?” Cullen objected as he escorted Lady Sophia back to her quarters. Somehow, an evening of chess with her and Lord Pavus had turned into a debate about the Great Schism. “Apart from everything else, those verses are Dissonant!”

“Dorian made a valid point; all of the miracles attributed to Andraste could be the acts of a powerful Mage. It doesn’t invalidate her also being the Bride of the Maker…” Sophia countered,
“and it puts many verses of the Chant into a new context; after all, it takes a Mage to truly understand the danger that the abuse of Magic represents. Anyway, Justinia restored those verses in the new edition.”

“That was never officially authorised…” Cullen huffed. It was a weak argument and he knew it, only the start of the Mage-Templar War had delayed the New Cumberland Chant’s formal acceptance by the Chantry as the definitive canonical text. “And if we believed that, the implications…”

“Would be very significant in resolving the current conflict.” She noted, as they drew near to her door, “I didn’t say I believed it, but the idea should not be rejected out of hand; and you still haven’t answered my question.”

Sophia paused with one hand on the latch, smiling up at him enquiringly. The Commander was formidably well-read, most Templars knew little more than the Chant and the Book of Regulations, and he possessed an agile – if sometimes conventional – mind. It had been an engaging evening; long nights of debate and argument were a staple of life in the Circle and something she had missed keenly. Dorian’s witty, frequently heretical, interjections had merely given it an added thrill of scandal.

Cullen let out a quietly resigned sigh.

“I can see this debate is far from over. Good night, m’Lady; I hope you sleep well.”

The Commander felt a lightness in his step as he walked down the path winding towards the gates. It had been an enjoyable evening; reading about these things was all very well, but the chance to have a proper discussion came along far too rarely. It was almost like those long-ago evenings by Lake Calenhad with Finn and…

He stopped in his stride; cursing quietly to himself, a word that some would be surprised he even knew. He’d promised himself he wasn’t going to think about that, but it had been too near the surface of his mind even before the Herald mentioned the Queen asking about him.

Of course Olivia Cousland would remember. Every moment of that nightmare must be etched on her memory the way it was on his; from the clawed hands of the abominations dragging him, kicking and yelling, from his bed – to finding… her… at the foot of the stairs; cold and still, one hand stretched out towards the staff lying just beyond her grasp. She must have been looking for him when… He ran his hand over his face, feeling his eyes starting to sting. Damn! Couldn’t he have one night free of this? It didn’t help that Lady Sophia looked so much like her; those bright, violet eyes, and the clear Amell complexion. Mercifully, she’d never enquired about her cousin in the Fereldan Circle. Perhaps Elena had been the family secret…

Cullen took a deep breath and squared his shoulders. There was no point in even thinking about sleep for the next few hours; time for one of his surprise inspections and, if he was lucky, Rylen would have a pot of tea brewing.

A movement between two stacks of lumber near the palisade caught the corner of his eye and Cullen’s hand went automatically to the hilt of his sword. Long years in Kirkwall had taught him danger lurked in the most unassuming places. He stepped back under the eaves of a nearby cabin, finding cover as he overheard voices; recognizing them instantly.

“Thank you for the surprise…” he heard Aleska say, with the hint of a laugh in her voice “You have no idea how much I needed that…”
“Oh, I think I can guess.” Trevelyan responded with a low chuckle, “and thank you again for the lesson it was quite… stimulating.”

“I believe this is where I bid you a good night,” Aleska opened her door, tucking a few strands of hair behind her ear. “Sleep well, perhaps tomorrow we can work more on your movements; they are a little rusty.”

Cullen felt something seething deep inside him as Trevelyan bade goodnight to the Herald and strolled away from her cottage, humming a jaunty tune. He’d been prepared to put up with the man’s insolence, arrogance and scandalous conduct because the Herald valued his usefulness in the field. Usefulness only went so far though, and the more Aleska appeared to rely on him the more disruptive his behaviour became. First that ridiculous and embarrassing ‘bargain’ and now this! Right when they were preparing for the final assault.

As Anselm passed by the Commander’s vantage point, Cullen’s hand shot out. Grabbing the younger man by the shoulder he spun him round and slammed his back hard against the wall, knocking the breath out of him.

“What in the Void are you playing at now…?” He hissed, face only inches from Anselm’s “The Herald is not to leave Haven without proper escort; certainly not on the whim of some pampered little…”

Anselm angrily shrugged Cullen’s hand off his shoulder, straightening himself up. The Commander was roughly the same height as him, heavier in the chest and arms from wielding sword and shield. He’d probably pack a good punch, but the armour would slow him. Anselm’s eye’s narrowed dangerously. He might not care for most of his family, but he was still a Trevelyan; no turnip-munching, dog-lord Templar was going to manhandle him like that.

“She’s no child; Old Man…” He growled, with no hint of his customary suaveness, “and you’re not her father, or her gaoler. As for escort, she seems perfectly satisfied with my services in that respect. Do you have an issue with that?”

“As a matter of fact I do, Boy…” Cullen snapped back, stepping a little closer. This over-privileged pipsqueak might pride himself on his abilities, but the Commander had honed his own skills in the streets and alleys of Kirkwall where style was less important than the ability to swiftly incapacitate your opponent. If Trevelyan thought he had the edge then he was in for a nasty surprise. “The Herald doesn’t need your distractions; especially not now…”

“You seem to know a lot about what she needs; or are you just unhappy it’s me she finds distracting?” Anselm gave an amused snort, “I imagined you were too busy sniffing around my cousin…”

“How dare…!” Cullen began, feeling his fists clench and fighting the urge to smack Trevelyan hard in his smug face. Anselm cut him off with a sharp, cold, laugh.

“Oh, sorry! Is Joe not your type?”

“Is there a problem here?” A sleepy, irritated voice grumbled. Both men turned to see Varric standing there in his drawers, glaring at them “Because someone woke Bianca up, and she gets awfully cranky if she doesn’t get her beauty sleep. And if Bianca’s cranky…”

“No problem at all!” Anselm said cheerfully, straightening his tunic. “The Commander and I were just having a heated debate about tactics… Isn’t that right?”
Cullen glowered at Anselm for a moment.

“I have inspections to attend to…” he said sharply, turning on his heel and striding off. Varric shook his head, tutting quietly.

“Be careful how far you push him…” The Dwarf warned, “Curly may seem like a stuffy ass but I’ve seen him fight. The man hits low and hard, and he’s got a temper…”

“I’ll bear that in mind, the next time he feels in the mood to discuss tactics…” Anselm gave him a wry smile. “Seeing as you’re awake, got any of that Dairsmuid rum left?”

Varric just groaned and patted the man on the back.

“Go to bed, Charmer! We got a long couple of days ahead…”
Chapter Summary

Closing the Breach was meant to be a monuments occasion for the Inquisition, but the consequences to Aleska were greater than anyone anticipated. Roles were reversed whilst Anselm's worry forced him to never leave her bedside, all the while Aleska slipped into the depths of the Fade and relived something she hadn't expected to.

Pain was the only thing Aleska understood that moment; a searing agony filling every nerve ending. Her vision fading, she could make out nothing more than a hazy blur; hearing only the voices of Cullen and Jonas as they raced over. Her hand travelled down her waist, touching the shard of wood that scraped against her ribs with every breath. Some scrap of the Temple ruins, shaken loose by the force of the Breach closing; it had struck hard enough to pierce her armour and embed itself under her skin like a giant, red-hot, splinter.

She could taste blood in the back of her throat and wanted to throw up, each heave of her abdomen sending new, stinging, pains through her ribs.

*Not now,* Aleska clutched at the sharp piece of wood embedded in her side. She felt herself growing weaker by the moment, the pain sapping her last reserves of energy.

*It needs to come out, it has to.*

“Don’t!” A sharp voice commanded.

Too late, with the last of her strength she tugged the red-hot wood from her side, singeing her palm in the process. With a shrill scream that resounded around the Temple. Aleska fell to her side, knees tight up against her chest as tears of pain streamed down her cheeks.

“Why… why did you do that?” Cullen stammered frantically, yanking his glove off with his teeth and placing his fore and middle finger to her neck to check her pulse. He looked around with a desperate expression “Where are the healers?”

“Don’t—” The words caught in Aleska’s throat. She wanted to tell him that the wound wasn’t serious, that all she needed was sleep, but her head lulled to the side as she faded in and out of consciousness and the words faded from her mind.

“Maker…! Oh, bloody hell… No!”

Jonas shoulder-charged his way through Mages and Templars alike, still too elated at the closing of the Breach to notice the still figure on the ground. Cullen was already there, holding her head up from the splintered stones littering the ground, frantically trying to get a response.

Aleska was only just conscious, one hand moving in an attempt to clasp the Commander’s arm; her skin pale and mottled, blood dripping from her nose and ears and smeared across Cullen’s hands. Jonas couldn’t remember seeing his friend ever look so scared.
“We have to get her somewhere sheltered, mate…”

Cullen met his eyes and nodded, the two men linked arms underneath Aleska and carefully lifted her up; eliciting a moan of pain

“Sorry…” Cullen muttered “You’ll be safe soon”

With Sophia and Solas following, the two men carried her into a still intact vault of the shattered Temple as Cassandra and Bull kept the concerned and merely curious at bay. Jonas held her carefully in his arms as Cullen pulled off his cloak and placed it on the paving slabs. Laying her down, he pulled out his knife and hurriedly cut through the straps of her armour. Dark bruises were already beginning to form on her abdomen and Jonas felt a cold clenching in his guts. She was bleeding inside…

Sophia examined the wound in Aleska’s side while Solas laid his hand on the now-unconscious woman’s brow and closed his eyes in concentration. After a moment, the two Mages looked at each other and nodded. Sophia got to her feet, wiping her bloody hands.

“Her wounds looks worse than they are.” She assured the anxiously waiting men “She’ll be black and blue for a few days, but that’s it.”

“For now, she just needs to rest.” Solas added “The effort of channelling that much raw magic has all but drained her. We can do more once we get her back to Haven and into the warm.”

Aleska stirred and moaned again, quietly this time, as Sophia tucked a woollen cloak around her. Jonas reached over and squeezed Cullen’s shoulder

“She’ll be alright Cull, you know how tough she is…” The Commander merely nodded “I’ll… I’ll go see about arranging a wagon to get her down to Haven.”

Jonas stepped out of the vault and into the crisp night air; without the baleful green light of the Breach it was dark, only the light of a few torches sending fantastic shadows dancing around the Temple ruins. Most of the crowd had cleared but Bull still stood there, leaning on his axe.

“She going to be ok?”

“Yeah… yeah, she’ll be fine…” Jonas wasn’t sure if he was trying to convince Bull or himself “I… I’m gonna go organise a wagon.”

The giant Qunari shook his head.

“I’ll see to that, Big J… you stick around here; to keep away any stragglers, I mean”

Bull shoudered his axe and strolled off in the direction of the Camp. Jonas sank to his haunches, back against the cold stone and Greatedsword across his lap, running his hands over his face. He knew it was gonna be bloody rough, closing the breach.

Maker alone knew what sort of damage Aleska had suffered from that level of raw power. You didn’t have to be smart, or a Mage, to know people weren’t built to take that. Soph said she was gonna be ok, and she’d never ever lie to him, but all this magic scared him more than he wanted to admit. He ought to say a prayer, but he wasn’t much of a praying man, never had been; just trusted that the Maker would watch out for him so long as he did the right thing.

Funny… he’d said that to Mother G and she’d told him it was the best sort of prayer there was. Jonas bowed his head and clenched his fists tight, feeling his knuckles press hard against his
forehead. He didn’t need many words for this;

Please... let ’er live...

***

The Chantry taught its followers that the Fade is where one goes to dream, the place through which the spirits of the dead travelled on their journey to the Maker’s side and where sinners could become irretrievably lost. A perilous realm of demons, spirits and illusions; accessible in the waking state only to those few individuals blessed or cursed with the gift of magic. The most fortunate of these, according the Chantry, practiced under the aegis of the Circle; learning to hone their talents into weapons of destruction, or instruments of healing.

“How long will this bloody take!” Anselm’s patience grew thinner, watching Solas and Sophia on their knees. “She has been unconscious for an eternity.”

He should have been up there with her, damn it! She needed someone to watch out for her, to keep an eye on the dangers no-one else noticed. Maybe she’d heard about his little disagreement with the Old Man and wanted to show him he wasn’t as indispensable as he liked to think.

“It shall take a while,” Solas kept his manner calm but Sophia threw him a dirty look. “Longer still should you keep interrupting.”

Time seemed to stand still, and Anselm had almost worn through the soles of his shoes from the vigorous pacing. In the corner, Jonas leaned against the wall, his one foot pressed against the doorframe; watching Solas and his sister work their magic to heal her. The silence frightened him more than the bad news he was Solas was about to deliver, despite Sophia’s frequent reassurances.

Cuddles lay on floor beside her bed; whimpering sadly and nudging her hand gently with his forehead, hoping to feel her fingers twitch and scratch at his ears.

Solas rose, his hand resting against Aleska’s forehead. “We have done all we can. Now she needs to rest and regain her strength naturally.” He turned to Sophia, helping her to rise “Thank you for your aid; and you should rest as well; such magic is not something you are accustomed to.”

“I’ll... I’ll take her,” Jonas put a massive arm around his sister’s shoulders; struggling to form even the simplest of sentences. The lump within his throat growing larger till the point where his neck-muscles twitched from the pain. “Ansie, you comin?”

“No,” Anselm pulled up a chair. “I can’t leave her, not now; I don’t want her to wake up alone. She never left me.”

“She is in no danger and will be in her slumber for a long while,” Solas reminded him, his hand flexing around his staff grip. “I would recommend—”

“Save it for Cullen,” Anselm snapped, his fingers running through her hair. “He might be more inclined to listen.”

The Elven Mage bowed slightly in response.

“As you wish.”

Leaning upon her brother for support, Sophia touched Solas’s arm to catch his attention as he prepared to leave.
“Will she be all right, spending so long asleep in this depleted state? I would dread to think she might be left vulnerable to possession.”

Solas shook his head.

“I cannot be certain; she could be dreaming, she could be simply in a state of dreamlessness. I will, however, take steps to ensure nothing malign ventures near where her spirit roams. Now, if there is nothing else?”

Sophia and Jonas followed Solas out, leaving Anselm alone with Aleska; the only remaining Trevelyan lay by Anselm’s side, his nose resting upon his knee; sad brown eyes looking up at him, whimpering.

“I know boy,” Anselm wiped away a tear threatening to fall down his cheeks. “I know.”

Anselm took hold of Aleska’s hand, her skin was cold to the touch, but her breathing remained even; that confounded mark crackled, reminding Anselm of what put Aleska in this state. “If you can hear me, please come back to me! Please.”

It was the same words spoken to him when he was in the similar position, but she could not hear him; for she was in the deepest parts of the Fade, reliving something she had long forgotten.

***

9:37 Dragon:

“Maela,” Aleska protested, “is this truly required?”

The various brushes tickled Aleska’s skin, watching her grandmothers shadow circle her as a panther would a Halla, the fine material of the dress barely touched Aleska’s skin, it felt different, not like the leather armour she usually wore.

“It is a must,” Sienna smiled down at her granddaughter, mirroring the same blue eyes as her son. “We need you to look the part Da’Len; not like one of the common folks. If they see you are a pretty human, and think you well-born, they will be less likely to cheat us.”

“And where will you be during all of this?” Aleska raised a brow, the sensation of a wet paste being applied to her lips made her squirm. “This tastes horrible!”

“You aren’t meant to taste it Valeska,” Sienna laughed, her hands beneath Aleska’s chin lifting her head higher. “You look perfect, do you have the goods?”

Aleska nodded, this had been the first time she ventured into Kirkwall since they lost her mother: lifting the hood above her eyes, the material covered her elven ears and framed the top of her face. Looking towards the saddled horses, she had never seen a beast so large. *And humans simply ride them as we do the Halla?* Aleska’s hand ran across the chestnut fur of her horse. Climbing into the saddle as her grandmother taught, Aleska realized the leather was firmer than she remembered. With a click of her tongue, her horse jolted forward, followed by her grandmothers horse. *Where did Bae get these? Are we going to keep them?* A thousand and one thoughts ran through Aleska’s mind. Whenever she questioned her father, he reminded her it was not her concern; his typical responses to her questions.

The shadow cast by Kirkwall had grown since Aleska was a child and the Clan rarely ventured there since the Sabrae had settled, trapped by the sickness and death of their Halla during the escape from Blight-stricken Ferelden. Sundermount had an ill-reputation among the People.
anyway, a place of demons and unquiet spirits. The strange tales surrounding the death of the much-revered Keeper Marethari only added to the unease the Dalish felt when they saw the split peak looming on the horizon. Aleska knew her father was a cunning man, who did little without at least three motives. It wouldn’t surprise her if this trading journey was also an excuse for Maela to learn the truth behind those tales.

Even among the humans of the Free Marches, the city had taken on an ill-aspect; especially since the Templar Knight-Commander seized power after the murder of the Viscount. On the road they heard rumours of the Knight-Commander attempting to exert her influence on the nobility of Ostwick, where Mages of the Circle enjoyed greater freedoms and privileges. Aleska listened to the gossip as her horse walked through the streets.

“Did you hear?” one merchant said to another. “They say she even threatened Count Boniface; said he was ‘failing his duty to the Maker’.”

A large woman nearby, with a basket of ducklings under her arm snorted derisively.

“Don’t surprise me none! That woman insulted King Alistair, him what stopped the Blight, right to his face! She ain’t got no respect for her betters…”

“I hear that a couple of weeks after she argued with the Count, a nice little letter arrived from the Divine telling her to keep her long nose out of another State’s business” the second merchant chuckled. “But it’s that doglord Knight-Captain I worry about; the one they call ‘Meredith’s Mabari’. He’s a bloody cold one.”

The woman with the ducklings grinned lewdly

“I hear he follows her orders in more ways than one… if you get me meaning…”

“May I saddle your horse miss?” The stable hand asked again, capturing Aleska’s attention.

Aleska shook her head, cursing her own interest in human affairs, if father were here, he would be in a spin. “Please,” lowering her head, she accepted the aid of a second stable hand who helped her off the saddle.

“Only a pleasure miss, will they need water and food?”

Aleska looked at her grandmother, a simple shake of the head was enough of an indication. “No, thank you; we shan’t be long. Could you tell me where the market is? I need to trade some goods from my fathers shipment.”

“Course,” the second stable hand smiled, “go up the stairs and make a left. If you get to the Keep, you gone too far.”

Aleska walked with her grandmother carrying the small satchel, it hadn’t been a fruitful year for Clan Lavellan; but this would be enough to see them through winter. Aleska passed various humans along her way, some were eager to be a faithful guide to the markets whilst others offered some immoral use for her time.

“Ignore them,” Sienna leaned closer, “they want to get a reaction from you; don’t allow them the satisfaction.”

“Yes Maela, Ir Abelas.” Aleska automatically responded, cursing herself the moment the words left her lips.
The market place was busy, but few merchants had any stalls which the Clan could benefit from. Here, in the Upper City, the merchants catered to the needs of the rich and noble; rare and exotic commodities from every corner of Thedas. Aleska tried hard not to stare at the throng of humans; especially the noblewomen with their rich silk gowns and high, powdered hair. Their own wares would fetch a good price though; Dalish leatherworking was second to none, and the apothecaries would jump at the chance to buy the rare herbs Maela had been gathering all season.

The satchel and the other leather goods sold for a price more than even her father anticipated.

Because they believe I am a pretty human girl,

As Aleska handed the coin pouch to her grandmother; a commotion on the broad steps leading upwards towards the Keep caught her attention. Two men, one in Templar armour, shouting at each other

“Champion,” the Templar barked, “be sensible, the Knight-Commander won’t stand for—”

“Void take her!” the second man snapped back. “I’ll not see my friends used in Meredith’s little power-games. You might get a thrill out of them, but…”

“How dare you…! Hold your tongue, you…”

Unknowingly, Aleska edged closer to the argument, both men were tall and powerfully built and it seemed as if a fight would occur at any moment. A lanky, blond man in a feather-trimmed coat tugged at the second man’s arm; trying to lead him away.

A sudden force pulled her back, and she found herself looking into her grandmother’s eyes; Aleska breathed softly.

“Come child,” Sienna urged. “Their quarrel does not interest us.”

“Yes grandmother,” Aleska remembered the human words she had been taught. “We need to get you home, before father comes.”

The dialect seemed foreign to her tongue, using words she never needed to in a place she’d hoped never to come. Needless to say, my fathers plan worked; he will be jumping for joy. Using his own daughter as a player in his game. Aleska had always been aware of her fathers little mind games, despite his humble origins, he never wasted an opportunity to show the humans how ignorant they were, by using Aleska to pose as a human; he had won the game – at least in his mind

“Excuse me,” A firm hand gripped her shoulder.

Aleska swallowed the lump within her throat, grateful her cloak covered her hand around the hilt of her dagger. Turning around slowly, Aleska’s gaze met that the man who’d been arguing with the Templar, within his hand, a small pendant rested. She released the hilt of the dagger, placing her hands before her.

“I dropped that didn’t I?” Aleska smiled, not wanting to give herself away. “I thank you for retrieving it, my father would be upset had I lost this.”

“How dare you,” he handed her the pendant. “It’s Dalish work, isn’t it? Quite old as well by the looks of it.”

Aleska exchanged a glance with her grandmother before laughing nervously
“You know more than me… Messere…” she said carefully, but proud she remembered the proper form of address for human nobles. “It was a Satinalia gift; for luck, I’m told.”

The man chuckled. He was handsome; curls of black hair framed his chiselled features, bright blue eyes glittered beneath bushy and unkept eyebrows and a well-trimmed beard defined his jaw. The sleeves of his tunic were short, and she could see an elaborate tattoo curving round his upper arm. He was certainly the handsomest human she’d seen in her time here.

The man chuckled warmly

“Not too lucky if it keeps falling off; but I’ve found that some Dalish jewellery can hide a surprise now and again…”

“We should go, child.” Her grandmother interjected “Your father will be waiting.”

“We should go too, Love!” the blond-haired man said urgently to his companion “Before the Knight-Captain decides to finish the argument on his terms…”

“Maker’s Breath, Andy! Give me a moment, at least” the dark-haired man laughed, and turned back to Aleska

“I haven’t seen you around Kirkwall before and I thought I knew all the prettiest faces. I’m Ansell – just Ansell; might I have the pleasure of knowing your name?”

“Well, ‘Just Ansell’,” Aleska laughed accepting his aid onto her horse. “You might, but unfortunately you won’t.”

Aleska got comfortable in her saddle, as Ansell helped her grandmother to mount with equal courtesy.

“That’s it? How will I recognize you again?” he persisted, the mischief glimmering within his eyes.

“Who says there will be a next time – assumptions are a dangerous thing.” Aleska shook her head, waiting for the people to dissipate from her path.

“Will I never see you again?” Ansell took the reins, leading her horse through a safe path within the crowds. “Do you trade within Kirkwall often?”

Aleska looked down at him, her gaze shifted towards her grandmother who seemed to me encouraging her to not entertain the man before them any further. *It isn’t my fault*! Aleska silently pleaded.

“No,” clearing her throat, Aleska spoke again. “This was a once off stop before we go back to Antiva. Thank you for guiding my horse.”

Without another word, Aleska kicked her horses sides, beckoning her to gallop as quickly as she could through the fields and into the forests where she felt at home. It would not be the last time fate would throw these two; their next encounter be sooner that either expected, and under circumstances that put them both in danger.

***

Aleska’s eyes fluttered open, the pain dimmed down, but it was still noticeable. She could barely turn her head, her mouth dry and her position uncomfortable. After turning her head, she noticed
Anselm fast asleep within the chair beside her bed, his head lowered and his legs resting on her bedside table. He stirred at the sound of Cuddle’s tail thumping on the wooden floor.

“Hey boy,” Aleska’s voice horse, her hand running through the Mabari’s coat as he wuffed happily to see her wake; for once he didn’t jump on her bed in excitement, his movements gentle and cautious.

Anselm scrubbed his hand along his face, the tired rings which formed beneath his eyes now more visible than ever. “Am I dreaming?”

Aleska shifted her position, trying to sit up, her attempts failed miserably. Only with Anselm’s help was she able to sit up, her back resting against the pillows. “How – how long was I asleep for?”

“A couple of days,” Anselm sat beside her, draping his cloak around her shoulders. “Maybe less, you had so many people worried.”

“I am their Herald,” Aleska pulled the cloak around her shoulders. “If I die, you’re all screwed.”

Anselm shook his head, laughing to himself. “Admittedly so, why not get some more rest. I can go tell the others you’re awake.”

Aleska refused, attempting to get out of bed. “No, I need to tell them myself, we still have to ensure no mages were possessed. I can rest when this is over, I am sure they all are waiting for me.”

Aleska stood up, placing one foot before the other, her balance uneven. Even the huff from Cuddles told her he wasn’t approving of her simply throwing herself back into work as if nothing happened. Reaching for her waist coat, Aleska lost her balance, collapsing against the wall. A groan of annoyance and pain left her lips. Damn it!

“You are not leaving this room,” Anselm rose; his unbuckled waistcoat swung open and it looked as if the thin shirt underneath hadn’t been changed for a while. “You aren’t well. Do you know the amount of magic that surged through you? No living person should have survived that. We don’t know what damage it could have caused!”

“I also don’t have the luxury of staying in bed all day,” Aleska responded, slipping her arms through the waist coat. “Now are you going to help me or hinder me? I would prefer you help me, at least you have an excuse to stay by my side all day today.”

Anselm rolled his eyes, walking over to her. “I don’t need an excuse,” he reassured her. “Although it may keep the Old Man quiet.”

Aleska smiled to herself, holding onto her bedpost for support as Anselm’s fingers worked the string of her waist coat. What do I do when I need to change my breeches? Aleska’s lips captured her lower lip, watching Anselm hand her the breeches which went with her waist coat. Cuddles stood behind her, supporting her should she have fallen. What a gentleman, Aleska scratched his ear as Anselm turned around to give her a semblance of privacy.

“I still don’t like it,” Anselm called out, listening for her command to allow him to turn around. “You need bedrest, Sophia would be the first person to tell you that.”

“Well, she is not here,” Aleska buckled her belt across her waist, placing her dagger within the sheath and putting her boots on. “You’re not going to tattle tale on me are you?”

“I just might,” Anselm extended his arm for her to take. “If you provoke me further.”
Aleska’s hand rested within the crook of his arm, walking along side him despite her aching muscles begging her to go back to bed. *I do not have the luxury of staying in bed all day,* Aleska reminded herself, despite playing the noble when appropriate; she never experienced the luxuries of living like one. *What would my father think if he saw me like this now?* Pushing the thought from her mind, Aleska refused to allow thoughts of her past to cloud her determination to ensure that Thedas was safe.

“The beard,” Aleska spoke, breaking their silence. “You should keep it, it might drive some Ostwick noblewoman wild when you go back; perhaps even set a new fashion.”

“I didn’t know I was relieved of duty,” Anselm looked at her, his face mirroring the disappointment in his voice; although one hand unconsciously strayed along the line of scruff presently adorning his jaw.

“I didn’t mean…” Aleska huffed, then took a deep breath. “With the Breach finally sealed, you don’t think this… Inquisition will last do you? I am sure my advisers will want to ensure everything went according to plan and then we’ll probably seal the remaining rifts and go home. There is no reason to keep us around.”

“There’s still that little business of the plot against Empress Celene” Anselm reminded her, with a teasing grin, “and a few other bits and pieces; to say nothing of our own wager. I’ll see this through to the end; Trevelyan’s have a tendency to be persistent…”

“Oh really?” Aleska laughed, fastening her waistcoat “I can’t say I’d noticed. But what about Ostwick, and your Uncle?”

“Ostwick can survive without me; you on the other hand, seem determined to get yourself killed at every possibly opportunity…” Anselm teased, adjusting her collar.

“Don’t start,” Aleska playfully nudged him.

They both turned as the door burst open. Varric leaned against the doorframe, gasping for breath; his eyes wide and anxious

“Sapphire,” he gasped. “Curly needs you, says the scouts saw something. Pray they are wrong, if he isn’t… we are in shit like you haven’t seen before.”

“What are you on about?” Aleska asked urgently, instinctively grabbing her bow as Anselm snatched up his blades from the table. “What did the scouts see?”

The Dwarf swallowed hard

“Templars, a big force heading up the mountain road. They say there’s something… wrong… with them… Shit…” He hesitated, still struggling to force the words out “And something else… Andraste’s flaming knickers…”

“What?” Anselm barked impatiently “Just bloody spit it out!”

Varric looked up and, for the first time, they saw how afraid he really was.

“I… I think the Elder One’s come calling!”
The noise in the Chantry bombarded Aleska’s ears. The screams of the injured and dying, children howling in terror, prayers to the Maker, Andraste, the Creators; all blending with the sound of the battle outside to form one unbearable mass. Yelling at them all to shut up would do no good so, instead, she forced herself to concentrate on Chancellor Roderick’s words. The Cleric had been nothing but aggravation since the first day they met, she’d wished a thousand different fates on him; now all she could see was a frightened, dying, old man – desperate to make amends.

“They… the path… it goes up through the mou… mountains…” He coughed, and fresh blood spattered his already stained surplice. “The… there are places the p-people can find refuge…”

“He’s hurting; but he wants to help…” The strange, ragamuffin boy, Cole looked at her with earnest, watery-blue eyes, “I want to help too. I can help him; help him show the way. Away from the fire, the fear…”

“What about it, Cullen; can they get out?” Aleska turned to the Commander, seeking refuge in practicalities.

Cullen hesitated, an evacuation on this scale and under these conditions was something he’d never taken into consideration when planning their defences. He should have been better prepared, anticipated a major attack, insisted on the civilians being evacuated well before the assault on the Breach. A scrap of sound caught his ear; some of the Sisters were trying to distract the children by leading them in a song, an old Chantry hymn. The words were Orlesian, but he recognized the tune; his mother always sang it to him if he was sick or sleepless. He took a deep breath, tightening his grip on the hilt of his sword. This was his duty and he would not be found lacking in the Maker’s sight; not this time…

“We can do it…” He assured her, hoping his voice reflected the certainty he needed to project. “But it will take time. I can lead a small force down there; keep their attention…”

Aleska shook her head firmly.

“No, it’s me he wants. If I can keep him busy long enough then the rest of you have a chance.”

There would be no arguing with her about this, that was plain.

“What about you?” he asked quietly. “When the mountain comes down…?”

“One of the old tunnels has an opening near the trebuchet.” Aleska reminded him. If they survived, she’d need to thank Queen Olivia properly for sending her a copy of Brother Genitivi’s *Notes on Haven.* “Three or four of us could make it there before the landslide reaches us. I’m not planning a
suicide mission, don’t worry.”

As Cullen set about organising the evacuation, Aleska seized a moment to catch her breath and look around. She could see some familiar faces in the crowd milling towards the passages under the Chantry; Minaeve, Threnn, Seggrit – complaining loudly to anyone who would listen about the loss of his stock – but there were some missing, people she’d passed every day, nodded a ‘good morning’ to, overheard little snippets of their lives in snatches of conversation. There was no way of telling yet who had made it this far or who lay in the blazing ruins of the town; just as there was no guarantee any of them would live to see the sunrise. A strange feeling crept over her as she watched the necessity of mutual survival dissolve implacable boundaries of race and class. Orlesian aristocrats and Fereldan peasants, Elven servants, Dwarven traders, rebel Mages and devout Templars; those who could walk helped those who couldn’t; the sick, the injured, those too young or too old to make it by themselves – no-one was being left behind.

*These are my people*…

The realisation struck like lightning. She’d thought it would be over once the Breach was closed; Cassandra, Cullen and Leliana would take over the business of the Inquisition, they wouldn’t need a Herald any more and she could vanish at the first opportunity. She remembered something her father said; after they’d learned the truth of Marethari’s sacrifice – A *Keeper’s life belongs to the Clan; even to the extent of surrendering it for the sake of others.*

She hadn’t fully understood what he meant until now

*Ghilan’nain; Halla-Mother*… she prayed inwardly… *Guide them all to safety*…

###

Anselm checked his spare quiver; 20 arrows left. He cursed softly to himself; each one of those would have to count. It would have been nice if he’d been able to grab a couple of extra sheaves on his way past the armoury, but when you had dragonfire crisping the hairs on the back of your neck these things could easily be forgotten. At least he had warm clothes and a solid pair of boots on his feet. Many of the townsfolk had been in bed when the attack happened and had little time to grab anything. Some were only in their nightclothes; cold and exposure might end up being the biggest killer before all this was over.

He reached into his tunic pocket for his flask, only to find it wasn’t there…

*Shit!*

He could see it in his mind’s eye, sitting on the table beside his bed where he normally put it of an evening. It was nearly full as well, best Val Forêt Cognac. It was going to be a long night.

Anselm adjusted his knife belt and held out his hand, flexing the fingers slightly. Steady as a rock, not a hint of a tremor. That was surprising, it felt like he should be shaking from head to foot. Strange, he’d always imagined he’d end up floating face-down in a canal or with a jealous rival’s knife in his guts. Fighting an Archdemon and an army of monstrously-deformed Templars wasn’t how he’d figured exiting the world, but it was certainly more interesting than the alternatives.

Hopefully Varric made it through all this; he’d have the best-seller of the Age on his hands.

Most of the townsfolk and soldiers had already made their way down through the Undercroft of the Chantry. A few of the scouts were doing a final sweep of the building; keeping stragglers on the move and grabbing anything that might be of use. Aleska stood near the doors, making final preparations with the others. She’d just picked a small group; Jonas, Dorian and Blackwall.
Anselm nodded approvingly. It was a good mix; attack, defence and, judging by what he’d already seen of Dorian’s abilities, some devastating magical firepower.

“So, where do you want me?” He asked, trying to keep his voice light and casual, “I’d rather save my arrows for the big beastie with the wings, but these should do some damage.”

He tapped the hilt of his knives with an encouraging grin, which faded slightly as he saw the look that passed between Aleska and Jonas.

“What…?”

She took him by the arm and led him to one side. He could see she was nervous about something and got the feeling it wasn’t all to do with the army bearing down on them. Her voice trembled slightly as she spoke.

“I need you to do something, and I don’t want you to argue or try to talk me out of it.”

Anselm folded his arms across his chest with a questioning frown.

“Somehow I don’t think I’m going to like this; but you have my word.”

Aleska took a deep breath, struggling with the urge to change her mind. She’d feel a lot safer with Anselm at her back; he was a skilled archer, lethal with his blades and one of the best trackers the Inquisition had. Even Harding spoke highly of his abilities. For all of Cullen’s misgivings, she knew she could rely on Anselm in a fight and that was why…

“I need you to go with the townsfolk; help get them safely over the ridge and onto the Pilgrim’s Path…” She raised a hand as he opened his mouth to object. “Don’t! Argue! They’ll need every skilled hand we’ve got and you’re one of the best. You told me when we first met that you don’t like seeing innocent people getting hurt and, right now, the only thing that matters is getting everyone to safety.”

Anselm nodded, still with a hint of disbelief in his eyes.

“You’re right; but that’s not the only reason, is it?”

Aleska inhaled slowly. From the moment the plan first formed in her head she knew this moment would come, but speaking the words gave it a reality that chilled her to the bone.

“This wasn’t some adventure story, she reminded herself, where the hero and heroine fought side by side against impossible odds. Hundreds of lives depended on this plan succeeding and she couldn’t let sentiment or emotion cloud her judgement. Nor could she be distracted, worrying about…

“I know exactly what it means…” she said quietly, pushing that thought to the back of her mind. “It means we have a chance to fire the trebuchet and get clear before the whole mountainside comes down. It means those… whatever they are… won’t be able to follow the refugees up into the mountains. You’ve seen what they’re capable of; there’ll be no mercy, not for anyone. You’re
the only I can trust to do this…”

Anselm tried to speak but no words came out; his gaze searched her face as if trying to read her real motivation in her eyes, or was he just trying to memorise her features? Eventually he spoke, his voice choked and little more than a whisper.

“No… no-one’s ever said they trusted me before…”

She reached up and cupped his face in her hands, her thumb subconsciously tracing the line of his cheekbone as she felt her eyes misting.

“Then don’t let me down… please?”

His lips were on hers and she felt his arms around her, holding her so close it almost knocked the breath from her. Aleska found herself responding with urgent hunger; her own lips parting as she relaxed into his embrace, arms slipping around his shoulders. His mouth tasted sharp and sweet, like wine and ginger, while the scent and warmth of him made her head spin. No man had ever kissed her before; she’d heard the more experienced girls of the Clan talk about what it was like, but she could never have imagined this overwhelming need. She could sense her passion mounting as clearly as the beating of his heart, rapid and insistent against her chest. Eventually she pulled back, gasping from the desire that threatened to choke her; he pressed his forehead to hers, eyes tightly shut…

“Prom… promise you’ll come back to me?”

She nodded, not trusting her voice, knowing that if they didn’t leave now there would be no hope for any of them. She found her breath and spoke just one word.

“Go.”

He didn’t look back, he couldn’t trust himself not to chase after her as he heard the Chantry doors kicked out and she headed into the blazing town with her few companions. He could still smell the faint hint of woodsmoke from her hair and felt his eyes begin to sting. Quickening his pace he bounded down the steps to the Undercroft two at a time and along the passageway; pausing to do one final check of the rooms on either side. The scouts had done a good job of rounding up any last stragglers, only the detritus of a hurried flight remained. Open chests spilled their contents onto the floor; books, clothes, personal items, all lay scattered and discarded. A broken teapot lay beside an overturned table, its contents staining the rug…

That better not be Sophia’s… he thought, with a humourless smirk… She’s a monster before her first cup of the day…

His foot knocked against something and he looked down to see a child’s toy. Some nearly-shapeless piece of stuffed flannel; judging by the flapping ears it was meant to be a Nug. Crouching down he picked it up, dusting off the imprint of a hobnailed boot across its middle.

“Well, that’s not a nice way to treat you is it?” he muttered, shoving the toy inside his jacket. “Better see if we can find who you belong to.”

As he straightened up, his eye caught something glinting in the dying light of the lanterns. He bent down again and picked it up, letting the pendant dangle from its broken chain. Three silver leaves curled around a dark red stone; it must have come loose while she was helping get the people moving. He’d warned her that clasp needed mending…”

Anselm ran his hand over his face, wiping away the moisture from his eyes as he stowed the
pendant safely in his belt-pouch.

_Now I know she’ll have to come back…_

###

The convoy of refugees moved with painful slowness; keeping to the pace of the oldest and weakest. Anselm had to admit the Old Man did a good job of organising it at short notice. The scouts led the way, with Inquisition troops and Battle Mages guarding the flanks; Bull’s Chargers brought up the rear, watching out for stragglers and any sign of pursuit. In the very centre, the most protected part were the children, the elderly and the injured. Sophia would be down among them, helping with the worst wounds as best she could on the move. Cuddles had whined and pawed at Jonas in protest when he told him to go with her but the big Reaver had been immovable, just as Aleska had been when she set him this task. They’d all had to make difficult choices in the last few hours and there were more to come. Anselm had never been very good at following orders… well, _most_ orders… and this was one he’d be glad of finding a way to ignore if it didn’t mean getting them all killed.

From his vantage point atop a crag of rock overlooking the past he wanted to scream at them to move faster, to get over the ridge so he could send the signal. He could see the dragon, or archdemon, or whatever it was circling around near the trebuchet and knew that blighted thing at the head of the army couldn’t be far away. The longer Aleska and the others had to face that, the worse their chances were.

Charter, the scout Leliana had sent to accompany him as back up, sat quietly beside him – eyes fixed on the blazing town. The fire had finally taken hold in the timbers of the Chantry roof and the dome caved inwards, sending a shower of flames and sparks high into the clear night.

“Shame… lot of history in that place,” she murmured and glanced over to Anselm. “Not long now”

He looked towards the head of the ravine. The last of the horses and brontos had crossed, it was just the rear-guard and the Chargers now and they were moving quickly. He got to his feet, knocking a flare-arrow into his bow and waiting for Bull’s signal. Finally, he heard the blast of a horn drifting up; adjusting his stance, the way Aleska showed him, he drew and fired…

The arrow burst into brilliant, blue-white, light as it soared – the enchantment creating a glow brighter than any natural flame. It could be seen for miles on a night light this and there was no way they’d be able to miss it; if any of them were still alive…

The next few seconds were agony, it was too dark even for Charter to be able to see if the trebuchet had fired but suddenly a ball of orange-red fire exploded just beneath the summit of the mountain. Immediately they could hear the impacted mass of rock, ice and snow begin to split and shift with a deep, gathering rumble – louder than any thunder ever heard. The entire side of the mountain broke and slid with increasing speed down towards the burning ruins of Haven. It was almost like watching a maidservant pour a bucket of ash over a fire to smother it for the night; the buildings disintegrated into clouds of flaming splinters as the avalanche flattened everything in its path. He swore as a rising shadow indicated that the dragon had escaped the onslaught. It had been too much to hope they would catch it, or its master, but at least it appeared to be heading way rather than pursuing the refugees.

It took no more than a few minutes for Haven to be wiped from the face of Thedas. As the noise of the avalanche faded, all they could faintly hear were the screams of injured or dying Templars caught in the wreckage.
“Void take the lot of you!” Anselm spat contemptuously.

Charter got to her feet with a muttered, “nuva Fen'harel ver na.”

“We ought to get moving…” she said “It shouldn’t us long to catch up at the rate they’re moving.”

Anselm shook his head.

“I’m going to wait”

“They might not take the same route,” she warned him. “Better to…”

“I’ll wait!” He repeated, firmly. “Roderick said this is the only clear route through the mountains. There’s no other way they can come.”

“And if they don’t?” If Charter felt annoyed or frustrated at his persistence, she showed no sign of it; perhaps she’d anticipated his natural stubbornness would re-assert itself once he’d carried out Aleska’s order. He glanced at her, defiantly.

“Then I go and find them. I’m not leaving them down there; even if they’re…”

“Then I’ll wait with you” Charter sat back down and pulled out her tobacco pouch “I don’t fancy explaining to Sister Nightingale why I left you alone out here.”

Anselm laughed grimly.

“She’d probably do a Redcliffe Jig!” She snorted, filling her pipe “That I wouldn’t mind seeing!”

The pair of them shared the scout’s pipe, smoking in silence as they watched the track leading up from the devastated town. It was real tobacco, Anselm noted, expensive and difficult to get this far south; cut with just enough elfroot and kohl to make the cold and the wait bearable. There was no sign of Aleska, Jonas and the others. The only good thing was there was no sign of pursuit from their enemies either. If they didn’t freeze or starve in the mountains there was a chance some of them might make it. Eventually Charter got to her feet, narrowing her eyes.

“Movement. Down there!”

Anselm looked to where she was pointing. After a while he could make out figures moving up the ravine, three of them dark against the early snowfall. There was no mistaking Jonas’s bulk, followed by Dorian and Blackwall. No sign of Aleska…

He was racing down the mountainside before Charter could say anything, leaping recklessly from rock to rock; heart racing and throat tight. Jonas paused in the act of reaching for his greatsword as he realised it was his cousin running towards them

“Ansie…” he began.

“Where is she?” Anselm nearly screamed, grabbing at the bigger man’s collar. “Where the bloody hell is she???”

“We were separated” Dorian said, leaning on his staff and breathing with painful slowness. The Tevinter mage appeared bruised and exhausted, his normally immaculate outfit stained and torn “The dragon got between us and didn’t seem inclined to shift.”
Anselm looked at the three of them in growing rage and disbelief.

“So you left her? You just left her and ran?”

“We didn’t leave her…” Blackwall insisted, although the look on the Warden’s face suggested he had his own doubts. “There were Templar reinforcements coming in. By the time we’d dealt with them, we saw the signal. Even if we could have got across to her…”

“Didn’t leave her…” Jonas mumbled, his face reddening “We was ordered, remember?”

“Fuck orders!” Anselm snapped back; right now, he couldn’t imagine hating anyone more than the three men in front of him. “I’m going back….”

As he turned to keep going towards the ruins of the town, Jonas grabbed his arm. With a howl of rage he spun round, aiming a punch at his cousin. Jonas caught his wrist and held it firm

“We got orders…” the big Reaver repeated, his voice breaking; Anselm pulled away from his grasp.

“I don’t fucking care, you great dumb ox! I’m not going to….”

Jonas smacked him in the chest, hard enough to knock the wind out of him and send him sprawling on his back.

“We gotta get ‘em all safe…” he shouted at Anselm, tears running down his cheeks. “That’s what she told us, and that’s what we’re gonna bloody do. And then we’re coming back to find her…. And don’t bloody call me that ever again…”

Anselm lay there on his back, staring at the other man in shock and disbelief. Jonas had never hit him before, not for real; but then, he’d never spoken to him like that… He felt himself beginning to tremble; a bone-deep shaking which took hold of his chest and came out as an agonised cry of pain and anguish. Jonas hauled him to his feet and pulled him into a tight bearhug.

“It’ll be ok, Ansie; she knows them tunnels…” His own voice was shaking as he tried to convince himself anyone could have survived that wall of rock and ice “She’ll find a way out and we’ll find her…”

“Joe… I’m sorry… I didn’t mean…” Anselm choked, Jonas hugged him tighter.

“I know you didn’t… been a rough night for us and it ain’t getting any easier.” He loosened his grip and looked Anselm in the eye. “We still got Soph to think about, and all the little ‘uns. You know ‘Leska’d want us to see ‘em all safe first…”

Anselm nodded, not trusting himself to speak. Jonas might have trouble with words and not always be the quickest on the uptake; but he always seemed to know the right thing to do. He’d made Aleska a promise and she’d expect him to keep it, no matter what happened to her.

“We ought to get moving” Charter broke in “Looks like there’s a storm rolling in. If we get caught in that we might lost the trail.”

Dorian sighed dramatically.

“Today has just been one bit of good news after another. I’d wonder if things could get any worse, but I think that might just tempt fate.”
“Less talking, more walking,” Blackwall grumbled as the five of them started making their way to the head of the pass.

Anselm paused and turned at the top of the ridge, looking back down to where Haven had been. It was dark and silent now; he’d loathed the place, a muddle of huts in a freezing wilderness, but right now he’d pay every ducat in the Trevelyan vaults to be sitting with a mug of beer in the Maiden, laughing at one of Sera’s filthy jokes and thinking of new ways to aggravate the Old Man. She was down there somewhere, in the dark and the cold. If he believed, he’d ask the Maker to watch over her; but the Maker seemed remarkably careless of His children’s wellbeing.

He heaved a painful sigh and took one last look before following the others.

*I’ll find you... I promise...*
Stolen Moments

Chapter by x_bellazarina_x

Chapter Summary

With the destruction of Haven, the Inquisition is forced to seek refuge elsewhere. Tensions rise within the intimate circles until Solas comes up with a solution. The one thing Aleska hadn’t counted on, was her past catching up with her.

Snows fell heavily around the ruins of Haven, the fire unyielding in its task to reduce the town to dust. The bodies of the fallen littered the mountainside. Earlier that afternoon, Haven had been vibrant and alive with celebration of their victory over the Breach; now it looked no better than a graveyard. *This is all my fault.* Aleska thought, clambering over the rocks and broken timbers, every part of her body shrieking in pain. She’d got her shoulder back into its socket, but she could feel the muscles were strained and torn. She definitely had broken ribs but at least the snowdrift at the base of the shaft had cushioned the worst of her fall. The Mark… *No*… she corrected herself *Corypheus called it an Anchor*… sparked and flared. Something had happened to it, possibly when the colossal Darkspawn had tried to remove it; there were more, and deeper, lines in her palm now and she still didn’t know exactly what she’d done to dispel the demons in caves.

At least the cold was starting to numb the worst of the pain and she could feel the wind stinging her face. The path that Roderick had informed her of had been long buried beneath the snow but, even in the driving snow, she could just make out the route up to the pass…

Trekking through the snow, Aleska had no means of knowing how long she had been stuck in the mountains; the only thing she knew for certain was if she didn’t find cover or warmth soon, she would be among the dead. She’d seen a few more bodies lying amidst the detritus that marked the route of the refugees; those too feeble or badly injured to make it any further. Some of them had their hands folded and faces covered; the survivors trying to give them what scraps of dignity they could manage as they struggled through the storm. Ice crystals were forming in her hair and the blood across her body was frozen to her skin and clothes;

*I must look like something out of a horror tale meant to frighten small children.*

As all hope seemed lost, Aleska saw a small campfire, the dying embers simmering. Kneeling in the snow, her body ached at the sudden movement. Warming her hands up upon the still-glowing ashes, it helped regenerate a small amount of heat; enough to make her realise how deeply and completely exhausted she was. It was never this cold in the Free Marches, unless you were mad enough to scale the highest ranges of the Vimmarks.

*Surely it can’t hurt just to close my eyes for a few minutes?*

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Aleska groaned in protest as something nudged her face; she couldn’t feel the cold or the pain anymore and it was surprisingly comfortable lying here in the deepening snow. The nudging came again, followed by a loud, familiar, bark that bellowed through the mountain pass.
Aleska opened her eyes, seeing Cuddles lying next to her; trying to warm her with his bulk. As the Mabari saw her wake he jumped to his feet with another bark; even louder and more urgent.

*Such a good boy...* Aleska raised her hand, petting his head... *He must be wanting his breakfast*

“Sweet Maker!” Anselm cried out, running towards her.

Anselm tore off his coat, placing it around her shoulders and lifting her up into his arms. It had been some time since Aleska had been carried by him, the last time had been the start of their journey down an interesting path. Aleska rested her head against his shoulder, her arm around his neck.

“Bloody hell!” Jonas brought a blanket, draping it around her. “She’s gonna be okay now.”

“Take her to one of the spare tents,” Cullen instructed, unclipping his coat to place around her. “I’ll take her from here.”

“You will do no such thing!” Anselm’s grip on Aleska tightened, “too much heat can make the blood flow again; we don’t know the severity of her wounds.”

Even the Commander couldn’t argue with his logic, running his fingers through his hair, muttering something incoherent. Anselm took her to one of the tents which had the material close over the entrance, to allow her some privacy. Lying her on the bed, Anselm removed the blanket from her body.

“Why did you have to do this?” Anselm whispered, examining the claw marks on her arms and the bruises which now formed around the cuts. “I am so mad at you right now.”

“I can’t stay here,” Aleska attempted to get up, only to be guided back down into the pillows. “Anselm, I have to help them plan our next move, don’t make me pull rank on you!”

“Pull whatever rank you like,” Anselm took the cloth from the bucket of warm water Jonas had brought. “I outrank you in station alone, you are not getting up until Sophia has looked over you. You barely recovered from your previous injuries with the Breach before you hurled yourself before a fucking dragon!”

Aleska kept silent, watching as he cleaned the blood off her arms, the clear water stained a dark red by the time Anselm finished. Applying the antiseptic ointment was the worst, the burning sensation intensified the pain. Bandages soon followed under Sophia’s careful watch.

“It was foolish of you to think you could take on the dragon alone,” Sophia reprimanded. “What were you thinking?”

“Do you know that by the time I fell through the mineshaft, the snow followed me, Jonas could have been trapped above ground with an entire mountain of snow coming down on him. Would either of you have preferred that?! That is assuming this Corypheus even allowed them to live!”

“I apologise; of course, you’re right.” Sophia tightened the strapping around Aleska’s damaged shoulder to support the muscles “You need rest, not to be burdened by our frustrations…”

Once Sophia and Mother Giselle had finished tending to her injuries, Aleska got up off the bed, despite Anselm warning her not to. *He wants to keep me in bed, he will have to strap me down.*

She’d grown sick and tired of listening to her advisers bickering; their argument was loud and circular with Cullen even losing his temper with Cassandra, something she’d never heard before,
and the whole thing was making her headache even worse. Walking out of the tent, she caught Anselm’s eye as he sat by the fire with Jonas and Cuddles; the ferocious gaze burned hotter though her than any of the fires of Haven.

“Will you all just shut up!” Aleska stood before her advisers, each one mirrored the shock of the other at her furious tone. “Now, do we have an appropriate plan? A means to get us out of this blizzard?”

Aleska felt a heavier weights upon her shoulders, looking at the fur lining of Cullen’s coat as he buckled it around her shoulders. A smile broke through despite her annoyance as she wrapped the material around her shoulders.

“Here,” Cullen pulled his gloves off, placing them on her hands. “It should help with the cold.”

“Won’t you get cold?” Aleska’s annoyance melted away with the cold which seemed to be kept at bay with the warmth of his coat.

“I am used to cold,” Cullen handed her a bottle of Elfruit and elderflower tonic. “You’re not.”

Aleska simply nodded, accepting the vial from Cullen and finishing the contents in a single gulp. From the moment the elixir hit her lips she felt the effects working, the pain dulled as her advisers expressed their concerns and the options they could take. As the conversation dragged on, Aleska peered over Cullen’s shoulder; noting Anselm glaring at her.

Glare away, that smoulder is too enticing, so I am not suffering. Aleska mused with an inward smile, returning her attention to the others. Watching where Cullen pointed at the map laid over the table, there had been no clear paths to the nearest city where they wouldn’t run into the remaining corrupt Templars. The tone within Cullen’s voice told her all she needed to know; he expressed his discontentment with the choice to go for the Mages since day one, she half expected him to accuse her of their condition.

“Ferelden is out of the question so long as we have the Rebel Mages with us…” Josephine sighed “Perhaps Jader? The Comtesse Sybille…”

“And get caught up in the Civil War?” Cullen snapped back. “Don’t we have enough problems already?”

As Aleska steeled herself for yet another argument she caught sight of Solas walking towards them, using his staff as a walking stick to keep his footing on the uneven ground.

“I need to speak with the Herald,” He said softly, his tone almost apologetic at the interruption. “It is a matter of importance.”

Aleska drew in a deep breath, instantly regretting it as fresh blades of pain jabbed at her still-healing ribs. She walked beside Solas, his eerie silence kept the adrenaline surging through her body. With a wave of his wrist, Solas lit a brazier embedded within the snowy ground; a faint sound of singing echoed through the mountain, as if in response to his enchantment.

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Solas knew of a place for them but getting there would be the challenge. Aleska stood before her advisers once more as the Mage relayed the plan he told her. No one seemed to object, for what choice did they have? If this place he spoke of still stood, then it might be their one and only chance to survive. As she walked away from the meeting, she couldn’t stop thinking about the Orb Corypheus carried and what Solas told her of it. He was right; if people learned it was an Elvhen
relic that had torn open the sky and caused the death of the Divine, then the consequences for 
Elves everywhere were too dire to think about. She looked at the Anchor again, trying yet again to 
discern something of the pattern formed by its lines.

*Magic from before the fall of Arlathan; and it found me…*

*Bae* had told her tales of the origins of the Dalish Clans; how they had once been the families from 
whom were drawn the High Keepers of the Evanuris and the ruling Lords of the Kingdom of the 
Dales. Even before that, legend said they descended from the Priest-Kings of Arlathan and 
preserved what remained of its lore during the centuries of slavery. Perhaps Mythal, or Andruil, 
had reached beyond wherever the Dread Wolf had confined them, and guided her towards this 
destiny? It might even have been Andraste, as many of the Humans believed. Dalish tradition 
remembered her as the great ally of Shartan who’d helped him win their freedom and promised 
them a home; and she saw no reason to disbelieve Queen Olivia’s account of what she had 
encountered in the Temple of Sacred Ashes. The Tevinter Chantry could even be right to consider 
her a Mage of unparalleled power, and if so…

Needing a moment of silence, Aleska found a quiet part of the mountain to collect herself and her 
thoughts. Gazing at the valley below, nothing but a white blanket gazed back up at her; no sign of 
any life for miles around, not even the snow nugs which hopped about Haven.

“Not good at listening to requests are you?” Anselm came up behind her. “Are you sure you’re in 
the right job?”

“You want it,” Aleska began. “Be my guest, but the perks aren’t fantastic; you also need to take 
this off me.”

She held out the hand that bore the Anchor. Mercifully, it had been quiet throughout this long trek 
and she was getting better at the meditations Solas showed her.

“No thanks,” Anselm ran his fingers through his hair, his arm rested at his side. “You know, for 
what it’s worth, I am just glad you are all right.”

“Thanks.”

***

Aleska sat before Anselm within the saddle, both arms on either side of her, he seemed intent on 
not letting her out of his sight since they began the journey to Solas’ destination. An eagle soared 
above them, as if their silent guide through the mountains, she had spent all afternoon in the 
saddle.

“Funny,” Aleska mused, slapping his hands off the reins and taking them herself. “When I 
envisioned spending an afternoon in your arms; this was not what I expected.”

“So you’ve been thinking of this moment?” Anselm leaned in, his lip brushing her ear.

“No, I just needed you to feel confident enough to move your hands.”

Aleska halted the horse, climbing off the saddle, her feet touched solid ground for the first time in 
what seemed like hours. Unclipping Cullen’s coat from her shoulders, the weight lifted off her 
made her realize just how heavy the material had been.

“I am not letting you wander off alone,” Anselm turned the horse around.
“I won’t be alone,” Aleska tucked the coat over her arm. “I’ll be with Commander Cullen and I doubt he will let me wander off. He seems as adamant as you to keep me within his line of sight.”

Without allowing Anselm another word, Aleska walked towards Cullen who seemed busy ensuring that everyone had been accounted for. From the elderly to the children. *He stayed behind to ensure we were all safe, no one give him grief for that. Me, I get interrogated about why I tried to save everyone’s ungrateful arse.*

_That is the burden of one who leads…_ She could almost hear her father’s voice, as if he stood by her side to answer her silent complaint… _They will praise you and condemn you in the same heartbeat_

“I believe this belongs to you,” Aleska sat on the rockface beside the Commander, taking the gloves off. “Well both of these. How do you handle such a heavy coat? It felt as if I was carrying a whole other person.”

“Quite easily,” Cullen chuckled, offering her the flask of water. “I suppose I no longer notice it. The weight I mean.”

Aleska accepted the flask, placing the opening to her lips and taking a long sip of the contents within. Swinging her one leg back and forth against the rockface took her mind off the afternoon heat. With the storms passed, the early Autumn warmth had begun reasserting itself; it felt like the seasons were regaining the rhythms disrupted by the Breach. Nibbling on the nuts Cullen had offered her, Aleska felt her appetite slowly return.

“Is the tonic meant to make my appetite go away?” Aleska used the tip of her tongue to remove a piece of candy coating from her teeth. “This is the first time I am genuinely feeling hungry.”

“It can,” Cullen affirmed. “It does depend on how long you take it and how often. It dulls the senses entirely. I wouldn’t be surprised if you partially lost your sense of smell or taste.”

“Now that you mention—”

“Aleska,” Solas came before them. “It is time.”

Looking around them, they seemed to be so lost in their conversation, neither noticed the droves of people had gathered at the foot of the mountain. Aleska’s eyes adjusted to the sunlight to notice Anselm still perched upon the horse, his eyes hadn’t left her since she began the conversation with Cullen. _Where did the time go?_ Aleska jumped off the rock face, the feeling in her body returned and the pain had subsided enough for her to move freely.

Moving towards the large group of people, Aleska observed them clear a path for her to walk through, with Cullen by her side. *He seems more determined than Anselm to not let me out of his sight._ Aleska mused, her gaze flickered between Anselm and Cullen. The tension between the two men remained palpable, but at least Anselm was refraining from goading the Commander quite so much as he had at Haven. The thing which seemed to surprise her was that every pilgrim she passed kneeled before her; lowering their heads in respect and admiration.

_This is all for me?_ Aleska looked around at each one of them, even Jonas knelt before her; a man well above her in rank, and Sophia dropped a deep curtsey as she walked by. _I don’t deserve this deep admiration. A thanks would have sufficed._

Aleska’s stare flickered towards the horizon. Nothing but a wall of clouds lay before her. The valley seemed a sheer drop from where she was standing.
“Solas there’s nothing—”

The clouds parted, revealing not only a safe path down the mountain, but a large fortress which seemed tucked away in the mountainside. Aleska inhaled deeply, frozen on spot for what seemed like an endless amount of time; but in reality couldn’t have been more than a few moments.

“May I present Skyhold.”

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Days turned into weeks, the preparations to turn Skyhold into a liveable fortress had been a daunting task to overtake, but Aleska seemed determined to get it done. There had been several days for her to accept her new title; a title which she hadn’t expected nor even wanted.

Inquisitor.

A title of power, a title which to Thedas meant she would be the figure head for everything should it go right; and the scape goat for when everything went wrong. In her mind, getting it wrong was not an option. Appreciating the moment to catch her breath, Aleska stood on the balcony overlooking the entrance; listening to Vivienne ramble about some books which had been lost when the Circles fell.

“I will do my best First-Enchanter,” Aleska smiled softly, not wanting to offend Vivienne. “But I make no promises, those areas are rather large.”

Aleska had learned the habit of not allowing people to finish their statements, leaving the balcony before the incense all but choked her; it was a good way to avoid getting caught in ceaseless debates and small talk. She ought to thank Sophia for the tip. Aleska shook her head thinking about the various favours people had asked of her since she had become Inquisitor. From Dorian to Vivienne, the list seemed endless; however her time was not. Opening the door to the Great-Hall, Aleska stopped immediately, Anselm stood before her; their bodies only inches apart.

“I need to speak with you,” Anselm spoke, clearing his throat. “Preferably away from prying eyes.”

Aleska turned her head to the side, observing the workmen stop their various duties to watch them. Nosy bunch aren’t they. Aleska rolled her eyes, grabbing his hand and leading him to the vacant gardens.

The garden’s hadn’t been tended to in years, vines and weeds had all but overtaken the courtyard. Aleska waved off the pacing guards from the battlements. Now if only I could do that to my problems, she enjoyed her little jest, closing the door behind her to give them some privacy.

“If this is about Josephine wanting to ask your uncle for a loan,” Aleska began. “I already told her not to; I don’t want your money or to be engrained so deep in the Trevelyans’ debt I will never be able to dig myself out of it.”

“What?” Anselm’s brows furrowed. “This isn’t about that, but thanks for the advanced warning. I doubt my uncle would agree anyway, he’s cautious when it comes to alliances; so perhaps I need to let the Ambassador down gently. That can come later.”

It better not be about what I think it is about, Aleska thought, despite her best intentions to forget what had happened; the sensations still crept up on her. The feeling of his hand behind her neck, pulling her deeper into his kiss, his arm around her waist; holding her against his firm body.

A soft tickle touched upon her lips, as if they longed to be on his once more, he tasted so sweet that
night; neither knowing if that would be the last time they’d ever see one another again. *He has won, I could have pushed him away, but I chose not to; I allowed him to kiss me. Now he has won.*

Knots formed within Aleska’s stomach, knowing now their little game had come to an end, his eyes would stray to the nearest woman who didn’t present half of a challenge. *Just accept it is over,* Aleska braced herself for the inevitable.

“I… uh—”

Anselm’s hands were in his pockets, he seemed to be searching for something, Aleska patiently waited, only to have Anselm take his hands from his pockets and tap each pocket on his waistcoat. *What is he playing at.* Her hips cocked to the side, opening her mouth only to have him pull out a silver chain from the pockets in his breeches.

“What’s that?” Aleska raised a brow.

“Well, during the battle, the clasp must have broken or come undone. When I went with the villagers, it caught my eye as the lanterns died down. That night in Val Royeaux when your robe came undone I saw the pendant around your neck.” Anselm stated, his usual façade faded; even his hands trembled.

“I thought I’d lost this,” Aleska took the pendant from his hands. “Wait, the silver is shiny. Did you clean it as well?”

“No,” Anselm let out a nervous laugh. “Not quite, I had Harriett rework the silver and make a new chain for you, the clasp should be reinforced now. It won’t be coming off any time soon – he grumbled the whole time, can’t understand why. I paid him more than he makes in a week.”

Aleska’s finger traced along the leaf design, the engravings clearer than before; even down to the grooves in the leaves. She couldn’t find the words to thank him, it seemed not even thank you would suffice. Anselm’s hands extended for the chain, a clear indication he wished to put it on her.

Turning around, Aleska’s gaze now upon the closed door, the feeling of the cool metal upon her skin sent a soft tremble running through her system. Lifting her hair up, the touch of his fingertips traced along the back of her neck. Aleska popped the top button of her waistcoat, tucking the pendant within her chemise. A thank you may not have sufficed, but she knew what would.

Aleska’s hand slid behind his neck, standing on the tips of her toes, her lips seemed a mere inches from his. The door slammed open with a loud bang, Varric’s voice broke Aleska’s focus, with a spin she faced him; her hands neatly behind her back.

“Varric,” Aleska cleared her throat. “What a nice surprise, what do you want?”

“Am I interrupting?”

Yes.

“No,” Aleska took a step forward.

Varric stood silent for a moment, unsure on what he had just interrupted, shaking his head; he waved his hand through the air. Relaying something about a secret meeting on the battlements and how Aleska needed to follow him immediately.

“Anselm can distract Cassandra for us,” Aleska peered over her shoulder.
“How in the Void do you expect me to do that?” Anselm folded his arms. “In case you have forgotten, I am not her favourite person.”

“I don’t know, drape your arm around her shoulders, propose some cousin bonding time,” Aleska stifled a laugh. “Than be prepared to outrun her whilst she is taking swings at you with a sword. Come on Varric.”

Aleska could no longer contain her laughter, the image which she’d painted made her laugh for the first time in weeks. Stopping as she entered the Great Hall, the last of Anselm’s conversation travelled through the narrow corridor, she ducked behind the wall to listen.

“Were you two about to—?”

“Perhaps, had you not walked in,” Anselm huffed.

“All right,” Varric chuckled. “I should warn you, you’re not the only one vying for our sweet Inquisitor’s attention. Curly has had his eyes on her since before you stumbled drunk out of the Maiden that night.”

“You are slowly becoming my least favourite Dwarf in this Inquisition,” Anselm’s irritation rose. “And that's including Stinky Rothgar the cesspit cleaner!”

“Oh, you wound me, Messere,” Varric backed out of the Gardens.

“I will do; if you’re not careful!” Aleska heard him grumble as Varric closed the door. She shook her head with a smile, heading toward her secret mission with the Dwarf, blissfully unaware that her past would catch up to her sooner than she’d thought.

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Varric’s route led them away from the battlements proper and towards one of the more isolated towers of the castle; still decrepit and uninhabited. The stairs smelled damp and mouldy, and dusty cobwebs filled the gaps between the beams, it could have been centuries since this tower was last occupied but there were signs that showed someone had been up here recently.

“So, what’s the big mystery?” She asked, as they neared the top landing. “Or did you just bring me up here to enjoy the views?”

The Dwarf stopped and glanced around as if he was afraid of being overheard. Aleska couldn’t help noticing that he seemed uncharacteristically nervous.

“Look; I didn’t want to tell you until I’d spoken to a couple of people but…” he hesitated, and it almost seemed as if he was ready to run, “I’ve run across Corypheus before…”

Aleska took a deep breath to stop herself from exploding there and then. Placing her hands on her hips she glared down at him. He was probably too heavy for her to throw out of the window, but the urge to kick him all the way down the stairs was almost overwhelming.

“I hope you have a very good reason for leaving it this long to tell me…” she said, coldly. “Or Cassandra is going to be the least of your worries.”

Varric sighed heavily.

“The last time I saw Corypheus he was dead, no question of it. Seeing him up and walking about like that, well…” His shoulders slumped, and he couldn’t meet Aleska’s unforgiving gaze, “I have
a… a friend… who knows a lot more about him than I do. He can tell you everything you need to know and might be able to help. Until I was sure I could find him and get him here…”

“So where is this ‘friend’ now?” Aleska asked, an unpleasant suspicion beginning to gnaw at her insides. If she was correct, then Cassandra was going to kill Varric.

The Dwarf gave her an apologetic look.

“Follow me.”

He led her to a door at the top of the stairs. He gave a sharp double-knock and opened the door, leading her inside.

A tall man, in scuffed and travel-worn leathers, got to his feet as they entered. His hair was shorter than the last time she saw him, and his beard closely trimmed, but the mischief and sadness in his eyes was still there. He’d lost weight and was looking lean and tanned.

“Inquisitor…” Varric said, almost as if they were at a diplomatic reception “Meet Ansell Hawke, the Champion of Kirkwall…”
Chapter Summary

Hawke bears mixed news for Aleska but offers a chance to unravel the mystery surrounding the Grey Wardens and Sophia expresses concern over where Anselm's pursuit of Aleska may be heading - forcing him to examine his own feelings and come to an unnerving conclusion. Meanwhile, across the Waking Sea in Ostwick, Anselm's father is laying his own plans to deal with his son's infatuation.

“It’s been a while since anyone called me that.” Hawke said, with a wry smile “Although it does sound better than ‘The arsehole who landed us in this mess’!”

“This mess was brewing long before you came on the scene, Smiler!” Varric chuckled. “We were just unlucky enough to be there when it boiled over.”

Hawke winked at Aleska, uncorking the bottle of wine that sat on the table.

“Notice how he doesn’t argue about the ‘arsehole’ part!”

Aleska fought back a laugh, trying to keep her expression neutral as she accepted the bottle from Hawke and took a swig.

“Varric says you know about Corypheus,” she said carefully, passing the wine to the Dwarf. “You’ve run across him before?”

Hawke nodded.

“Fought him and killed him – and I’m good at killing so I can assure you he was very dead by the time I was finished. Getting Varric’s message gave me a bit of a shock, but…” he hesitated, scratching at his chin. “It also made sense of a few things I’ve been… running across”

Varric lowered the bottle from his lips and looked questioningly at his friend.

“Smiler…. What have you got mixed up in now?”

Hawke glanced at Aleska and she could sense the deep anxiety burning beneath the veneer of easy charm.

“I need to talk privately to the Inquisitor; I’ll tell you the full story later.”

Varric’s eyes narrowed suspiciously but, for a change, he didn’t seem inclined to argue.

“Just don’t do anything stupid…” he paused at the door, turning to Aleska. “If he asks you to play Diamondback, keep an eye on the Aces!”

As the door closed, Hawke placed a finger to his lips; waiting a moment before checking to see Varric wasn’t loitering in the staircase. Once he was sure they wouldn’t be overheard, he strode
over and enfolded Aleska in a massive hug

“Andaran atishan, lethallin…” he muttered. “Seems like I’m not the only one in a Blighted stew this time…”

Aleska’s arms wrapped around Hawke’s neck, pulling him into a tight hug. Taking a step back, she took in Hawke’s appearance; using her hands to smooth the stray hairs threatening to stand up. It seemed like a life time ago since they last saw one another.

“You know me…” Aleska laughed softly “If there’s trouble. I’ll find it! I am just happy to know that you are well.”

He stepped back and looked her up and down.

“Lady Inquisitor Valeska Ravenna Lavellan; Herald of Andraste…” he gave her a bewildered smile, shaking his head. “The Grand Clerics must be shitting their smallclothes; those of them that are left anyway.”

Aleska took another mouthful of wine, the spicy undertones balanced with the fruity sensation now dancing upon her palate. It was well over a year since she’d last seen Ansell and had forgotten how much she missed his company.

“You never told Varric?”

Hawke shook his head.

“I trust him, but sometimes he lets the lure of a good story get the better of his common sense; and I couldn’t risk putting you or the clan in danger, not after everything you did to help. That’s one ‘Tale of the Champion’ I’ll be keeping to myself.”

Aleska nodded gratefully, brushing the plaster dust from a stool and sitting down. Resting her one leg on the wooden beam running along the stools legs, Aleska propped herself further onto the chair. She handed the bottle to Hawke, her gaze turned to the windows; ensuring they were undisturbed.

“You said the news about Corypheus made sense of some things; what do you mean by that?”

Hawke took a long swallow of the wine, leaning back against the wall and closing his eyes; Aleska could tell from his expression he was revisiting memories he would rather have left alone.

“Corypheus can influence the minds of Grey Wardens, I saw him do it with Andy; it made him do…” He paused and took another drink. Aleska waited patiently; despite her eagerness to learn what he knew, Hawke would need his own time to tell it – especially if Anders was involved in any way. He’d never told the full story of what passed between them in the weeks leading up to the destruction of the Kirkwall Cathedral, but she knew enough to understand those wounds would never heal. Eventually he started to speak again; sitting down at the table across from her.

“It made him do things… things that weren’t in his nature. Sometimes I wonder if that… if that was what…”

Hawke bowed his head, shoulders trembling. Aleska reached over and took his hand, feeling his fingers tighten around hers.

“I never stopped loving him, even at the end…” he continued, voice low and choking. “Maker forgive me, I might even have helped if he’d told me; perhaps that’s why he knew he couldn’t.”
“He loved you…” Aleska spoke with gentle assurance. “You told me he said he wanted to protect you from Justice.”

Ansell nodded, but the sadness still loomed within his eyes.

“I think I’m finally beginning to understand what he meant…” He cleared his throat and straightened up, letting go of her hand. “But that’s a story for another day; right now, you and I have more pressing problems. You know my brother, Carver, is a Grey Warden…”

Aleska listened attentively as Hawke told her of the day, some months before the Conclave, that he’d received a letter from his brother expressing concern about things that were happening in the Order.

“Carver and I don’t exactly get along, so for him to write to me – let alone say anything about the Wardens – meant it had to be more serious than he was letting on. That’s when we started investigating…”

She did a quick mental calculation; that would be roughly around the time Leliana said the Fereldan Wardens started to disappear.

“What did you discover?”

Hawke sighed,

“Nothing that made sense at the time, but something was making Wardens act oddly. Carver headed to the Storm Coast to follow up some leads there; I think he just wanted to get away from me before we started fighting again, and I headed back to the Free Marches. I still have friends in the Mage Underground, I thought perhaps they might have heard something. Then the sky burst open and everything turned to ten different types of shit…” He paused for a moment, taking another drink and running his hand over his face.

“I ran across some abandoned Warden campsites on the Storm Coast,” Aleska informed him. “It must have been your brother they were hunting; it didn’t look like they were having much luck.”

He gave a quiet chuckle.

“Carver’s sneaky. He’s survived Darkspawn and worse; it’ll take more than a few trackers to get the better of him. Last I heard, he was heading to a place in the Bronach Bannorn; something about Templars using Red Lyrium. I got Varric’s message just after that, and everything fell into place.” He offered her the last of the wine, Aleska shook her head and he drained the bottle. “I guess I don’t have to tell you that Templars and Red Lyrium are a bad combination?”

“So, Corypheus may be corrupting the Wardens like he has the Templars?” Aleska groaned. “Just once I’d like to get some good news…”

“Carver’s note did mention he had some leads on that…” Hawke leaned forward with an encouraging smile, “I can help you locate them, assuming you want my help?”

Aleska gave him a questioning look.

“Why wouldn’t I?”

Hawke laughed.

“I’m not exactly the most popular person around at the moment, and there’s plenty – including
some of your Inquisition – who’d happily see me swinging in a gibbet!”

“Then they’ll just have to go without that satisfaction,” she said firmly, getting to her feet. “Anyone who has an issue with the Champion of Kirkwall aiding the Inquisition can discuss it with me.”

“That’s kind of you,” Ansell said, standing up and stretching, “but it’s probably for the best if I don’t stick around here; anyway, I don’t like the idea of leaving Carver out there on his own. He’s set up camp just north of a town called Crestwood. I’ll give the exact location to Sister Leliana before I go.”

“Crestwood?” Aleska’s brow furrowed, recalling something Mother Giselle had told her. “Isn’t that where the dead have been rising?”

Hawke’s face fell, and he groaned quietly.

“I hate Undead. It’s not too bad if they’re skeletons, but the soggy ones… Urgh!” He shuddered.

“Was there ever a time when life was simple?”

“Yes, before I met you!” Aleska gave a sharp laugh and he shrugged ruefully in response. “I’ll have some food sent up. You look like you need to rest, and I ought to apologise to Varric.”

“It has been some time since I slept in a real bed…” He admitted, “and if any of your cooks know how to make a Fereldan Three-Bean Stew…”

“I’ll see what I can do…” she smiled and left to find the Dwarf.

###

“I was looking for that…” Sophia said with a hint of reproach as she approached Anselm, slouched in a corner of the Library “What are you even doing with it?”

“Trying to broaden my mind.” He closed the book and handed it over to her, “I thought with a title like *Emerald Waters of Creation* it might at least have a touch of poetry. Why are all books about magic so dull?”

“They’re not meant to be read for entertainment and I’ve wasted an hour trying to find this. If you’re bored, why don’t you go and pester the Iron Bull? Or I’m sure Chief-Scout Harding could find something for you to do…”

The annoyance in her voice was unmistakable and he knew it had little connection to him borrowing a singularly tedious book on Lyrium and its relationship to the Fade. News of the Champion’s presence had spread quickly, aided by Cassandra’s screaming argument with Varric, and it was safe to say the reaction had been mixed. *The Tale of the Champion* had made the man something of a folk-hero; a dashing and dangerous character who’d faced ogres in the Deep Roads, duelled the Qunari Arishok for the sake of a beautiful pirate and battled demons on a daily basis. Orlais and Ferelden might revel in the tale but, for many in the Free Marches, the name Hawke was inextricably linked with the destruction that fell on Kirkwall that late summer afternoon four years ago – and with the chaos and bloodshed that followed.

It was easy for him to see how much it was disturbing Sophia. In public she maintained her poise and courtesy, but in private she was skittish and irritable; spending most of her closeted in her room or discussing utterly abstruse magical dynamics with Dorian or Solas. Jonas had simply retreated into a grumpy sulk, taking out his own feelings on the nearest training dummy. Fortunately, this situation wouldn’t last much longer…
“I’m just trying to kill time until they’ve stopped bickering over how to handle this Crestwood business,” he said, with an apologetic little smile. “Then everything than get back to what passes for normal. I’ll be happy to get out of this place and back in the field…”

The biggest sticking point was that Crestwood, and the Bronnach Bannorn, lay firmly in Ferelden; within the jurisdiction of Highever and under the authority of Teryn Fergus Cousland. For the Inquisition to return with any sort of effective force they would need the consent of Alistair and Olivia, who also had to contend with the mood of the Landsmeet. Convincing the Ferelden nobility that the Inquisition wasn’t the advance guard of a new Orlesian occupation would be an uphill task.

Sophia paused, running her fingers along the spine of the book.

“You’ll be accompanying Aleska to Crestwood?”

Anselm yawned and stretched, feeling a series of satisfying little cracks between his shoulder-blades.

“I certainly hope so! I’m not looking forward to the Undead, but I’ve heard there’s good hunting in that part of the country; and we’re right in the middle of Red Templar season…” He lowered his arms and looked up at Sophia; there was something about her tone and expression “What?”

She sat down opposite him, placing the book on the table and smoothing out a crease in her skirts, glancing around before speaking in a lower voice, almost a whisper.

“What’s going on between the two of you, Ansie? The way you’ve been behaving around her; I’ve never seen you this obsessed by someone before.”

“I wish I knew…” Anselm muttered. “We’ve barely spoken since Haven and the first real chance I got, we were interrupted by Varric. It’s… I don’t know what it is. All I know is that I can’t stop thinking about her.”

He sat back with a heavy sigh, closing his eyes and running his fingers through his hair. Sophia shook her head gently.

“You need to take a step back, Tesoro; she’s the Inquisitor now. The eyes of every power in Thedas are on her right now and many of them are just waiting for her to make a mistake. She can’t afford to get mired up in a scandal.”

Anselm lifted his head slightly and looked directly at her.

“Do you really think I would do that to her?”

“Not intentionally but…” Sophia hesitated then took the plunge. “Scandal follows you like your shadow, you can’t deny that. At Haven, when she was just the Herald, people didn’t notice so much; but neither of you have the luxury of privacy. An Elf has never held a position of such power before and Aleska has the opportunity to do great things for Thedas, and for her people; I’d hate to see that opportunity lost because…”

“Because I can’t keep my prick in my breeches?” Anselm snapped, regretting the words the moment he uttered them. “Soph… I’m sorry…”

“I know, you didn’t mean it…” She said softly. “But this is what I’m talking about. You have a reputation, not a good one, and that could easily damage her; especially as some of the Inquisition’s other allies are of… dubious… quality.”
“And I might just be one scandal too many?” Anselm’s brow furrowed. “Has Raffali been writing to you?”

The old Elf had served the Counts of Ostwick in one capacity or another since the reign of their Great-Grandfather, Sergio the Magnificent, and had been Count Boniface’s ‘Confidential Secretary’ for as long as Anselm could remember. Little that happened in the Courts of Thedas escaped Signor Raffali’s attention, and it would be surprising if he didn’t have several agents present in the Inquisition. Knowledge was a crucial part of the Game, and Trevelyan power was based on centuries of carefully thought-out alliances.

Sophia nodded in confirmation.

“I received a letter from him a few days ago. Rumours have spread like wildfire ever since the fall of Haven. The most popular is that the Inquisitor is merely a puppet in the hands of her advisors, a tool for them to use in taking control of the Chantry. Depending on who’s asked, you are either being used to gain our support and that of our allies; or Father is using you to take control of the Inquisition for his own ends. Even you must see how dangerous gossip like that can be; especially now that someone as… divisive… as the Champion has joined our ranks.”

Anselm pressed his knuckles to his mouth to suppress a snort of angry laughter.

“I could spend every day in the chapel, singing the Chant, and it wouldn’t make any difference to that…”

A mischievous smile lit up Sophia’s face.

“If you did that, they’d only assume you had your eye on one of the Sisters…” She moved over to sit on the arm of his chair, resting her hand on his shoulder. “What’s going on, Ansie? We used to be able to talk about anything, now we just seem to end up bickering all the time…”

Anselm took her hand and kissed it fondly, sighing gently. It was true, they had been drifting apart. Sophia had always been more like an older sister to him; even after she went to the Circle, she’d written to him at every possible opportunity and he’d visited whenever he could.

“Honestly? I don’t know…” he said quietly, still holding her hand. “I’ve never felt this way for anyone before…”

It was difficult, trying to find the right words. He’d never lacked for company back home, and had always been the centre of attention, but he was no fool; the lure of the Trevelyan name and wealth was a bigger draw than his good looks and wit. He could have been a pock-marked dullard and they’d still be fawning over him, laughing at his every word or falling into his bed. He knew full well why he’d ended up with the hardest and dirtiest duties when he agreed to stay with the Inquisition. Aleska made it plain she thought he was a spoiled brat who’d go running home the first time he was expected to get his fine boots a little bit muddy.

It had been a game at first; he wanted the pleasure of proving her wrong. Having to fend for himself was a new experience and it came as a shock to discover he liked it; just as much as he liked those moments where he broke through the ice a little and she laughed. For once, what he could do and who he was mattered more than the gold in his purse. He hadn’t felt this good since that time at the Tourney when he passed the last of his trials and they’d marked his face. And yet…

“…all I know is that I feel happier; more… well, more me when I’m around her…” He glanced up at his cousin, still sitting on the arm of the chair and stroking his hair as he struggled with the
words to express his emotions. “Is this what falling in love feels like?”

Sophia kissed the top of his head, a knot of conflicting emotions tangling in her stomach. Anselm had changed, and for the better, during his time with this new Inquisition; discovering a drive and a purpose that she’d almost despaired of him ever finding; but this? She remembered her terror at realising she was falling in love with Guenther, and he with her. Even in the relaxed environment of the Ostwick Circle, the distinction between Templar and Mage was still very firm; she had the Trevelyans name and her family’s influence with the Chantry to protect her, but the consequences for a low-born Templar like him would have been severe. They’d taken the risk, however, and she couldn’t imagine being able to endure those years without him…

“It’s different for everyone, Tesoro, but it sounds to me like that’s what’s happening…”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing…” he murmured, still holding onto her hand. Sophia swallowed back her fear and turned his face, so he was looking at her.

“If you truly love her, there may come a time when you’re forced to let her go, for both your sakes.” She looked down into his eyes, recalling how he used to sit in her lap and beg her for stories when he was small “I’m afraid there may be a lot of pain ahead for both of you…”

###

Declan fidgeted anxiously with his cravat as he waited, only the steady ticking of the clock broke the silence of the high-ceilinged salon and there was a musty smell – as if it hadn’t been aired for some time. The room faced inwards, to the courtyard garden of the Palazzo Tresaquae, but the windows were firmly closed despite the stifling humidity of the early-Harvestmere evening. Baron Giulio preferred to keep his own household, well removed from the Palazzo Comital on it’s high ridge overlooking the harbour, but the young man had never set foot across the threshold before. Unlike his brother, or indeed the majority of the Ostwicker nobility, Anselm’s father had little inclination to throw the balls and entertainments that made the city rival Val Royeaux as a centre of fashion and culture. More often than not he was absent, pursuing his own interests in Orlais or Rivain and returning only in cases of absolute necessity. Declan was uncomfortably certain why the Baron was at home; and why he’d been summoned here.

The young man glanced around, trying to find something to distract his attention, and caught sight of his reflection in a mirror. Pulling a comb from his pocket he ran it hurriedly through his unruly, sandy-brown, hair and tied it back as a soft shod Elven servant opened the great double doors at the far end of the room and bowed his master in; closing the doors quietly behind him as he withdrew.

The Baron was a tall man in his late 40’s; he had the Trevelyans looks but there was a stern sharpness to his face, and a hint of petulance about his mouth, as though he lived with perpetual disappointment. He gave Declan’s bow the briefest acknowledgement as he walked over to a table and poured himself a glass of Medoc.

The boy looked to be about his son’s age; short and slim with a weak, handsome face and a nervous manner. He was dressed in the Antivan style that seemed to be the fashion among the young dandies these days; a russet-brown swallowtail coat and cream-coloured breeches, with a fussily-tied linen cravat around his throat. He took a sip of the wine and set it down, wrinkling his nose in distaste. It had been left to stand for too long, that would have to be addressed. He turned to face Declan; this was a distasteful business and he would rather get it over swiftly.

“I understand you will be leaving for Jader shortly, to join this Inquisition?”
The man might have been uttering a profanity, the way the word distorted his face.

“Yes… yes… Excellency…” Declan stammered. “My Father wants me to…”

The Baron waved him into silence.

“Messere will suffice, only my brother is ‘Excellency’, and your father’s intentions do not concern me in this matter. It does, however, put you in a position to carry out an errand for me. One that will be to your advantage.”

Declan swallowed nervously, feeling his stomach clench tight. Fortunately he hadn’t eaten yet, so there was no danger of throwing up on the elaborately worked Tevinter carpet.

“An… an errand, Messere?” He managed to say. Whatever the Baron intended was unlikely to be something so simple as a parcel of letters. Baron Giulio nodded slightly, unlocking a cabinet and removing a sheaf of papers.

“More of an escort duty. There is a young… lady… who is pining for my son’s company…” he looked across at Declan with a cold smile, “I wish you to ensure she reaches Skyhold safely. A simple service, but a rewarding one.”

Declan looked puzzled for a moment. _Donna_ Sophia was already in Orlais and he couldn’t think of anyone else particularly close; then it dawned on him, and his eyes widened in shock.

“A… are you talking about _Señorita_ Delilah…” He blurted out. Anselm’s Rivaini mistress, the one who’d provoked the duel that almost caused a diplomatic incident between Ostwick and Orlais. The Count had banished her the same day he sent Anselm packing to the Conclave. “But I thought His Excellency had…”

The Baron waved him into silence again, a trifle more impatiently.

“Matters have changed, and you need not fear incurring my brother’s displeasure. The woman will not be setting foot in Ostwick; she will be waiting for you at Jader and you will escort her from there.” He walked slowly closer to Declan, the papers still in his hand. “You must be aware that my son is making a fool of himself with this Elf they’ve put at the head of the Inquisition. The embarrassment that causes is considerable, far outweighing any nuisance his whores might have caused. He has, I believe, a fondness for this Rivaini; I’m sure she will be more than capable of distracting him from this current obsession.”

Declan hesitated; unsure if Anselm would be quite as welcoming of the distraction as his father seemed to believe. Once Anselm had a new conquest in his sights, he rarely looked back to an old one and if Delilah missed him so much why hadn’t she already made the journey south? He shifted awkwardly. Anselm had always been a good friend to him, despite his family being barely on the fringes of Ostwick society. His father might carry a Fereldan noble title, but they’d been forced to leave years before he was born. His grandfather had been too close to the Orlesian occupiers, even to the extent of marrying an Orlesian woman, and in the wake of King Maric’s victory that made life more than uncomfortable. Since then they’d been in the Free Marches, struggling to get by on what resources they had, and uncomfortably aware of their outsider status.

“I… I don’t know if I would feel right about…” he began, only for the Baron to cut him off sharply.

“I don’t care what you feel…” he brandished the papers in his hand and Declan saw it was a sheaf of bills, all now bearing the Baron’s seal and signature “You owe 1000 Reals to the moneylender
Scarpini, another 2000 to the dwarf Callidore, 1700 to three different tailors and so on! Over 6500 Reals in total, more than twice the annual revenue that your father scrapes from his wine business. It was no small effort or cost to buy these debts off them, but if you carry out my instructions then they go into the fire and you get an additional 2000 Reals to do with what you will. More than generous, for such a small task, I think you will agree?"

Declan swallowed hard. He knew he was in a lot of trouble, and that even in Skyhold his debtors would have found him eventually but seeing his notes of credit in the Baron’s hands was more frightening than the thought of anything Scarpini or Callidore might do to him.

“If… If I don’t?”

The Baron’s smile turned thin and sharp. He stepped closer until there was only a few inches between them.

“Debtor’s prison would such an unpleasant place for a handsome young man like you. I’d advise you to consider my offer very seriously.” He turned and walked back over to the cabinet. “I expect your answer by tomorrow afternoon. Good evening to you, Serrah!”
With the judgement of Alexius passed, Aleska heads to Crestwood with Hawke to meet with Carver. Things between her and Anselm heat up, but a visit from one of Anselm's friends threaten to destroy everything he had worked so hard to achieve.

_We cannot hesitate to show our strength_, Cassandra’s words rang through Aleska’s mind, as she lay back against her propped-up pillows. Inhaling deeply, she welcomed the cool mountain air filling her lungs. They had left it long enough, she must now decide the Magister’s fate and there was no postponing it.

Her hand ran along the silk pillow cover, such finery wasn’t something she had grown accustomed to; even the covers were of the richest Orlesian silk. Her eyes glanced around the room, taking in the grandeur of her new quarters.

_Josephine must have been a stern taskmaster to have this ready in time._

Aleska found herself smiling; despite being dressed by the crack of dawn, the desire to leave this comfortable room was lacking.

“There you are,” the door opened, revealing Anselm, with a steaming mug in his hand. “I might have something to cheer you up.”

“You are under the assumption I need to be cheered up,” Aleska sat up, folding her legs beneath her. “What’s this?”

Accepting the mug, Aleska peered into the frothy brown contents; the sweet, unfamiliar, scent wafting towards her. Pressing her lips to the rim, she took a long sip. It was rich and creamy, with a hint of bitterness offset by the sweetness of honey. Licking the residue off her lips, Aleska savoured every sip.

“That is absolutely delicious,” Aleska placed the mug beside her, resting back into the pillows. “So what was that?”

Anselm chuckled, using his thumb to wipe away the foam which had gathered on her top lip. “Hot chocolate; it is a delicacy and, according to cousin Marc, only a Marcher can brew a decent cup that doesn’t taste like dishwater.”

“That is very descriptive,” Aleska raised a brow. “Will this cousin be joining us, or do I have to rely on your services for a decent cup of hot chocolate?”

“You can rely on my services whenever you wish, for whatever you wish…” He replied with a throaty chuckle “and Marc is far to the south, some University expedition in the Frostback Basin, and well away from this mess.”

Aleska watched as Anselm walked around her bed, flopping down beside her, propping himself on
his elbows. *What is he up to?* Aleska looked down at him, that mischievous gleam shimmering within his eyes.

“So what’s wrong?” Anselm looked at her, rearranging the pillows to sit up beside her. “You’ve been cooped up in here all morning. That is very unlike you. You’re usually up and about by now.”

“Is the great Anselm Trevelyan concerned?” Aleska lay back down, her hand resting upon her waist, her eyes fixed to the ceiling.

“Perhaps.” Anselm watched her intently, even in the dimmest of lights he could make out her delicate features.

Fixing the hair which fell along her chest, Aleska moved it to the side. *He has spent enough time around you to know when something is wrong,* twirling the ends of her hair with the tip of her finger, Aleska’s forefinger and thumb ran through each of the strands before she let it flow back down upon her shoulder.

“Today,” she began, the words instantly caught within her throat. “Today I have to cast judgement on Alexius, as if I were above him, as if I had a right to decide his fate. You should have seen him when I went down there, a man broken beyond repair, do I break him further? Tell me what I should do.”

Anselm took a moment to consider her words carefully. “I cannot presume to tell the Inquisitor what to do.”

Aleska sat up.

“That wasn’t the answer I had been hoping for.”

Her fingers traced along her lips, the time was approaching where she would cast her first judgement as Inquisitor Lavellan.

*I could have easily been on the other end of that judgement.*

Reminding herself of this seemed to keep her level headed. The eyes of Thedas would be fixed on this moment; a despised Dalish Elf sitting in judgement over a Magister of the Tevinter Imperium. No objection had been raised to this; the Magisterium even expelling Alexius from its ranks, eager – at least publicly – to disassociate itself from the Venatori and their Elder One. She didn’t need anyone to tell her that nothing like this had been seen before. Her judgement would determine not merely Alexius’ fate, but also how the world viewed her and the Inquisition.

“Just think,” Anselm’s hand rested over hers. “It will be over before you know it and we can get out of this forsaken castle, Crestwood wouldn’t be my first choice, but I hear there is a dragon prowling around. Don’t tell Joe… or Bull for that matter.”

Aleska gave him a puzzled look. “You’re not coming with me, I thought Josephine had made that clear when she asked you to assist with the diplomatic negotiations alongside Sophia.”

Anselm’s face dropped, the look of disappointment clearer than the blue skies of the Marcher summers, but Aleska could only keep her composure for so long before she burst out laughing. Falling back into her pillows, Anselm’s confusion deepened.

“Wha—”

“I’m only joking,” Aleska caught her breath. “You should have seen your face though, I swear you
The force of the pillow tapping her face caused her to stop, looking at Anselm; the decorative pillow rested in his hand, his fingers clenching the corner and a look of self-satisfaction across his handsome features. Aleska grabbed the pillow, but Anselm was quick to counter; his hand curved around her wrist, holding it above her head.

“Care to try again?” Anselm’s hand tightened; not enough to hurt her, but with the right amount of firmness to make him think he was in control.

Aleska looked up, her blue eyes met his green, his fringe resting along his forehead.

“Not bad,” her voice dropped to a seductive purr. “There is only one issue with you in this position.”

Aleska locked her legs around his waist, rolling him off the bed and onto his back. Pinning him down, with her knees either side of his chest, she freed her hands and grabbed hold of his wrists – holding them securely above his head.

“You’re easy to move,” Aleska climbed off him with a laugh, brushing the dust from her breeches.

“No fair,” Anselm adjusted his waistcoat, pulling it back down and smoothing out the creases. “I call for a rematch!”

Aleska’s finger hooked in the belt of his waist coat, her teeth capturing her lower lip as she pulled him closer. “That depends, if you behave or not. The sparring ring is being erected, perhaps you will get your rematch in due course.”

“I will be holding you to that,” Anselm looked down at her, his hands firmly upon her waist. “My Lady.”

***

The throne of the Inquisitor; a seat of power and a place of authority. Aleska sat, Josephine’s last-minute adjustments to her hair and formal armour becoming less tolerable by the moment. The Inquisition soldiers stood at the foot of the steps, observing the crowd before them. Commander Cullen stood beside her, his hand upon the hilt of his sword as a warning to all who dared approach her.

Aleska’s gaze shifted towards Cullen, a silent plea for reassurance. With a simple nod, he smiled down at her before his gaze turned Anselm who came walking up the aisle beside Jonas. Aleska took in a deep breath, then another; the sensation of her heart thudding in her chest tightened her muscles, the adrenaline flowing through her veins. The rhythmic tap of her nails against the metal arm rest soon became the only thing she’d heard.

Her eyes met Anselm’s, with a single nod she gestured him to stand beside her throne. To the casual observer, this was a request from the Inquisitor to a soldier, asking for a second line of defence; but to the both of them, it was a measure of trust – one which hadn’t been extended before.

Anselm approached the steps, only to be halted by the guard nearest to Aleska’s throne. A look of annoyance crept up upon her delicate features as well as upon Cullen’s; although for different reasons.

“No one is to approach the Inquisitor,” the guard commanded, his knuckles flexed along the shaft
of his spear.

“And which one of you propose to stop me…” Anselm’s eyes gleamed with mischief as the second guard came closer. “…from following a direct order from her Worship?”

“It’s all right,” Aleska called down, watching the two guards allow him to pass. “I requested Lord Anselm to stand beside me. It’s not wise to underestimate a Tevinter Magister, especially when those shackles come off.”

Aleska used all her training to calm her own heart, as the guard’s brought Alexius out, the iron manacles clanging against the loose swinging chain. All around the Hall, soft whispers between the nobility gathered within rippled through her hearing. Her senses felt so acute she was even convinced she could hear the heartbeats of the two men flanking her throne.

“Are you all right?” Anselm whispered, edging closer.

“I’ll be fine,” Aleska cleared her throat, shifting herself into a more comfortable position.

Her gaze turned to Cullen, his soft nod giving her the reassurance she needed. Listening to Josephine relay the crimes of Gereon Alexius; a man who once seemed assured himself of his victory and now bent the knee before her.

*If only Tevinter could see him now.*

Aleska remained calm, despite the persistent whispering below her. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed Cullen’s hand flex around his sword’s hilt, as if to unsheathe it the moment he deemed it appropriate.

To her right, Anselm’s hand shifted his coat; revealing the daggers which he kept within his belt. If anyone were to consider getting close to her; they would feel the full wrath of the two men beside her. Her concentration broke when Josephine addressed the charges brought against Alexius, who dared not speak against them.

Drawing a sharp breath, Aleska was slow to exhale, eyes shut; she counted.

*Three.*

*Two.*

*One.*

“Magister Alexius,” her voice carried. “These are grave charges; do you have anything to say on your defence?”

Turning her head to either side, both men gave her a nod of approval, neither of them uttering a single word. In her hypersensitive state she could even make out words and sentences in the rustling of noise from the watching crowd.

“Why does she need them both?” The woman in the pink dress asked her companion. “Surely the Commander would have sufficed.”

“Haven’t you heard?” The other woman responded with a soft giggle. “She has them both wrapped around her dainty little fingers. I heard Ser Cullen and Lord Trevelyan actually came close to brawling over her.”
“Rubbish,” the first woman scoffed. “She is pretty, no doubt, but the Commander has more tact then that. Doesn’t he?”

“I wouldn’t know,” a snort followed. “But if you believe the rumours, not much work is getting done on the nights she meets with her Templar – and that new bed looks big enough for three…”

A voice brought Aleska’s attention back to Alexius, Josephine looked at her, urging her to speak. How long had I been lost in my own world. The cool breeze from the open window sent an all too real chill down her spine, as if trapped in the Fade once more; a vision came before her.

She was upon bended knee, in a hall not unlike this one. Cassandra sitting where she sat, the mark crackling upon her hand, sending a sensation of a thousand tiny needles pricking at her skin. In that moment, her heart faltered, she looked to both Cullen and Anselm for guidance; but neither could offer the words of comfort she needed.

“I—” the words caught in her throat, the lump grew larger and larger as if to choke her. “I believe that sentencing you to—“ the words caught again. She cursed herself. Control your voice, if you cannot take yourself seriously, then how can they? “I sentence you to right the wrongs you have inflicted upon Redcliffe. You will work alongside the mages there to help repair and rebuild the city; your wages shall go to aid the less fortunate among them. Once this is done, you will serve the Inquisition as a researcher and magical consultant. I am giving you a chance to atone for your crimes; do not squander it! Ambassador, see to it that the King and Queen are privy to this arrangement; I want no surprises.”

“Yes, Inquisitor.” Josephine lowered her head, the tip of her quill ticking against the bottom of her inkwell as the guards led the former Magister away. The murmuring in the Hall grew louder at this unexpected, yet creative, act of mercy. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Dorian give her a grateful nod.

“Now if there is nothing else,” Aleska sat back in her throne and closed her eyes; the sound of her own thudding heart all but overwhelming her hearing. The sound of Cullen’s metal greaves rubbing against one another caught her attention; he walked down the steps before momentarily turning towards her and bowing his head before continuing his path towards the training grounds.

The hall emptied, leaving only Aleska and Anselm; taking his extended hand, she smiled warmly and rose to her feet. The warmth of his skin sent a surge through her; one she could not explain, nor did she want to.

“You did well,” Anselm smiled down at her.

“Get me out of this castle,” Aleska dropped her voice into a low whisper. “I cannot bear staying here another moment, it feels that every minute that passes is suffocating me.”

“I haven't been able to find any hot springs nearby - yet - but there's bound to be some good hunting in these mountains. Shall we steal a couple of horses from the stables and go exploring?”

Anselm’s hand still held her, his thumb stroking her knuckles; his other hand moved up to stroke her cheek. Aleska closed her eyes, his familiar scent of musk and cedar filling her nostrils. A smile formed upon her lips, the feeling of his forehead against hers sending a tremble through her spine.

“I’ll let our travelling companions know we’ll be taking the long way to Crestwood,” Aleska forced herself away, leaving Anselm to make his way down to the stables. She dared not look back, for if she did; this growing desire would strip away what remained of her self-restraint.
Thunder rumbled in the distance; the sunny skies vanishing behind thick grey clouds and taking the
day’s warmth with them, leaving nothing but a cold chill in its wake. A shudder travelled down
Aleska’s spine, even through the winter coat she procured from a seamstress in a village not far
from their destination sat snug about her shoulders.

“Still cold?” Anselm halted his horse, trotting beside her.

“It will take a moment for me to settle into it,” Aleska shivered, her one hand holding the reins,
with the other, she rubbed her shoulder in an attempt to generate heat. “We better get to camp,
before Cassandra or Bull come looking for us.”

Aleska nudged Vesenya’s side, urging her towards the faint light in the distance, with Anselm not
far behind her. Arriving at the camp, the first thing to catch her attention was Bull sharpening his
axe; he seemed mesmerized by the simple task, as if each stroke of the whetstone brought
memories of the blows it had delivered.

Cassandra had gathered wood for the fire, and was using an enchantment loaned to her by Sophia.
Orange runes glimmered within the grey stone plaque, illuminating the Seekers face as she recited
the chant which activated them.

“It is to ensure that the wood stays dry,” Anselm told her as he helped her from her horse. “You
could throw it in the ocean, pluck it out an hour later and still light a fire with it.”

“Magic can do that?” Aleska cocked her head to the side. Bae normally used only the most basic
charms and spells in sight of the others, but humans seemed to have no qualms about using it for
the most everyday purpose despite their fear of mages. Anselm shrugged

“It has its limits, but the Formari used to create these little gadgets all the time. It was the main
source of revenue for the circles.”

Pulling off her gloves, Aleska walked toward the camp fire, warming her hands before its blazing
embers.

“So what have we missed?” Aleska asked, looking round the others.

Varric placed the book in his pack, nudging his glasses further down his nose.

“Harding’s set up main camp just to the south of the Lake, trying to keep an eye on the undead.
Hawke sent a message giving the location of the cave where we can find him and Carver. There’s
a Rift of some sort in the lake itself and we spotted what look like a couple of Red Templar
patrols!” The dwarf laughed ruefully “Just to top it all off, there’s a High Dragon nesting below the
dam. We were hoping you’d have some insight on what to do.”

“What makes you think I have in-depth knowledge of dragons?” Aleska accepted the bowl of soup
Jonas handed to her; the warmth of the broth heating up her body with every mouthful she took.

“You must have a better idea than Bull. He just wants to swing at it with an axe,” Varric shook his
head, taking out his ration of berries and nuts. “Seeker wants to leave it be.”

“If we disturb the beast,” Cassandra scoffed. “She will take flight. By leaving her alone, we ensure
she won’t disturb the villagers in Crestwood; they have enough to trouble them and we are not here
for sport.”
Aleska glanced around the others; none of them seemed entirely agreed on what to do regarding this unexpected element.

“We should set up shifts to watch her, ensuring she doesn’t get too close to the village; and someone should ride to Crestwood and inform the Mayor, although I doubt he would welcome the news.”

They all looked at her, then at one another before nodding in agreement.

“I can get behind that plan,” Bull placed the whetstone within his pocket. “Providing we can hunt her down later.”

“ Heard there’s a Wyvern up in the hills, as well!” Jonas said eagerly “One of them big crested ones with the purple markings!”

“Oh yeah!” Bull grinned “They’re the really vicious sort!”

Cassandra gave a disgusted grunt.

“We are not here to go hunting!” She reminded them. Aleska rolled her eyes.

“We’ll see, once we’ve made sure the town is safe and the Rift is closed” She set her now empty bowl beside the fire. “So who will take the first watch and who will ride to tell the Mayor?”

“Jonas and I can ride down to the village.” Dorian suggested. “It would also give them some extra manpower if the undead attack again tonight.”

Jonas didn’t seem too happy with the idea, but he nodded his assent anyway; picking up his greatsword and strapping it to his back.

Anselm rose, buckling his quiver across his chest.

“I’ll keep an eye on the Dragon…” He offered, turning to Aleska. “Care to keep me company?”

Aleska glanced at the others. Cassandra and Bull were intently working on their equipment while Varric seemed immersed in scribbling notes. The sky was still clear, although clouds were gathering, and watching a dragon with Anselm seemed far better than the alternatives.

***

Walking along the coastline, Aleska kept the Dragon well within her sights, the great beast’s soft slumber affirmed by the purring growl she released with every breath. Her powerful tail swished at random intervals, almost the way a cat’s did when it dreamed.

She is beautiful.

Aleska perched herself on the rocks, watching the vibrant colours of the rain-slick scales shimmer in the moonlight.

“My father would tell me of Dragons,” Aleska sat at the edge of the cliff, the waves crashing beneath her soothing her every anxious thought. “He would say they are the embodiment of raw power and there were only two ways to deal with them; you can either kill them, thus embodying that power…”

“Or,” Anselm sat beside her, sliding his coat over her shoulders and lifting the hood up to shield her face from the coming rain.
“Or you can tame it. If you were to conquer it, then you merely wait for someone else to come along and take it from you – but if you tame it, the options opened to you are limitless.”

Anselm looked at Aleska, mulling over her words.

“That sounds like something my uncle would say.” He laughed quietly “Your father sounds quite formidable.”

“The Clan sometimes call him The Dragon, for good reason!” She smiled at him “So bear than in mind.”

They both lapsed into silence, watching the sleeping dragon at the foot of the cliffs. Eventually Aleska found the courage to ask the question that had been on her mind for weeks

“I have been meaning to talk to you about something,” She began, her eyes fixated upon the horizon. “At the battle of Haven, you kissed me, why?”

Aleska had rehearsed that a thousand times, perhaps more; but the clarity and confidence with which she asked him surprised even her. Drawing a deep breath, the salty sea air hit her lungs. It seemed heavier and richer than the crisp mountain air of Skyhold.

“I—” Anselm’s hands ran through his damp hair. Thunder rumbled again in the distance, stirring the dragon below. “I didn’t know if any of us were going to make it through that night; and I didn’t want to die without having kissed you.”

Aleska looked at him in silence as the rain began to pour down, soaking them through their armour and plastering Anselm’s fringe against his forehead. Aleska allowed her arms to rest at her side, the cold water trickling down her arms; sending a shiver through her.

“This isn’t a game anymore,” She dropped her voice, the lump in her throat felt near to choking her. “No man, no sane man, would go to these lengths. You are a proud man Anselm Trevelyan; but not this proud, you’ve more than proven I am not some conquest. If you are still willing; then I shall be yours.”

His smile broadened, and he took a step closer to her, hands cupping her cheeks as his thumb lightly traced the outline of her lips. He leaned in closer towards her, his movements slow at first to allow her to step back should she want to. Aleska felt the warmth of his breath upon her lips and slid her arms around his chest; pulling him close as the heat of his hungry kiss warmed up the rest of her body.

His arms were round her shoulders, clasping her as eagerly as she held him. Holding her body against his, afraid to let her go. Aleska’s fingers ran through his wet hair, slicking it backwards and seizing him by the back of his neck. She felt his arms around her waist again, lifting her up, and she instinctively wrapped her legs about his hips as they fell back into the damp heather.

They broke apart as a rushing gust of air hit them and they heard mighty wings above them. Looking up, they saw the dragon taking to the sky; her slumber broken by the sudden rainstorm. Fortunately, she either didn’t care about or didn’t notice the two tiny figures lying on the ground below her. It was a breath-taking sight, leaving them speechless and in awe.

“We... we ought to tell the others it’s on the move...” Anselm said, finally getting to his feet and helping Aleska to hers “But at least it’s going away from the town.”

“It must be looking for somewhere more sheltered; sensible girl!” Aleska laughed, pushing her wet hair away from her face. “Will we ever have an undisturbed moment?”
Anselm smiled and kissed her forehead.

“At least it wasn’t Varric this time; and I believe Skyhold has doors that lock…”

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“I still don’t understand…” Aleska said as Carver finished recounting his story. “If you killed Corypheus, how was he able to return? The dead can’t come back from the beyond, can they?”

The only sound, other than the crackling of the fire, was the drip of water from the cave ceiling. Carver looked cautiously around the group of people gathered there. Other than his brother and Varric they were strangers. He was out of his depth, needing the help of the Inquisition as much as they needed his, but the Wardens kept some secrets for very good reasons. Even now, he wasn’t sure how far he could safely go.

“The Blight isn’t just a sickness.” he said, carefully. “The Taint has a kind of magic the more powerful Darkspawn can use. It’s why Archdemons can be… difficult… to kill. If Corypheus is one of the original Darkspawn, a Magister who breached the Golden City, then his link to the Blight might allow him to survive physical death.”

“The same link that allows him to influence the Wardens…” Aleska muttered “Are you hearing it as well?”

Carver nodded, grimacing slightly.

“It’s almost overwhelming at times; but I’ve had Corypheus in my head before, I know what he sounds like. Of course, when I tried explaining that to the others…” He looked across at Aleska and shrugged. “You know the rest of that story.”

“We need to get to this ritual site, find out what they’re planning.” Hawke interjected, giving Carver a sly glance “Somehow I doubt it’s going to involve scattering daisies and frolicking in their smalls!”

His brother gave an almost-amused grunt.

“Grey Wardens aren’t exactly known for frolicking…”

“It’s a long journey…” Aleska said, looking down at the map. The deserts of the Western Approach lay on the far side of the Orlesian Empire, a difficult road at the best of times, “and right through the Civil War.”

“Carver and I will go on ahead with a couple of the Nightingale’s scouts,” Hawke said. “We can try and find the safest route for your people, as well as get an idea of what to accept.”

“Sure the pair of you can spend that long together without killing each other?” Varric asked with a raised eyebrow. Hawke shook his head with a small laugh.

“As long as we’ve got something bigger to fight, we’ll be fine.” He looked across at Carver and Aleska saw a hint of genuine concern and affection behind the mischief “Once I don’t have to worry about saving my little brother’s arse… again… normal bickering can resume!”

As they left the cavern to return to camp, Varric dawdled alongside Aleska; turning to her once he was sure the others were out of earshot.

“So, Sapphire, when did you first meet Hawke?” Aleska hesitated, caught by surprise, and the
Dwarf chuckled quietly. “You don’t think I can tell when two people already know each other? Hawke’s shit at bluffing even though you manage to keep a pretty closed face when need be.”

Aleska took a deep breath. It had been naïve of her to hope Varric wouldn’t notice, but this was still a tale she would rather keep to herself for now.

“It’s a long story, Varric; and one that could put a lot of people I care about in danger. One day I’ll tell you, if I think it’s safe; but not today.”

Varric’s eyes narrowed thoughtfully as the wheels turned within his head. Smiler had been a good friend of Marethari, Clan Sabrae’s Keeper, and had won their grudging respect for the way he dealt with the whole Merrill business. That could well have bought him friends and allies in other Dalish Clans…

“This wouldn’t be anything to do with the time he vanished after the battle at the Gallows; would it?” He asked, not really expecting an answer but keen to see her reaction. Aleska’s expression didn’t change.

“You’re fishing, Varric; stick to bluffing!” She said, sharply. “Now, let’s catch up with the others. Aside from everything else, we have a Keep to take.”

Varric shrugged with a resigned grin.

“Just point Tiny and Syrup at the gates. The rest of us can follow and sweep up the mess!”

***

“I am just grateful we were able to close that thing,” Aleska accepted Rylen’s help off her horse. “It was smaller than I expected.”

Aleska brushed the dust off her hands, the long ride back had been exhausting and the whole expedition a struggle. Crestwood was safe now, that was the main thing, and the Inquisition had a base of operations on the main route from Denerim to Val Royeaux. The tending of the horses was being overseen by Rylen and Aleska noted he seemed to be lingering in the same area as this went on.

Listening to our conversation no doubt.

She smiled to herself; Skyhold thrived on gossip as much as the Clan did. No doubt everyone was eager to learn what might have passed between the Inquisitor and Lord Anselm during their absence.

“I still cannot believe the Mayor was behind it,” Anselm shook his head, pulling a leaf from her fringe. “I—”

Within that moment a shrill voice came, calling his name, a woman dressed in Marcher finery dashed into his arms, her lips firmly pressed against his. Aleska felt her blood run cold within that moment, her mouth went dry and her palms sweat.

“When I received your letter,” the woman began, unable to contain her excitement. “I couldn’t believe you’d written. You always had a sweet way with words.”

“Delilah,” Anselm breathed, “I didn’t—”

“Shh, my love,” Delilah placed a finger to his lips. “I am here now. That is all that matters.”
Aleska shook her head, her hand resting on the hilt of the dagger which sat firmly within her belt. *I should have known! I should have fucking known!* Aleska’s hand flexed around the hilt, the urge to pull it out grew greater and greater. Inhaling deeply, a desperate attempt to calm her nerves.

“Aleska—” Anselm pushed Delilah off him.

With a raised hand, Aleska called for his silence. “I shan’t keep you from your guest, Lord Trevelyan.”

Walking towards the Great Hall, each step Aleska took threatened to cause her to collapse to the floor. Her sensitive hearing picked up the soothing voice of Knight-Captain Rylen.

“If I were you,” Rylen stated calmly. “I wouldn’t go after her, unless you want that dagger in your unmentionables.”

“She wouldn’t?” Anselm protested.

“You sure about that?” Rylen responded. “You didn’t see what I did, lad, let her cool down.”

Aleska climbed the steps carefully, not daring herself to look back. A thousand curses in both Elvhen and Marcher ran through her mind. The uncertainty if they were meant for Anselm, or herself.
Chapter Summary

The arrival of Anselm's former mistress forces Sophia to tell her cousin some uncomfortable truths; while Cullen assures Aleska that she's made the right choices. Anselm's suspicions about the source of the letter lead to an aggressive confrontation.

Ostwick:- 9:40 Dragon

Anselm sprawled snoring, sheets tangled around his waist, as the dark-haired woman beside him slipped out of bed and walked softly over to the dressing table; her feet barely making a sound on the cool parquet floor. Delilah pulled back the heavy silk curtains a fraction of an inch to glance into the street below. The day was clear and bright, with the heavy warmth of an Ostwicker Kingsway, and the Via Hessarian already crowded as the merchants did as much business as possible before the noonday heat because intolerable and the afternoon siesta began. It was a good day to be lounging in bed, she thought, as she bit into a cherry while examining her reflection in the mirror. Perhaps later, once it cooled and the city came back to life, she could entice her Tiger to take her down to the Vicolo dei Gioiellieri and buy her some new bauble for her neck or ears.

Wiping the cherry-juice from her lips, she picked up a soft brush and ran it through her dark curls until they lay, thick and full, around her shoulders and breasts. Laying the brush down, she rinsed her mouth with iced mint-water – catching her breath in her hands to check it was sweet and fresh – before returning to bed. No courtesan worthy of the name would allow Il Patrono to see her looking less than perfect on awakening; especially a prize as desirable as the man who lay, now stirring slowly, beside her.

She brushed her lips against his bare shoulder and ran her fingers down his back with a light, tantalising touch until she found that spot near the base of his spine. Anselm writhed with a low, throaty, chuckle as his eyes flickered open and he turned to look at her.

"Now, you know what happens when you do that…” he said; drowsiness making his voice a rich, throaty, growl.

"Of course, I do, Namur…” She purred, sliding her hand around his inner thigh to continue her teasing "Why else do you think I…?"

There was a sharp knock at the door of the Antechamber and Anselm gave Delilah a questioning smile.

"Are we expecting company?” He asked, with a hopeful glint in his eye. “One of your delightful friends, perhaps?”

Delilah shook her head with a twinge of annoyance; she was expecting no-one, and Don Anselmo paid handsomely to keep this little nest private and undisturbed.

"Salma, see who that is!” She called out to the girl who served as her maid. “Tell them to adhab
“You need to teach me more Rivaini.” Anselm chuckled, kissing her breast. “That sounded gloriously obscene.”

“It was totally filthy, My Lord” she assured him, lying back amongst the heaped pillows and cushions. “Do you know what takalani tatta ‘asih means?”

Anselm rolled on top of her, with a hungry look in his eyes.

“That is something I am very familiar with…”

The bedroom doors opened and Salma, the maid, hurried in with a flustered look.

“Pardon Sayidati… they wouldn’t…”

Before she could finish - and before either Anselm or Delilah could properly respond – a thin, elderly Elf in black satin frock-coat and breeches walked in; leaning on a silver-tipped walking stick. Behind him stood two sturdy, similarly dark-clad, men with impassive faces. Delilah screeched and pulled the bedsheet around her, while Anselm clamped one of the pillows firmly over his lap.

“Raffali?” He barked, in anger and surprise “What in the flaming Void…?”

“Your Uncle has requested your presence, my Lord.” Signor Raffali spoke calmly and with quiet courtesy, as if disturbing naked couples was a routine part of his morning. “I would be obliged if you could get dressed without fuss. The day is too warm for any unpleasantness.”

Anselm looked at the old Elf, demure as a Chantry lawyer in his plain black clothes. Helvetio Raffali might only hold the modest title of Personal Secretary, but everyone in the family knew his story. Spared hanging as a youth by Sergio the Magnificent – impressed by the ability and audacity that had enabled him to pick the pocket of one of the Count’s entourage, almost unnoticed – he’d served House Trevelyan in one form or another for three generations; as spy, assassin, private ambassador and now as Head Intelligencer and Master of Spies. This was not good…

“He could have just sent a messenger…” Anselm muttered, still clutching the pillow over his lap as Delilah squirreled into a dressing gown under the sheet. Signor Raffali sat down on the couch, crossing one leg nearly over another.

“He did, he sent me; and that should tell you all you need to know.” He pulled out his pocket watch and checked the time, glancing over at Anselm with a very clear look of warning. “I would dress quickly. His Excellency is in no mood to be kept waiting.”

Anselm’s shoulders slumped and he reached for his drawers. For Uncle Boniface to send Raffali on an errand like this told him he was in serious trouble. No point in making it worse…

“And what about me?” Delilah stood with her arms folded, glaring at Raffali with false defiance. “You barge into my home…”

The Elf pulled a sealed envelope out of an inner pocket of his coat and threw it onto the bed.

“That is a draft for 2000 Rials, redeemable at any bank in Orlais or Antiva.” He told her firmly, but with an underlying note of quiet sympathy, “I suggest you take that, together with whatever jewels and money Don Anselmo has doubtless lavished on you and find a fast ship out of Ostwick. The curtain had come down on this entertainment, my dear child, it would be wise to leave the stage
before someone less thoughtful decides to force the issue.”

Delilah turned to Anselm with a cry of disgust.

“Is that it? I am to be cast off so easily?”

Anselm shrugged as he picked up his shirt off the back of a chair.

“What can I do?” He said, with a helpless look. “Like he said; *la commedia é finita!”*

###

The private study of the Count of Ostwick stood slightly apart from the rest of the Family Apartments in the East Tower of the Palazzo Comital; separated by the Small Library and the loggia where the family breakfasted. The high windows offered an unparalleled view of the Grand Harbour, primary source of the city’s wealth and strategic importance, and the Waking Sea beyond. Count Boniface stood at the open windows gazing out, inhaling the soft sea breeze that blew in from the east and leached some of the heat from the air. The sky was clear with barely a cloud in sight, the sea calm and smooth; one could almost forget the gathering chaos that had already struck at the heart of his family and threatened to sweep all before it. He didn’t turn as the door opened, knowing who it was; the view this morning was just too perfect to ignore.

“Please ensure Don Anselmo signs the letters; then you may leave us.”

Raffali bowed and took two letters, written on heavy vellum, from a leather portfolio on the Count’s desk. Placing them before Anselm, he dipped a pen in the inkwell and held it out to him. Anselm hesitated a moment then sighed and took the pen from Raffali before giving the letters a cursory glance. They were appropriately diplomatic and elaborately apologetic; one addressed to Empress Celene, the other to the Marquis du Barras. The look Raffali gave him made it clear that refusing to sign was not an option.

“Technically I was the injured party…” he muttered as he signed both and handed them back to the Elf, who blotted the signatures and returned the letters to the portfolio; placing it under his arm and bowing to the Count once more before departing. A few seconds passed before Count Boniface spoke again, still staring out of the window; his voice steady but with a cold, formal edge.

“You arrive uninvited to Mme de Mancini’s reception, flaunting a companion who could most charitably be described as inappropriate, and have the audacity to claim injury when the guest of honour expresses dissatisfaction? I suppose I should be grateful you merely wounded M. du Barras and that he is *not* one of Celene’s favourite cousins!”

“Perhaps I should have cut deeper in that case…” Anselm chuckled, trying to turn the mood “She might have thanked…”

“YOU THINK I FIND THIS AMUSING?” Count Boniface roared, turning and slamming both hands on his desk so hard one of the pens jumped out its holder and fell on the floor. Anselm took a step back, shocked by his uncle’s vehemence and nearly stumbling over the rug. The count took a deep breath, clenching his hands slowly. When he spoke again it was with the calm precision of a man exercising supreme self-control. “There is anarchy in Kirkwall, civil war in Orlais and Sebastian struggles to keep order in Starkhaven while rebel Mages and rogue Templars terrorise the countryside. The fundamental order of the Chantry itself is under attack… and now this…”

The Count pulled out the message he’d received earlier and threw it to Anselm. He caught it and read the few words several times to make sure it was real, feeling icy fingers clutching at his
stomach.

“Oh Maker! Sophia…?”

Count Boniface let out a heavy sigh.

“She will live, Andraste be praised, although her injuries are severe…” he bowed his head, not even his most precious treasure was safe from this madness, “First Enchanter Spiridion and Knight-Lieutenant Guenther were not so fortunate; neither was Revered Mother Diotima…”

“Uncle, I’m sorry…” Anselm swallowed hard, his head spinning with the shock. “If I’d known…”

The Count gave a sharp snort.

“I didn’t know until an hour ago; so I doubt it would have impacted on your conduct last night!” He picked up the pen that had fallen and placed it back in the holder. “This is my fault; had I not been so tolerant of your previous behaviour you might have exercised greater discretion and behaved like a Trevelyan, not some street-brawler!”

Anselm opened his mouth to object but thought better of it as his uncle delivered judgement.

Confinement to the family’s country palace at Castrotrevalli; not exactly a prisoner but under ‘supervision’, until the Ostwick delegation departed for the Divine’s great Conclave in the New Year.

“And what do I do there?” Anselm asked, feeling increasingly uncertain about his uncle’s intentions “I’m not exactly a diplomat.”

“Her Perfection intends to restore the Inquisition, to replace the Templars as the Chantry’s force for order, regardless of the Conclave’s outcome. She has graciously agreed to grant you an officer’s commission; a sign that House Trevelyan stands with her in this crisis and a chance for you to demonstrate you are capable of more than gambling and fucking.” He looked directly at Anselm, holding his gaze with a stern and serious look. “Regardless of what your father thinks, I have always believed you have what it takes to be a great man. So far, I have been disappointed in that belief and I have a deep dislike for being proved wrong. Make sure you don’t disappoint me again!”

###

**Skyhold:- 9:41 Dragon**

“I never sent her a letter…” Anselm muttered, reaching for the bottle to refill his glass. Sophia took it from his hand, ignoring his protest.

“Getting drunk is not going to resolve matters.” She said, placing the wine back in the cabinet and closing the doors firmly “Nor will saying you never wrote to that woman. If anything, it’s only making things worse…”

“How can it make this worse?” Anselm asked, staring down at his empty glass. “And why is everyone so angry at me? I haven’t done…”

“It’s what you haven’t done that’s the problem, can’t you see?” Sophia pressed her fingertips to her temples, feeling the beginnings of another headache behind her eyes. “I’m sorry that I have to spell this out to you; but, for all your courtesy and charm, you have a very poor way of treating women…”
He looked up at her in bewildered shock.

“Soph… how can you say that. I’ve never…”

“Oh, I know you’ve never raised your hand or taken a woman against her will! You just move on to the next conquest without a second thought, like a hunter collecting trophies, and to the Void with any consequences!”

“That’s not exactly true…” Anselm mumbled, increasing uncomfortable under Sophia’s steady scrutiny.

“Isn’t it…?” She sat down beside him with a sigh. “What did you once tell me? ‘I can sit down to dinner beside a woman I’ve never met and have her ready to pounce on me before dessert’s served.’”

“I was joking…”

Sophia shook her head sadly.

“I only wish that was true. Do you know how much time Father spent covering up your little indiscretions? The dowries he arranged? The irate husbands who found themselves with a new title or an estate because you couldn’t turn down a challenge? And now this…”

Anselm shifted uncomfortably in his seat. Yes, he’d had his share of escapades but… listening to Sophia spell it all out so bluntly made his skin crawl; like he needed to spend a week in the steambath. At least he had a defence with Delilah.

“I didn’t have any choice there, remember? Raffali sent her packing and I was penned up in Castrotrevalli getting lectured by Mother Jacinte!”

Sophia took his hand and held it gently.

“Anselm, look me in the eye and tell me honestly; did you even give her a second thought?”

“We… we had an arrangement.” Anselm said awkwardly, unable to meet her gaze. “We both knew…”

“That isn’t an answer.” Sophia shook her head again. “Even a courtesan deserves a little more consideration than that. Is it any wonder Aleska doesn’t believe you can trust you?”

Anselm felt his stomach tightening again and he sank his head into his hands.

“I’d never treat her like that…” he moaned. “This isn’t like any of the others; I’ve never cared for any of them the way I do for her…”

Sophia stroked his hair gently, wishing she knew of a way to make this better. Anselm might well believe he’d never abandon Aleska once his interest waned but, were his feelings for her strong enough to make him break that habit?

“I know you care for her; I’ve seen the risks you took for her…”

Anselm grunted miserably.

“I almost caused a diplomatic incident with Orlais because du Barras called Delilah a whore; then the next day I walked away without a thought when Raffali came calling…” He turned his face to Sophia, a look of resigned despair in his eyes “You’re right; she’s got no reason to trust me. I don’t
know how I’m going to fix this, even if I can.”

Sophia sat back, folding her hands in her lap and thinking for a moment.

“The first thing you have to do is speak to Delilah and end things properly and decently…” She held up a finger to silence him as he opened his mouth to protest. “That’s not up for debate! Once you’ve done that, we can start looking into this mysterious letter.”

###

“I’ve ordered Rylen to begin setting up a preliminary force to head out to the Western Approach once we hear from Hawke and Ser Carver…” Cullen’s voice droned on about requisitions and supply lines as Aleska tried to focus on the reports in front of her. The long lists of dry military orders meant little, but it gave her something to think about other than the rage and humiliation boiling deep inside her.

Aleska listened intently, her fingers around the pendant laying upon her neck, swinging it across the chain. With each passing moment her chest tightened, as if her very breath would be her undoing. If it hadn’t been for Cullen’s private meeting, she would have been on the first horse and as far from Skyhold as one could imagine.

“Do the arrangements meet with your approval?” He asked, watching carefully as she finished reading through the manifests. “If not, I can…”

“Hm?” Aleska tore herself out of her own mind, a smile forced upon her lips. “They’re fine Cullen; honestly…” She handed them to him and sat back as he tucked them carefully in his portfolio. Aleska inhaled slowly through her nose; everyone was being very calm and professional around her, especially the Commander, she wasn’t sure how much more she could take.

“Just say it…” she snapped; the Commander looked at her in surprise, caught off guard by her sudden directness “Let’s get it out and over with…”

The moment Aleska had been dreading, the formidable I told you so. Something she’d been waiting for, but no one dared utter it near her.

“I…” Cullen paused and cleared his throat “I mean… I’m not sure what I can say in the circumstances…”

“At least you didn’t say ‘I warned you’…” Aleska muttered, getting up and walking over to the window. A heavy rain was falling, and the mountain-peaks were lost in clouds and mist. She couldn’t even take consolation in the view. “But you did warn me; and I chose to ignore it!”

Cullen was silent for a moment, looking thoughtfully at the portfolio in his hands.

“You’re being unfair on yourself.” He spoke with no sense of hesitation or uncertainty “As I recall our conversation, you told me that you would judge Lord Trevelyan on his behaviour in the Inquisition. Regardless of my personal feelings about the… man… you took the correct course of action. I’m sure Lady Cassandra would agree with me.”

Aleska’s response was halfway between a laugh and a sob. The tears filled her eyes, but she refused to allow them to fall down her cheeks.

“At least you don’t think I’ve made a complete fool of myself then…” she said, still staring out of the window and trying to keep her words steady. “You must be the only one.”
Cullen walked over to stand beside her, looking at the rain running down the glass.

“Gossips will always think, and say, the worst. I know that from bitter experience. As the Commander of your military and, I hope, your friend; I can say, in all honesty, that my opinion of you remains un tarnished. The fault here lies entirely with Trevelyan.”

Aleska swallowed hard, unable to trust her voice she took Cullen’s hand and squeezed it gratefully. With the meeting over, Aleska leaned against the threshold of the archway to her balcony, her gaze fixed upon the horizon; a sign she’d had enough for a single day. Cullen gave her an understanding nod and turned to leave; pausing at the head of the stairs.

“I’ll make sure you aren’t disturbed.”

She managed to hold on to the last shreds of self-control until she heard the door close behind him, dropping to her knees, leaning against the threshold, her knees brought closer to her chest, her forehead resting on them; she could no longer contain it; with a throat-scraping cry of pain and regret…

###

“Look at him! Going up there, bold as brass!”

“That’s nobles for you; don’t care who gets hurt, so long as they have their sport!”

Anselm did his best to ignore the whispers and sour glances from the patrons of the Herald’s Rest, as he climbed the stairs to the guest rooms.

At the edge of his vision he saw Sera, leaning against the doorway of her room, giving him a venomous stare.

_I’d better check my bed for spiders tonight, or powdered rashvine…_

He stopped at the door of Delilah’s room, knocking twice and then once, before opening the door and walking in.

Delilah sat by the window; fresh from the bath with her chamber-robe hanging seductively open. The silk was a soft ivory colour; highlighting the delicate cinnamon of her skin and the black lustre of her hair as it hung about her shoulders. The Skyhold tavern lacked such luxuries as dressing-tables, so she’d propped a hand mirror against one of the shutters and continued applying rouge to her lips as he closed the door behind him.

“You are a wicked Tiger…” she smiled, still intent on her reflection “You should have told me you had a new playmate; I would have been a little more discreet. She is truly lovely, will she be joining us?”

“Delilah…” Anselm’s voice died in his throat as she got up and walked towards. Beneath the robe she wore only stockings, and high-heeled slippers, the rest of her glorious body barely concealed by the robe. It would be so easy for him to forget about this pursuit of Aleska here and now; he’d be lucky if she ever looked at him again after this and it was only a matter of time before a smirking Commander or sour-faced Seeker ordered him elsewhere.

Why not just leave now; with Delilah? She’d always known how to delight him, teased out his secret pleasures and imaginings; of all his mistresses she was the most agreeable. They could go to Val Royeaux, or Antiva City, and live in delicious abandon; forgetting all about this mad adventure of the Inquisition.
“You look sad; no wonder, in this grim place.” She said, raising her hand to caress his face. “Let me find a way to bring that beautiful smile back…”

He took hold of her wrist firmly, but gently; If he let her touch him, he wouldn’t be able to resist. As she looked at him with questioning surprise, he forced himself to speak the words he’d been repeating in his head.

“Delilah; I never sent you any letters…”

She pouted, frowning, and removed her wrist from his grasp.

“This a joke, yes? Payment for me embarrassing you in the courtyard.”

Anselm shook his head; trying his hardest not to look away from her in shame.

“I wish it was; but I never wrote to you. That letter didn’t come from me.”

Her frown deepened and the set of her mouth hardened. They looked at each other in silence for a moment and then she slapped him, hard.

“Not even a farewell…” she snapped “I mattered so little to you?

Anselm bowed his head; cheek stinging from the force of her blow. Perhaps he’d missed her for a day or two; but Castrotrevalli had been full of pretty, willing, maids to take his mind off things.

“I should have found a way to say goodbye…” he said quietly “It was the least you deserved. I know it doesn’t mean much but, I’m sorry… You deserved better.”

Delilah took a step back, tying her robe closed and folding her arms across her chest. She’d never had any illusions about her arrangement with Anselm. One day he would get bored and that would be it. It had been an entertaining few months, he was certainly more handsome and… adept… than her previous Patrons, but a smart whore didn’t let herself get too sentimental. If she was honest, she hadn’t given him too much thought until the messenger found her in Val Chevin. His casual dismissal of her had been annoying, although at least she’d been allowed the grace of leaving Ostwick without ‘assistance’; but being dragged away from a promising young Chevalier, only to make a fool of herself in this frozen wilderness? – That truly stung!

“This woman; you’ve bedded her?”

“No, not for lack of trying, but she doesn’t trust me…” He gave a harsh, bitter, laugh, “I wonder where she gets that idea from?”

Delilah looked at him, thoughtfully; usually she only saw men on the gallows, or in the debtor’s gaol, looking so forlorn and miserable. She might not get sentimental over her patrons, but that didn’t mean she hadn’t been in love, or that she couldn’t recognize it in others. She turned away with a sigh and took a bottle of wine from the table by the bed, pouring them both a glass.

“Someone has made fools of us… and this new Lady of yours.” She handed him a glass “And I do not like being made to play a game I haven’t chosen.”

Anselm looked down at his broken reflection in the surface of the wine and drained his glass in a single long swallow.

“Did you keep the letter?” He asked.
“I keep all my letters, you never know when they’ll be useful…” she said with a dry smile. Opening her jewel case, she removed a single folded sheet of paper and handed it to him. At first glance it did look like his handwriting, with all the curls and flourishes he was so proud of, but there was no imprint of a seal on the remaining wax and the paper was cheap.

“I didn’t recognise the man who delivered it.” She continued. “From Ansberg, I think; he had that quack-quack-quack way of speaking they all have. He told me to go Jader and wait for my escort; that I would know him when I saw him. Of course, I wasn’t surprised it was Ser Declan…”

“What…?” Anselm looked up from his scrutiny of the letter, he’d barely been listening to what she was saying. “What did you just say?”

“I said I wasn’t surprised when Ser Declan arrived at the inn.” She said, with a hint of impatience at his lack of attention. “Who else would you send?”

Anselm felt something dark and angry boiling in his gut and slowly rising upwards.

“Declan knew you would be there? He said…” He thrust the letter back into Delilah’s hands “Give this to Lady Leliana; tell her what you told me!”

“What… what are you going to do?” Delilah asked, alarmed, by the sudden change in his expression. He smiled, and something about that smile terrified her.

“I’m going to have a little word with Dec; and he’s going to give me some answers…”

###

Declan watched the men training in the lower courtyard; going through a new drill as the Knight Sergeant barked orders at them. He was to report to Ser Rylen in the morning, to sign the papers that would officially make him the newest Junior-Knight-Lieutenant in the Inquisition’s ranks. Even a junior commission must have cost his father a pretty sum of money, one the family could barely afford, but this was meant to be a new start for him; and a chance for the MacHugh family to restore their name and repair the damage done by grandfather’s mistakes. Some new start! He’d just messed everything up, like he’d always did. It wasn’t fair; he’d just been trying to keep up with the others, trying not to look like the poor boy hanging onto Anselm’s coat-tails. Maybe he should have told Delilah the truth in Jader; but then she’d never have come, and the Baron would know…

It still did nothing to shake the knowledge he’d sold out his best friend…

The punch took him by complete surprise; driving into his side and sending him staggering back against the wall, gasping for breath and feeling like he was going to throw up.

“What… what…” Declan choked out as Anselm loomed over him; a dangerous fire in his eyes.

“One chance, Dec…” Anselm growled, fists balled so tight his knuckles showed white “Was it my father?”

Declan felt a cold sweat prickling his back. He looked helplessly at Anselm, trying to find the words to explain it wasn’t his fault; there was nothing he could do.

That one look told Anselm everything he needed to know, and he leaped at his friend with a howl of fury. He heard something crack as his forehead impacted the bridge of Declan’s nose, and felt the other man’s fist smacking against the side of his head. Dec was shorter and wirier than Anselm, but still quick and agile, and he twisted sharply as Anselm tried to hook his leg; taking
both men to the ground in an ugly, grappling, brawl. Declan’s knee hit him hard in the chest, just missing his diaphragm. It loosened the smaller man’s grip enough for Anselm to wrap his legs around his waist and roll Declan onto his back; pinning his chest and arms, allowing Anselm – now lost to all sense of reason – to rain down blows…

He let out a cry of frustrated rage as powerful arms hauled him up and off his opponent; struggling to break free and launch back into the fight as he heard Joe bellowing in his ear, loud enough to hurt.

“Stop! Bloody stop!!” Jonas shouted “You’ll bloody kill each other…”

Held firmly in his cousin’s unflinching grip, Anselm began to regain awareness of his surroundings; Bull had a similar hold on Declan, still yelling and trying to free himself, while Cuddles stood to one side – tense and barking in agitation. All of Skyhold must have been in and around the Upper Court, witnessing the fight. As his gaze travelled up the steps to the Great Hall, he caught sight of Sophia, white with shock, and – at the top of the steps – Aleska staring down at them with a cold, angry, expression. Cullen stood behind her, arms folded, with a look of quiet satisfaction on his face.
Chapter Summary

Aleska struggles to come to terms with the events of the past few days, not wanting to see or speak to anyone, Dorian took it upon himself to be the voice of reason. Only to have to break up a fight between Anselm and Ser MacHugh. A chess match with Cullen uncovered that it was more than mere books and maps which caught the Commander's fancy; a plan forms within Aleska's mind, whether the Commander wants it or not.

1 Hour Earlier…

Lying on her bed, Aleska took no comfort in the Orlesian silk sheets that had been her solace for the last couple of days. Her hair a tangled mess, her pillows scattered; tear stains upon the pillow covers as clear as the blue skies this fateful day.

_He isn’t going to let up_, Aleska observed Dorian ruffling through her closet, muttering something to himself. Another waist coat made it to the floor, followed by a pair of breeches and some boots. _He is clearly looking for something._ A deep breath drew into her lungs, he’d seem to find it.

“Ah,” Dorian placed the outfit upon her bed. “Now why haven’t I seen this one before? It would suit you rather well. Providing you don’t mind showing a bit of exposed skin.”

“You know you’re picking all that up,” Aleska slumped back down between her pillows, her arms still folded. “I told you, I am not leaving this room until I am ready. I am sure what ever trouble arises, my advisers are more than capable of handling it. As for the rest, it can jump down to the Abyss for all I care.”

Aleska’s eyes fixated to the ceiling, a single tear ran down from the corner of her eye, joining its counterparts upon her pillow. Dorian yanked open the curtains on the largest window, the rings making a metallic clattering and the sudden rush of sunlight into the gloomy bedchamber hurt Aleska’s eyes. With a miserable groan, she rolled to one side and covered her face.

“So you’re going to sit in here,” Dorian huffed, as he opened all the curtains. “All miserable and mopey because a noble boy broke your heart? I thought you had more common sense than that, now I am going to arrange a bath for you; if you’re not out of this bed by the time I return, I will be quite upset with you.”

_Well, I know he isn’t going to let up. I suppose I could wrangle Cullen into some kind of alibi for a chess match?_ Aleska threw the covers off her, her feet touched solid ground for the first time in couple of days. She’d almost forgotten how warm the fibres of her rug felt on foot. Catching her reflection within the vanity mirror, Aleska could hardly believe what she’d seen.

Her hair remained a tangled mess, her eyes and nose were pink from her crying; even her cheeks were swollen. _Why have I allowed this to happen_, Aleska ran her fingers along her cheek, pushing the skin up and down. The crying had made her nose stuffy and runny at the same time, it had been
a mission to keep the mucus at bay.

“Ah,” Dorian entered again, four women accompanied him. “Now isn’t that better. The ladies will draw you a bath and hopefully we can get you back to your old self.”

Aleska nodded, the feeling of Dorian’s arm around her shoulders pulling her into a tight hug made her smile for the first time in a while. She watched as the servants stripped the bed, down to the bare mattress. Placing new covers upon her bed, no one would have guessed that she’d spent a couple of days within it refusing to get out.

“Your bath is ready my lady, Inquisitor.” A servant appeared, wiping her wet hands upon the apron around her waist.

“Did you add the oils I gave you?” Dorian gave her a questioning look.

“Yes, Lord Pavus.” The servant nodded, leading Aleska towards the bathroom. “Come, my lady, before the waters cool down.”

Within the next few minutes, Aleska stood before a mirror, her hair neatly brushed. One of the elven servants pinned her braid along her side, allowing the rest of it to fall along her shoulders. With ever moment her corset tightened, not nearly as troublesome as the first time she wore one. The lower half of her abdomen left exposed. The black breeches complimented her figure.

Various brushes glided along her face, an attempt to hide the fact she’d been crying, black kohl applied to her eyes and red lip paint to her lips. Had it not been for her elven ears, one would assume she was a pretty noble woman.

“Aren’t you a vision?” Dorian looked up from the book resting upon his lap. “Now doesn’t that feel better, you smell like fresh summer jasmine which is a vast improvement; you were beginning to resemble a wilting lettuce!”

“Gee,” Aleska rolled her eyes, taking a bite of the toast the servants left. “Thanks.”

Before she could swallow her mouthful of toast, a soldier burst through the doors, running towards her; he went upon bended knee, lowering his head in respect. Aleska listened to his heart rate, it threatened to burst from his chest at any moment, his panting meant he ran harder than any training Cullen could have given him.

“Your Worship,” the scout panted. “You’re needed in the court yard, Lord Trevelyan and Ser MacHugh, there is blood everywhere.”

“What is going on?” Aleska demanded, placing her breakfast down on her table.

“They… the Commander… they were fighting in the courtyard, screaming. Lord Trevelyan pinned him down—”

Before he had a moment to finish, Aleska rushed down the stairs, from listening to Cullen she knew that soldiers squabbled; but it rarely resulted in full blown fighting. When it did, it would take a force of strength to rip them apart. Please tell me Joe was there, or even Bull. Creators, why today of all days!

***

Standing atop the stairs, Aleska observed the scene before her, Ser MacHugh had blood running down his face, from his nose to the very deep gash upon his cheek. Anselm had been panting,
through his shirt she could see the blood running his arm, and the fresh stains on Jonas’ pauldron. *He must have been cut when Jonas ripped them apart.* Aleska saw Bull ready to intervene should they get stuck into one another again.

“I will deal with this matter personally,” Aleska announced, keeping her composure calm. “Perhaps you can all return to your duties? Commander, see that these gentleman are escorted to my office and then I would like a private word with you.”

“By your order, Inquisitor,” Cullen lowered his head, signalling both men to follow him with a pointed finger. “Would you like me to remain with you to investigate this further?”

“That won’t be required Commander,” Aleska smiled, appreciative of the gesture. “Perhaps later, we can fully discuss those troop movements you mentioned yesterday.”

Aleska walked down the stairs, each look that the patrons had were one of sympathy, knowing the ache she’d been forced to handle. Walking towards the med bay, Aleska knew she’d require some supplies in order to have both men cleaned up.

Within the next half an hour, Aleska had re-entered her quarters, instructing the nurses to leave the supplies upon her desk. With a light curtsy, the nurse left her to her business. It had been clear from the moment she’d entered the room they had been conspiring. *To make a cover story no doubt.* They hadn’t even noticed her walk in, using all the force she could muster, she slammed the door. It even rattled the windows.

“My apologies to break up your little tea party,” Aleska placed a chair beside her desk. “Ser MacHugh, you’re first.”

“It isn’t required, my Lady,” Declan lowered his head.

“Was I asking a question?” Aleska soaked the cloth in the warm waters. “I don’t believe I was; disobeying your commanding officer in your position is very unwise.”

With a clenched jaw, Declan sat before her, her fingers beneath his chin to examine his wounds. Running the warm cloth over the wounds, a sharp hiss escaped his gritted teeth. Aleska attempted to be as gentle as possible, noticing that his wounds only looked severe. Taking a small glass jar from the crate, Aleska opened the lid, taking a whiff of the contents within. The strong scent of mint and eucalyptus filled her senses.

“Put a dab of this in your nose, the nurse swears it will help the cuts within.”

Aleska rose, wiping her hands clean of the blood, taking a long needle from the pouch, Aleska ran it along the candle upon her desk; wiping the blackened soot off the tip. Threading the needle, Aleska used her teeth to sever the stitch from the roll, knotting the ends. Walking towards Anselm with a wet cloth, her hand touched the sleeve of his shirt only to rip it away his broad shoulder.

Without uttering a single word, he sat down on the couch, enduring every moment of searing pain the salt water gave him. With the needle between Aleska’s teeth, it freed her hand to ensure there were no other cuts.

“Your ladyship is too kind,” Declan finally spoke. “Surely nurses could have done this for us?”

“I don’t want blood on my carpets,” Aleska took the needle. “You’re not the one who has to deal with Josephine’s scowl if she saw that. You’ll need a strap of leather, this will not be pleasant.”

Anselm glanced at her, since the moment with Delilah, this had been the first time she’d spoken to
her, a thousand feelings ran through him; some stronger than others. With a simple shake of his head, it was his turn to hiss through gritted teeth as the tip of the needle pierced his skin.

“Stupidity hurts doesn’t it?” Aleska cleaned the blood seeping out as she went. “It should always serve as a reminder to not do the very thing which got us within this mess.”

“Your Worship is both kind and wise,” Declan placed the warm cloth to his sore cheek.

“Nor do I need you kissing my boots Ser MacHugh,” Aleska knew it was an obvious attempt at flattery. “I’ve spoken with Commander Cullen, he thinks I should cut my losses now and send you both packing to Ostwick with letters of dishonourable discharge to your father and uncle.”

“Of course he—” Anselm’s sentence was stopped by the feeling of Aleska’s hand upon his jawline, forcing his head in its original position as to get the most light.

“However,” Aleska’s tone raised slightly. “I am going to give you both one opportunity to tell me the truth, if you are honest with me. I can reduce that to perhaps a week of cleaning the equipment. Or patrol duty in the Hinterlands.”

Aleska snipped the edges of the thread, placing a bandage along Anselm’s bicep. Silence filled the room, both men looked at one another, then at her. Out of the corner of her eye, Aleska noted Declan shaking his head lightly, a silent plea to keep their secret.

“I had been informed that Declan had,” Anselm began, looking down at her tying the bandage around his arm. “Made advances on Sophia, something inside of me snapped and I lost control. Even Joe will tell you I am very protective of Sophia, I didn’t want to see her hurt.”

Aleska nodded, rising from her seat, the tip of her tongue tucked between her teeth and lip. *Liar!* Almost as if rehearsed, a nurse entered her chambers to remove the bloody rags and water bowls. With each passing moment, Aleska’s chest tightened. Being around him once more had been harder than she’d thought.

“Ser MacHugh,” Aleska leaned back within her seat. “Is this true, did you pursue the Lady Sophia knowing that Lord Trevelyan would react in such a way?”

“Y-y-yes,” Declan stammered, his heart pounding. “I’ve been infatuated with her since the day we met. I was hoping that, once I was an officer of the Inquisition; she might see me as a man and not a boy any longer.”

Aleska nodded, unfolding the letters of discharge, her quill resting within the inkwell. “So, as Lord Trevelyan will inform you; I hate being lied to and I’m very good at telling when someone isn’t being honest. As punishment for both your actions in the court yard and lying to the Inquisitor…”

“Wait—” Declan kneeled before her, his hand on her wrist to prevent her from signing her name. “Please, I beg you for mercy.”

“Why should I give it?” Aleska removed his hand. “I gave you both an opportunity to tell me the truth and you squandered it, much like rich little noble boys do with anything they fancy. Luckily for you both, these letters are for you new patrol assignments; the Hinterlands for Ser MacHugh and the valley patrol for Lord Trevelyan. Should you continue this dishonesty, it will be a week cleaning the armoury and if you persist. I’m sure the horses stables need to be mucked out.”

Aleska signed both pieces of paper, handing them to each man. With a wave of her wrist she dismissed them both, Declan wasted no time in leaving her; but Anselm lingered around. Closing
the door behind Declan, he rested his forehead against the cool wood, composing himself.

“Are you staying to tell me the real reason you beat a man you call a friend?” Aleska cracked the seal on one of Cullen’s reports. Scanning the document, she used any excuse to not look up.

“I—” Anselm began, watching her intently, with each moment that passed; he sensed the wall of ice growing larger between them. He knew he had to fix this before she shut him out entirely. “I’ve missed you, speaking with you; hearing you laugh, seeing your smile.”

“Lord Trevelyan,” Aleska shook her head, signing her name to another document. “I fail to see the relevance of this conversation. So perhaps could you get to the point of it? Sooner rather than later, I have meetings to attend to.”

“Aleska please—” Ansel took a step towards her. “Shout at me, scream, let it all out. I deserve nothing less; I just want some reaction other than this—this cold and desolate place you’ve deemed fit to put me.”

Aleska placed her reports neatly upon her desk, inhaling deeply to regain her composure. Standing up, she tucked her chair in behind her desk. “Does it hurt? Me not screaming at you like you rightly deserve, because I am not going to give you what you want. Not after what you did; the fact I am allowing you to even stay here longer than required is the most you’ll get out of me from now on. You should have thought of that, before inviting your special *guest* to greet you when we came back. After I gave you the opportunity, after I put all my doubts about you aside, ignored sound advice about this.”

Aleska’s hand curved around the neck of a vase, with a hard swing of her arm she threw it against the wall behind him, the vase shattered into what seemed to be a thousand pieces at his feet; Aleska wondered around the room, her hand grabbing another vase and hurling it towards him; his reflexes proved useful in dodging it.

“Okay—okay,” Anselm placed his hands before him. “Can we not throw any more precious vases? Josephine will foam at the mouth if she walked in on this.”

“My lady,” a soldier bowed. “The Red Templar Shadow is ready for you? Commander Cullen asks if you’re certain about this, he urged me to warn you one last tim—”

“I am positive,” Aleska took the coat off her shoulders. “Our soldiers need to learn how to fight one, we both know I am the only one capable of avoiding their speed attacks.”

Aleska nodded towards the soldier, tying her hair up in a messy pony tail and fastening the gauntlet onto her arm. Watching Anselm’s reaction within the reflection of her vanity.

“You’re going to do what?!?” Anselm found his own voice raised. “Do you know how dangerous those things are?! One cut with their Lyrium blades and you can become infected! Are you out of your mind? I refuse to allow it!”

“You’re in no position to refuse!” Aleska tightened the belt around her waist. “You’re not my father, nor my uncle, nor my paramour; or in any position to forbid me to do anything. Commander Cullen will be there to assess the danger, should he feel the need to, he will step in and aid me.”

“I know you are angry, but rather than endangering yourself, haul my arse into the ring and kick it instead!” Anselm shouted.

“We both know I can kick your arse from here to the Hinterlands without a fuss! Why are you so mad anyway? I am not asking you to watch!”
“I am mad because—” the words caught in Anselm’s throat, a simple eight letters, three words; one he hadn’t said to a single woman before. “I am mad because I love you!”

“You—” Aleska turned around, the blood rushed from her face as she felt weak in the knees. “You don’t mean that. You’re just saying it because you want to have the last word, have the upper hand.”

“No,” Anselm stepped towards her, not caring if she took one of those blades and embedded it within his abdomen. “I love you and it is because I love you that I refuse to allow you to be put in any danger.”

“You don’t love me!” Aleska fired back. “Perhaps I was good for your ego, to make you feel better about your sad miserable life in Ostwick, but you don’t destroy the people you love!”

Only when the last word had been spoken, had she realized what she’d said to him without uttering a single word. Anselm left her quarters. Shit, Aleska let out a slow breath. I need to find Joe, ensure he doesn’t go and do anything stupid.

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The blood dripped out of the corner of Aleska’s mouth, she’d been lucky the Shadow had only cut the leather of her gauntlet and not any of her exposed flesh, her hands gripped the daggers tightly; with a glance, she noted Cullen pacing around the arena, his sword hand twitching with every movement the Shadow made. *He is teasing you Cullen,* Aleska observed, even the Shadow panted as the crowds fell silent. *This is it!*

The Shadow lunged for Aleska, the Red Lyrium blades emerging from his wrists aimed for her abdomen and her heart. Her reflexes only saved her by millisecond. She successfully dodged the Shadow’s lunge, leaving its weakness for her to exploit.

With a flick of her wrist, the throwing knife embedded into the back of its leg, sending it down on its knee with a shriek of pain. It turned to look at her, the red shot eyes and irises burned with the same fire that surrounded her at Haven. A shiver travelled through her spine, watching Cullen and three other soldiers incapacitate it.

“What have we learned?” Aleska accepted the wet towel, wiping the blood from her lips.

“They move quickly?” One recruit spoke up, hoping his answer was the correct one.

Aleska looked at Cullen, his arms folded and his head shaking lightly. “Not entirely wrong, but then, so does every rogue in Thedas.” Kneeling down, Aleska’s hand ran along the red Lyrium shard at her feet. “They will only use two means of attack, one being the smoke cloud and the second to carve your intestines out with this. A rogue will always attack from your flank, where a warrior is most vulnerable.”

Holding up the shard, the Lyrium caught the rays of sunshine, casting a red glow upon her face. Tossing it to the first recruit, her hand burned where the Lyrium touched. *Varric warned me not to handle it without gloves.* Aleska examined her arms, pink patches appeared on her exposed skin, undoubtedly where bruises would form in the morning.

The soldiers mumbled among themselves as Cullen issued their dismissal, Aleska removed her gauntlet, ensuring the Shadow hadn’t touched her. Once the adrenaline subsided, she could feel her muscles aching. Examining her cut lip, she was thankful it wouldn’t scar. *The face bleeds more than we know,* the words rang through her mind as if Healer Ghianna were standing before her.
“Thank you for your assistance,” Cullen observed her bruised patches. “Are you certain you’re all right? I saw it took a few good hits.”

Aleska smiled softly, in the distance she saw Anselm huffing towards the main gate to prepare for his punishment; she caught him staring at her throughout the training session. The Rivaini woman sat on a bench outside the Herald’s Rest laughing at one of Varric’s jests, a thick fur stole wrapped around her to ward off the late autumn chill.

_Doubtless one of Trevelyan’s gifts; payment for services rendered_, Aleska surmised, then realised she’d not answered Cullen’s question.

“Nothing I can’t handle,” Aleska placed her belt on the weapons table, listening to the wood rattle under the weight. “It was flank right? I didn’t misuse military lingo did I? I might as well go bury myself now if that was the case.”

A rich chuckle left Cullen’s lips, his hand rubbing the back of his neck. “Yes, it was correct. If you have a moment—” the words caught in Cullen’s throat. “Perhaps if you’re not occupied elsewhere… I would be grateful if you’d join me for a chess match. Dorian has been busy of late and I feel my game is getting rusty.”

Aleska ran her fingers through her now loosened hair, a playful gesture of poking Cullen in the sternum ensued. “Prepare the board Commander, I’ll bring the wine.” Her tone more flirtatious than she intended as she stepped closer to him, her teeth capturing her lower lip.

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The wine bottle lay on its side, the last of its contents dripping onto Cullen’s desk, both he and Aleska sat before a chessboard. An inevitable stalemate, with only three pawns, their King and her Queen remaining. Neither seemed assured of their victory. Aleska ran her finger along the rim of her glass, touching the tip of her finger to her parted lip before her tongue slowly licked the wine residue off. The tip of her finger ran from her inner lip, stopping at the tip.

“This is good wine,” her voice dropped to a seductive purr.

“I know what you’re doing,” Cullen smirked, his eyes fixated on the chessboard. “Needless to say, this match belongs to me. Perhaps you should work on your strategy.”

Aleska finished the contents of her wine, a bid to prevent herself from laughing. Her elbow resting against the arm rest, the side of her head cradled against it. Watching hopelessly as Cullen captured her Queen, checkmating her King.

“All right, so I resorted to feminine charms to distract you,” Aleska crumpled the piece of paper a scout handed her earlier, tossing it against his forehead and provoking an amused scowl in response. “Can you blame me, I wasn’t on top of my game.”

“I dread to think if you were,” Cullen leaned back, his arm slumped behind him, his legs spread apart. “This afternoon would have ended before it began.”

Aleska saw the door swinging open, Sophia walking in with her nose buried in a book.

“Commander, I wanted to thank you—”

There was only the faintest glimmer of embarrassment as she realised the Commander wasn’t alone, and the hint of a blush. Aleska had been avoiding the Trevelyan siblings since she’d returned; unfairly, perhaps, but the thought of being even indirectly reminded of Anselm was unwelcome. She turned back to Cullen, now rising to greet his visitor, and couldn’t avoid noticing
the touch of colour in his own cheeks and the slightly awkward smile.

Getting up, Aleska tucked her chair back into position, allowing her a better opportunity to see Sophia’s reaction. She was wearing her hair in a new style; two long braids looped back and resting in a loose coil at the nape of her neck. It was simple and practical, yet elegant; emphasising the graceful curve of her neck.

*I must learn how to do that.*

As if in response to Cullen’s smile of welcome Sophia unconsciously tucked a stray curl back into place behind her ear. Her own smile held its own hint of awkwardness.

“Please forgive me Inquisitor,” She said, with an apologetic smile. “I was hoping to return this book to the Commander, had I known he was busy; I would have scheduled another appointment.”

“No need,” Aleska leaned against his desk, one leg gently folded over the other. “We weren’t doing anything important, were we Commander?”

“No,” Cullen rose, clearing his throat. “Not that I—”

Sophia returned the book to its rightful place upon the shelf, her finger gliding across the others until she stopped at a slim volume bound in blue cloth.

“Oh; you have Faustian’s ‘Songs of the Avvar’…” she took the book off the shelf with a hopeful look “Might I borrow this? Marcus keep telling me to read it if I want to really understand his letters.”

“Of… of course…” Cullen said, rubbing the back of his neck nervously as his gaze flickered between the two women. “Please, keep it as long as you need.”

Aleska observed them both, she knew the signs, she saw them in Kayden when he met Adriana. Whether they wanted to admit it or not was another question; did they themselves even realize it? As Sophia bid them both farewell, Aleska waited till the sound of her shoes could no longer be heard.

“You like her, don’t you?” Aleska said casually, straightening the wine bottle. “Why didn’t I see it before? Probably because I don’t spend enough time around you both in a room.”

“What? That’s prepost… I mean…” Cullen stuttered, his cheeks reddening further. “I respect Lady Sophia as a colleague… nothing more!”

Aleska shook her head, picking up the wine bottle and cradling it within her hand.

“And when did you last lend Cassandra or Josephine one of your books?” She gave a significant glance in the direction of the two overstuffed bookcases beside the Commander’s desk. Every supply wagon arriving at Skyhold was guaranteed to contain one or more volumes Cullen had ordered from the booksellers of Highever or Jader, and he guarded his collection as jealously as his sword.

“Lady Sophia and I share certain interests…” Cullen said ingenuously, adjusting one of his wristguards “It would have been impolite to refuse…”

“As your friend, may I say something?” Aleska waited for the subtle nod to come from Cullen. “It’s not too difficult to recognize if a man and woman are interested in each other; I could almost hear your pulse racing when she entered. It doesn’t do that when I come into the room.”
“How do you…?” Cullen cleared his throat, fidgeting with the crumpled message she’d thrown at him anyway. “It’s no secret I admire your courage and determination…”

“Yes, but we’re not talking about admiration…” Aleska looked down for a moment. “And the heart never lies. Lady Sophia is an educated woman, devout, compassionate…”

Cullen shook his head emphatically.

“It would be entirely inappropriate. Even if I thought there was a chance, she…” he leaned his hands on the desk, sighing heavily. “You must be aware she lost someone very close, just over a year ago?”

Aleska nodded as the Commander continued.

“I lost someone… someone very dear to me… many years ago. I would not have welcomed…” He paused, then straightened up; the shift in his expression telling Aleska he’d retreated behind his armour once again. “Thank you for your concern, but I value Lady Sophia’s friendship and would rather not risk that for some foolish infatuation on my part.”

She gave Cullen a vaguely disbelieving look; his statement carried as much conviction as the tale Anselm and Ser MacHugh had spun earlier, but the Commander kept his emotions, and his demons, close to his chest.

“Of course, but if you ever do need to talk about it…”

“Thank you, although I doubt that will be necessary…”

Aleska nodded, walking over to the chessboard, and began putting the pieces in their box as Cullen uncrumpled and read the message he’d been fidgeting with. One of the Grand Cleric and fallen off the table and rolled near the door. As she picked it up and dusted it off, she heard Cullen give an angry snort. Looking over she could see his face hardening; the familiar crease lines of irritation furrowing his forehead.

“What is it?” Aleska asked, placing the chessboard in the bookshelf.

“Did you read this?” Cullen handed her the note.

“I stopped reading after I saw his name,” Aleska huffed. “I assumed it was Charter telling me he arrived for his punishment.”

Cullen shook his head and Aleska looked down at the note; reading once, then a second and third time as she paced the floor with increasing agitation. One sentence played itself over and over in her head.

*Lord Anselm was last seen on the Kings Road, heading towards Crestwood, in the company of Lord Jonas following him and his Mabari.*

Aleska ripped the note to shreds, throwing the pieces in the wastebasket. She’d finally done it, she’d sent him packing to Ostwick; but why wasn’t she happy? A knot formed within her stomach, as if a ball of lead found itself there and it weighed her down.

*Shit! This is not how I wanted it to end!*
Regrets

Chapter Summary

Anselm takes out his frustrations on the wildlife of Crestwood and has an unexpected encounter. Meanwhile, back at Skyhold, Sister Leliana sets to work uncovering the truth behind the arrival of Anaelm’s former mistress and Lady Sophia makes a discovery about the Commander.

The wyvern-whelp spread its crest and hissed, jaws gaping. Its poison sacs weren’t fully developed yet, but it’s dagger-sharp teeth and claws could tear a man’s flesh to the bone. At six feet or more in length it was still a deadly opponent, despite being less than a few months old. Anselm shifted his hold on the long knives, carefully watching the bunching and flexing of muscles beneath its scales, waiting for the moment it would leap. He motioned Jonas and Dorian to stay back. This one was his!

As the beast jumped, Anselm dropped and rolled; raising his blades to slice it open from throat to tail. In that same moment an arrow struck the whelp in its side, sending it squealing and hissing on its back among the rocks. Before the three men could react, another arrow hit square through its exposed throat, pinning it to the ground. It convulsed briefly, blood spurting from its mouth, then lay still. A tall, lean, Elf strolled casually into the grotto; slinging his bow across his shoulder.

“Nasty bastards, aren’t they?” The Elf said, with a broad Dalish lilt, walking past a scowling and bewildered Anselm to retrieve his arrows. “You can thank me later!”

“Thank you?” Anselm growled, tense and ready for a fight. It was a brave, or foolish, man who got between him and a kill and – weapons sheathed or not – a stranger in the hills of Crestwood was still a potential threat. “I had the damned thing!”

“Oh, really?” The Elf said lightly, pulling the arrow out of the wyvern-whelps throat. The shaft had broken when it struck the ground but the head was still intact, and he tucked it into his belt-pouch “Because from where I was standing it looked like it was about to bite that pretty face clean off your skull. I’ll not repeat that mistake!”

He stood, wiping the blood from his hands. It was difficult for humans to tell the age of an Elf but he appeared young, taller and broader in the shoulders than average, with the dark, curving lines of vallaslin highlighting his high cheekbones and wide forehead. In addition to the bow, he carried two long knives sheathed in his belt and a greatsword with an unusual curved grip was strapped to his back. He looked at the three men with an amused, questioning, look in his piercing blue eyes.

“Did Charter send you?” Dorian asked as Jonas lowered his own greatsword a fraction. The Mage kept his stance and tone carefully neutral. He knew it was only a matter of time before Leliana’s chief agent at Crestwood got their scent. It had been no surprise when Aleska had asked him to head out in pursuit of Jonas and Anselm. She might be unwilling to admit it to herself, but she wasn’t ready to let go of the handsome Marcher just yet. It had been a relief to discover that Anselm wasn’t planning to go home in a huff, just to kill a few things – preferably as lethal as possible – in order to work off some tension. It was a mentality Dorian understood all too well.

The Elf chuckled.
“Now I have no idea who that is. I was just passing by and thought to pay my respects when I heard a spot of a commotion…” he nodded in the direction of the two halla-statues still standing a proud guard over the warm spring. “This used to be a shrine of the Halla-Mother, where the Does would come to give birth in season. Now it’s full of wyvern-shite and dead men’s bones…”

“So, what’s a lone Dalish doing out here; or can we expect company?” Anselm asked, frowning in anger and frustration. The elf glanced in the direction of the blades still poised and ready in his hands.

“Why don’t you put those lads away and we can talk like civilised people?”

Cuddles took a step forward and sniffed at the air. There was something oddly familiar about the stranger’s scent and, while he seemed ready for trouble, didn’t appear inclined to start anything. He barked softly and butted Jonas’ leg with his forehead.

“Put ‘em away, Ansie.” He said, sheathing his sword and turning to the Elf. “We ain’t lookin’ for a fight; just got questions.”

“That’s a smart hound you got there.” The Elf gave Jonas a friendly wink, “I’m guessing it’s one of the Mabari I’ve heard so much about; but you don’t sound Fereldan.”

“It’s a long story.” Dorian observed, as Anselm thrust his knives back into their sheaths with a sour grunt. The Mage rolled his eyes slightly; Anselm would be in a bad mood about this all afternoon. “As, I imagine, is yours. Perhaps we should start with introductions? I’m Dorian of House Pavus; formerly of Minrathous and currently serving the Inquisition. I’m one of the good Vints.”

The elf cocked an eyebrow.

“Knew there had to be one or two hiding somewhere; and, if you’re with the Inquisition, maybe the Creators have finally stopped pissing on me. Name’s Kayden, of Clan Lavellan, currently trying to find this Skyhold place the world and its aunt is on about.”

The three men exchanged surprised glances.

“Clan Lavellan?” Anselm exclaimed. “You must be kin to Aleska then”

The young Elf folded his arms across his chest, giving Anselm a careful look.

“She’s my little sister, and this story is getting longer all the time. How does some random fella who hasn’t had the courtesy to introduce himself happen to be calling her by name?”

“This is Lord Anselm Trevelyan,” Dorian interjected, eager to establish cordial relations before Anselm’s simmering temper boiled over again “and his cousin, Lord Jonas. We’re friends of your sister; currently on a little… erm… hunting trip.”

“Trevelyan eh? I am in distinguished company! If I thought I’d known I’d be rubbing shoulders with royalty I’d have worn my best armour.” His gaze flickered from one to the other, thoughtful and assessing. “And if it’s hunting you’re after, then I’ve got a fresh quarry for you; might even put a smile on this one’s face!”

“What do you mean?” Anselm asked sharply, knowing he was being an ass but not particularly caring. Losing his kill still rankled and being reminded of Aleska right now wasn’t helping either. He could see Jonas and Dorian both glaring at him, but Kayden’s air of cautious amusement seemed unchanged. He crouched down and started rummaging in his pack.
“I spotted some lads further back in the hills sniffing round some caves; a couple of them had a go at me. Thought they were Templars at first, but there’s something off about them. I was off to warn the folks down at the castle. Is that the sort of thing that might interest you fine lords of the Inquisition?”

He pulled out an arm-greave and showed it to them. The sword-and-flames sigil of the Templar Order was still partly visible under the red, crystalline growths sprouting from the tarnished metal.

###

Leliana looked up from the notes she was studying as Baron Plucky’s caw alerted her to someone coming up the stairs.

“I prefer your other pets.” Sophia said, drawing her shawl a little closer as she carefully skirted round the raven’s cage “How are Schmooples II and Boulette doing?”

Leliana smiled quietly to herself; Sophia had never been fond of birds.

“Fat and happy; Gardner writes to me regularly with updates.” She set down her pen and sat back. “Were you able to find something?”

Sophia handed her a letter from under her shawl. The paper was heavy and high quality; slightly worn and tattered as if re-read many times. The wax of the seal had long since chipped away, leaving only a reddish-brown stain. Leliana laid it down on her desk and opened it. The first opening line immediately caught her eye…

My dearest Chaffinch.

I do not know if I can find the words to properly express my sorrow at your cruel loss, or my anger at the cowards who inflicted it…

“Are you sure you wish me to use this?” She asked, carefully folding the letter closed. “I wasn’t expecting something so… personal.”

Sophia sighed softly to herself. This wasn’t something she enjoyed doing, but there was little choice if this mess with Anselm’s old mistress was to be resolved quickly.

“It’s the only letter of his I have with me; unquestionably in his hand, and old enough so there could be no hint of subterfuge.”

Leliana nodded understandingly, opening her strongbox and putting the letter inside.

“I’ll take care of it…” she tucked the key safely back inside her habit, “I feel we’ve hardly spoken since arriving at Skyhold. Are you well?”

“I’m settling in comfortably; Mother sent some of my things from home, which makes life easier,” Sophia said, accepting the seat Leliana offered, “and Olivia has been pestering me to visit her and Alistair in Denerim; although Maker only knows when I’ll find the time to do that…”

“That’s not what I meant…” Leliana replied gently; Sophia smiled in response.

“I’ve not needed the valerian tea in almost a month, and my dreams are less troubled…” she glanced out of the window; a light flurry of snow was falling, heralding the approach of Firstfall and the Feast of Satinalia. “It’s strange; if it wasn’t for the attack, and Guenther’s death, I would have been at the Temple with Justinia. Sometimes it’s hard to see the Maker’s Hand at work…”
“And yet you still do…” Leliana almost envied her friend’s ability to retain her faith despite everything that had happened. Sophia reached across the desk and took the Spymistress’s hand.

“Faith only becomes real when it has passed through fire; isn’t that what Justinia used to say? You endured the Blight, you can endure this…”

The two women sat and talked as the snow continued to fall, prematurely darkening the afternoon. As the clock chimed three, a scout knocked on the door with fresh despatches and Sophia rose to her feet

“I must go, there’s an errand I have to run for Aleska.”

“Not more Satinalia preparations?” Leliana asked with a wry smile as she took the despatch pouch and dismissed the messenger. Sophia laughed and shook her head.

“No, fortunately; although this might prove more of a challenge than the table-settings for the Feast of Fools.”

“And now I’m intrigued…” Leliana laughed in response. Sophia and Olivia were the only two people left she could trust enough to relax around and be something of herself again, “I’ll want details later…”

###

“What is this?” Cullen asked, staring at the bowl on his desk like it was a live viper.

“Lamb and Pea stew” Sophia said, brushing some flakes of snow from her cloak and hanging it on the hook behind the door.

“I can see that! I mean, why is it here… and what are you doing?” He asked as she removed a stack of books from the armchair and sat down.

“You’ve skipped dinner three days in a row; Aleska asked me to make sure you had a proper meal…” she replied, tucking her feet under her and picking up a book. “You can’t live off coffee and a bacon sandwich.”

Cullen stared at her in a mixture of frustration and disbelief.

“I appreciate the gesture, Lady Sophia, but I’m extremely…”

“You’re not too busy to spare ten minutes to eat something.” She interrupted, turning a couple of pages and laughing quietly. “The Pirate Queen of Llomerryn? I don’t think I’ve read this one; the Randy Dowager review was quite…”

The Commander strode over and took the book from her, blushing furiously.

“Maker’s Breath! I’m not some child to be told when it’s dinnertime!”

Sophia looked up at him with an unflinching gaze.

“Then stop behaving like one and eat your stew. Mistress Roviere said it was your favourite and I’m not going to see it go to waste.”

“You asked the cook…?” Cullen glared at her, but she held his stare with no sign of backing down; the silence between them icy, until it was broken by a loud growl from his abdominal region. Sophia’s chin trembled for a moment then she burst out laughing.
The Commander huffed in defeat, stomping back to his desk and sitting down. The stew did look, and smell, delicious; the fat carefully trimmed off the lamb, just the way he liked it, and garnished with a sprig of fresh mint. He picked up the spoon and began to eat; throwing the odd defiant look at Sophia, trying to hide her giggles behind another book.

A few minutes later he put his spoon down with a deliberate thump and tilted the bowl towards her so she could see it was empty.

“Satisfied?”

“You do make it sound like I was asking you to do something painful or unpleasant,” she said, shaking her head with a smile as she got up and took it from him. “And I’m sure if one of your officers was missing meals…”

“You’ve made your point, thank you! Now if I could…” Cullen picked up his pen but the muscles in his hand spasmed suddenly and he dropped it with a muttered curse. Sophia put the bowl back down, a look of concern on her face.

“When did you last take Lyrium?” she asked sharply.

“What makes you think…?” Cullen began, but she cut him off.

“I know what the symptoms of Lyrium withdrawal look like,” Sophia shook her head in disbelief. “Sweet Andraste, Cullen! Missing meals is one thing but skipping doses… you know how dangerous that is! How many have you missed? Two? Three?”

Cullen sat back in his chair and ran his hands over his face. He should have known it was only a matter of time before Lady Sophia noticed something. Imperial Templars didn’t use Lyrium, so Dorian wouldn’t know the signs and he’d never spent more than the briefest periods of time with any of the other Inquisition Mages. He took a deep breath and exhaled heavily.

“Just over a year.” He admitted, his heart pounding at the risk of revealing his secret to another “Since Lady Cassandra recruited me for the Inquisition.”

Sophia sat back down with a shocked gasp.

“Over a year?” It was almost impossible to believe, but the Commander’s uncertain temper and sometimes drastic mood swings made a sudden sense; to have endured this long without dementia or worse was astonishing, but he must be in constant pain. “Why would you do this to yourself?”

“You know what happened in Kirkwall; the things I was party to…” He stood suddenly, his chair scraping on the stone floor, running his fingers through his hair in agitation. “You were with the commission Most-Holy sent to investigate.”

“And it was ruled that you weren’t culpable.” Sophia reminded him. “Do you think Cassandra would have considered you for this position if there was any doubt of that, or that Justinia would have approved her choice?”

He turned to stare out of the window down to the camp in the valley below; the tents and huts now black shapes against the blanket of fresh snow. Perhaps Cassandra had been quicker to extend forgiveness than she ought.

“I could not let myself be tied to that life any longer.” He said quietly. “I placed my fate in the Maker’s Hands, accepted His judgement.”
Sophia sat in thoughtful silence. She’d had little interaction with the Knight Captain during the brief time the Commission had been in Kirkwall, tasked instead with locating survivors of the Circle and convincing them to tell their story, but the ugly sequence of events leading up to the destruction of the Chantry was painfully familiar to her; a tale of hypocrisy, abuse and corruption which caused her to wonder – sometimes, in the darkest moments of the night – if the Apostate had acted entirely without justification. It was, perhaps, no surprise that Cullen was willing to accept such a risk to separate himself from those things. The Commander was a zealous man, not inclined to do things by halves, regardless of his personal wellbeing.

“Does Aleska know?” She asked. Cullen shook his head.

“Only Lady Cassandra, and now you. I was intending to tell her when she returned; but…”

Sophia rose from her seat and walked over to him, placing a comforting hand on his shoulder.

“Now might not be the best time. I don’t think she could deal with any more surprises right now; but as soon as things have settled down a little.”

Cullen nodded gratefully.

“Thank you; I am grateful, I…” he bit back the words he wanted to say. It was ridiculous, inappropriate even, to entertain these thoughts and feelings about a woman of Lady Sophia’s rank and quality. Even if she did reciprocate them, what kind of life could he offer her? “I ought to get back to work. The troops for the Western Approach…”

“Of course…” she said, with an understanding smile, taking her hand off his shoulder and picking up the bowl from his desk. “This is a very brave thing you’re doing Cullen; I pray the Maker gives you strength.”

Cullen stammered out a final word of thanks; waiting until the door closed behind her before collapsing back into his seat with a despairing groan.

###

“You all right there Dor?” Jonas grabbed Dorian’s hand and hauled the mage to his feet. “Gotta be careful of these buggers. Bloody sneaky!”

Dorian dusted some grass and dirt of his coat, looking down at the Red Templar’s body with a shudder of horror and disgust. It… he… had come out of nowhere, slashing at him with arms corrupted into jagged shards of red Lyrium. He’d been taken completely by surprise; if the big Reaver hadn’t been nearby…

“It gave me something of a shock… I must admit.” He replied, trying to sound less unnerved than he felt. “Thank you. You did an excellent job of bisecting it before any real damage could be done!”

Jonas looked up from wiping the blood off his sword with a questioning frown.

“I did what?”

Dorian paused. Coming from Blackwall or anyone else, that question would have earned a pithy comment about ‘Illiterate Southern barbarians’, but the younger man’s somewhat limited and awkward vocabulary – especially considering his rank – suggested more than a simple lack of decent education.
“Bisected…” the Mage repeated. “It means you sliced it in two… quite neatly, really!”

“Like to keep me blade sharp” Jonas chuckled and went back to cleaning his sword. Dorian noted his lips moving as he quietly repeated this new word to himself several times. Cuddles padded cautiously over to the body of the Templar, sniffing from a safe distance before backing away with a growl.

“Even he can tell there’s something very wrong about those things…” Dorian said, checking his pockets to make sure everything was still there. “Maker! What are we dealing with?”

“Ain’t bloody right, that’s for sure,” Jonas muttered, getting to his feet and whistling Cuddles over “C’mon, better find the others before Ansie starts worryin’.”

As they headed down the hill, Dorian decided to take the plunge; it had been bothering him for some time and here, at least, there was no chance of being overheard.

“Do you mind if I ask you something? It is rather… erm… personal…”

Jonas huffed quietly to himself.

“I’ll change me socks when we get back to camp!” he muttered.

“Oh! It’s not to do with that… but, thank you anyway…” Dorian laughed softly. “I just wanted to ask…”

He hesitated, and Jonas turned to look at him with a puzzled expression.

“Got somethin’ on your mind, Dor?”

Dorian took a deep breath. It was going to be difficult to ask this without seeming insufferably rude, but he couldn’t back away now.

“I can’t help notice you’re not as… comfortable with words… as your sister or Anselm…” He hesitated, giving Jonas what he hoped was an apologetic look, “I was just wondering if there was a reason for that?”

Jonas looked at him in silence, scratching thoughtfully at the stubble on his chin. People weren’t normally this direct about it. They’d whisper behind his back; either thinking he didn’t hear or not caring if he could. He could tell Dorian wasn’t trying to be rude, or to embarrass him, but – truth be told – he wished he knew the answer to that himself.

“They just get all jumbled up in me head. It’s why I don’t read too good neither; can’t make sense of ‘em…” He said eventually. “Ma had a hard time birthing me and I were really sick a lot when I were a little ‘un. Maybe that’s why I grew up wrong…”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say you grew up wrong!” Dorian replied with a smile. “You’re really quite skilled in a lot of areas!”

“Like… bisecting… things?” Jonas asked, grinning. “Did I say that right?”

“You did indeed” Dorian assured him as they resumed their path back to Anselm and Kayden. He sighed quietly; wherever you went in Thedas, court society was a vicious and cruel place. A man like Jonas must have had to deal with a lot of casual unkindness “It can be difficult, not being able to meet the expectations family places on you. I know that only too well.”
“You seem alright to me, Dor.” Jonas said, a little puzzled as to how a smart chap like Dorian could feel that way.

Dorian laughed sharply.

“You should mention that to my father sometime! I’m sure he would have a great deal to say about that.”

They rendezvoused with Anselm and Kayden near the caves in the ravine. Anselm looked up from cleaning his blades as the two men approached; noting Dorian’s slightly dishevelled appearance.

“Any problems?” He asked, laying the knives down across his laps. Dorian shook his head.

“All clear up there now; we had a slight tussle with an unexpected Shadow, but nothing a comb and a hot bath won’t fix.”

“I bisected it!” Jonas beamed proudly.

“Can’t say I’m surprised… Big fella like you; must have some swing there,” Kayden grinned, winking at the Reaver. “We rooted out the last of the ones down here. Good fight, even cheered this one up!”

He nodded in Anselm’s direction who replied with a wry smile.

“All right, I was an arse, I admit it! But I’m…” he hesitated, sheathing his knives with a sigh and picking up his bow, “I’m not exactly having the best time of it right now.”

Kayden gave him a sidelong glance, his eyes narrowing slightly.

“That wouldn’t have anything to do with my sister, would it?”

“It’s complicated…” Anselm acknowledged. “I’ll tell you about it on the road.”

He hefted his pack onto his shoulder with a grimace. They’d cleared up this pack of Red Templars but there was not telling if there were more in the vicinity or why they were here. The last thing anyone wanted was another surprise attack; that meant going down to the Keep, reporting in to Charter, and facing the music.

###

Kayden grunted sympathetically as Anselm finished recounting his story, including Aleska’s rebutting the admission of his feeling for her.

“That’s harsh, even by her standards, but I see her side of it too. Your woman turning up like that was a nasty shock; and, even if you didn’t invite her, it’s still a reminder of what she’d be up against.” He shook his head slowly “Humans and Elves? That rarely works out well.”

“I don’t care about those things.” Anselm said firmly “It’s who she is that matters to me!”

Kayden stopped in his tracks and laughed, leaning against a rock. His arms folded across his chest and he exhaled heavily.

“You’re a Human, and a nobleman, you can afford not to care; but there’s plenty who do, including the Dalish.” He gave Anselm a serious look, “I can tell you this; our father isn’t going to be happy with it and, by the sound of it, your mae and bae aren’t best pleased either.”
The sharp intake of breath from Jonas told Kayden he’d said something wrong, but Anselm continued looking straight ahead, his expression unchanged.

“My father’s behind the letter, I’m sure of that. My mother died when I was five.”

Kayden winced, a quiet sense of understanding overtook his features.

“Shit! Sorry…” He patted Anselm on the shoulder. “Aleska and I lost ours when we were little. It’s hard on a child, growing up without his mae, no matter how many friends and family he’s got around him. Aleska took our mae’s death harder than anyone, blames herself for what happened.”

“What did happen?” Anselm inquired.

“That is a story,” Kayden nodded towards Jonas. “For another day.”

“We oughta stay moving…” Jonas muttered, eager to take things away from the awkward territory it was straying into. “Get to the Keep before it’s dark.”

“Good idea, Big Fella! I could do with a drink and a decent meal.” He gave Anselm’s shoulder an almost friendly squeeze. “The two of us need to get drunk and, if I still like you when we’re sober, maybe I’ll see if I can persuade my sister that you’re not a total shithead!”

###

Declan stood with his hands behind his back, desperately praying he wouldn’t vomit from nervous fright, as Sister Leliana spelled out the details of Baron Giulio’s scheme; including the forged letter and his own part in the whole affair. She’d presented him a simple choice; either tell her the whole story, or she would inform the Lady Inquisitor that he remained obstinate in the face of incontrovertible evidence and allow her to deal with him as she saw fit. He was still worried about what the Baron might do; but he was hundreds of miles away in Ostwick, and the Lady Inquisitor scared him much more.

Aleska stared out of the window, running her fingers along the pendant of her necklace, swinging it on its chain; breathing deeply through her nose in an attempt to hold down the fury she felt inside. It had been bad enough to think she’d been humiliated in some cruel game of seduction; but to know it was a clumsy attempt to force them apart and, worse, that it might even have worked?

She looked down at the bustle in the upper court as Leliana continued with her assessment of the situations and her recommendations, seeking an alternative point of focus to help maintain her self-control. The snow had been cleared from the court, but still lay thick across the roofs and battlement. She could see Sera and some of the Chargers building what could only be described as a ‘Snow-Bull’ while men went back and forth with armfuls of pine-branches; decorations for the approaching feast. Try as she might, however, one thought kept coming back

*He said he loved me, and I threw it back in his face. Why would I do that? Why then of all times to admit it? The thoughts ran through Aleska’s mind, attempting to make sense of this mess. What have I gotten myself into?*

She’d wanted to hurt him, to make him feel some of the pain tearing at her like broken glass; whether he was telling the truth or not, she wanted him to know his clever words weren’t enough to fix things anymore – but the look in his eyes before he stormed out…

*A blade to the belly would have been kinder, the temptation was there.* She mused, remembering how close her dagger had been to her hand.
Leliana had finished speaking. Aleska let the silence last for a few seconds before taking a deep breath and turning around, her face pale and angry.

“You put your whole family in jeopardy…” she said, with cold and careful precision. “You allowed Mme Delilah to continue believing Lord Anselm had asked for her; you lied to me and, worst of all, you betrayed a friend. Was the money worth it? To have my Inquisition in shambles for the Baron’s game!”

Aleska found her voice raised with each word that left her lips, was it truly anger at Declan or anger at herself for not realising something like this could happen.

Declan opened his mouth, trying to find some words to apologise or beg forgiveness, but only a dry croak came out. Aleska shook her head in disgust. Pinching the bridge of her nose, Aleska drew a deep breath to calm herself down, noting Declan had become as pale as the freshly fallen snow outside the window.

“I didn’t think so…” She walked over to her desk and sat down “I should revoke your commission and send you back to Ostwick in disgrace, after I’ve put you in a sparring ring with Lord Anselm and let him finish what he started, but I have no desire to see your family suffer because of your cowardly stupidity. Sister Leliana considers you may be of use; you will consider yourself to be under her orders and allow Baron Giulio to believe your involvement in this amateur conspiracy remains undetected. If there’s any hint of further deceit, you’ll wish I had let you get beaten to a pulp!”

“Y…yes, your Worship! Thank you! I… I…” Aleska cut him off with a wave of her hand.

“That will be all, Ser MacHugh. You’re dismissed.”

Declan saluted and left the room. As the door closed behind him, Aleska let out a long sigh and sat back in her chair.

“Mme. Delilah left for Jader this morning.” Leliana informed her. “I have provided her with introductions to contacts in Val Royeaux and Halamshiral; she’ll be a valuable source of information about what’s happening there.”

Aleska laughed sharply.

“I’m sure the chance of gaining access to the Orlesian Court was more than sufficient inducement!”

Leliana nodded with a knowing smile.

“Like most successful courtesans, Mme Delilah is a pragmatic woman and prefers to avoid making unnecessary enemies…” Leliana closed her portfolio and tucked it under her arm. “She asked me to pass on her apologies, and her regrets, at the… disruption… her arrival caused.”

At least he chose whores with manners and common sense Aleska thought as Leliana took her leave. She should feel relieved, knowing that Anselm was the victim of an underhanded trick; If he was anyone else it would be a matter of finding a way to put this past them and move on, but nothing was that simple anymore.

The Free Marches might not have a king, but they still had royalty and - according to Leliana - there was a strong chance that Anselm might one day find himself Heir; Count Boniface’s eldest children were mages, and therefore barred from the succession, while Jonas - for all his kindness and courage - was plainly unsuited for the job of ruling a state like Ostwick or managing the
extended affairs of the sprawling Trevelyan clan. It could only be a matter of time before the Anselm’s uncle started putting pressure on him to conform, and would he have the strength of will to resist.

Even if she could set all that aside, one thing remained. Arrangement or not, he’d walked away from Delilah without a second thought; as he had from every other woman he’d been with. How could she trust the same wouldn’t happen to her?

She pushed her chair back from her desk, getting to her feet and anxiously pacing the floor. The smart thing would be to let it end now; tell him there could never be anything between them. No matter how they felt right now, the future held nothing but more pain and heartbreak for them both.

Aleska slapped her hand hard against the wall with a cry of desperate frustration. If only the memory of that damned kiss would leave her; the feel of his arms around her, the look in his eyes as they prepared to face the army of monsters descending on them. He’d have walked into fire if she’d asked him… faced Corypheus with only his bow and blades; what was to say he wouldn’t face his uncle, the whole of his family, with equal courage if she let him?

And if that destroys both of us? Wins a new enemy for the Inquisition?

She snatched a heavy glass paperweight from her desk and hurled it furiously. It bounced off the wall, denting the plasterwork, and rolled across the floor as she dropped to her knees with a choking, helpless sob. For all the hundreds of Inquisition soldiers and functionaries. Her advisers and friend, she felt utterly and completely alone.

There was a knock at the door; from the rhythm she knew it was Leliana. Hurriedly getting to her feet, and wiping her face with her hand, she called out sharply.

“What?”

Leliana came in with a note in her hand.

“Apologies for disturbing you so soon…” She held out the note. “This has just arrived from Charter. I thought you would want to know immediately.”

Aleska took the note from her and read it; feeling the sudden, exhilarating relief flood through her, she didn’t know whether to laugh or cry.

“Please excuse me,” Aleska folded the note carefully. “There is some… uh… business that needs my immediate attention.”

“Thank you for your time,” Leliana returned to her reports. “I shall have another favour to call upon, once I know all the details.”

Aleska smiled, placing the note within her waistcoat pocket, she ensured it was tucked away safely. A walk down the stairs from her chambers turned into a run, slowing as she entered the Great Hall and made her way to the doors. Standing atop the stairs leading down to the courtyard, a smile formed upon her lips; the first in a very long time.
A Game of Chance

Chapter by x_bellazarina_x

Chapter Summary

With Saturnalia on the Inquisition's door steps, both Aleska and Cullen deal with their siblings unexpected visits. Whilst Kayden proves a much needed distraction for Aleska; Mia on the other hand wants some answers. A game of Wicked Grace sets the playing field, but who shall emerge the victor in this Game of Chance?

The only sound Aleska heard was that of her own thudding heart, even her breathing slowed to a near standstill. The rhythmic tapping of her heeled boots on the cobble stone flooring echoed as she raced down the steps towards the Great Hall. With a violent pull of the door, Aleska ran into the Great Hall; colliding forcibly with the man about to open it from the other side. Inactively he grabbed her to stop her from tripping and falling.

As she caught her breath and recovered her balance, Aleska realised – to her embarrassment – that her hands were braced against Commander Cullen’s chest; his own hands having a firm grip on her waist. The blush set into both their cheeks.

“Cullen,” Aleska breathed, moving away. “I—I am sorry, I should look where I am going.”

Cullen cleared his throat, letting out a cough as he reminded himself. Aleska’s glance flickered to the woman beside Cullen; plainly, yet comfortably, dressed - with the same blonde hair and rich amber eyes as him. She remembered the commander mentioning something about his older sister arriving while she’d been away at Crestwood, a visit that didn’t seem to please him much, but the past few days had been too frantic for Aleska to have been much of a hostess.

How did I not see him?

Aleska pondered the last few minutes, pulling her scattered thoughts into some sort of sensible order.

“Are you all right?” Cullen dusted his breastplate. “That can’t have been comfortable.”

“I… yes,” Aleska struggled to find the words. “I have to go, I need to go. We can discuss the report you left on my desk later—right now…”

Cullen gave her an encouraging nod, a smile crept onto his lips as he stepped aside for her. It seemed Cullen had even heard the news. He sent the note, Aleska remembered Leliana had mentioned it was from Charter, but the handwriting didn’t match. The one person it did match, she’d successfully embarrassed herself in front of.

Of course, he probably transcribed it from the original cipher; it’s the sort of thing he would do.

“So,” the woman beside Cullen stated as Aleska hurried on her way. “She bumps into you and you’re the one apologizing for it? How does that work exactly?”

“Not now Mia,” Cullen shook his head, watching Aleska walk down the steps.
Aleska stood atop the stairs, feeling the warmth of the sun on her skin for the first time since snow started falling. The sky was a clear, crisp, blue with only a few feathery wisps of cloud high above the mountain-peaks. She could see a familiar mop of black hair walking across the courtyard; the Greatsword upon his back. Aleska couldn’t help but smile broadly; somehow keeping her footing as she raced down the frosty steps.

She choked back a sob; tears stinging her eyes as the cold wind threatened to freeze them to her skin. Aleska felt a lump within her throat, the last time she’d seen her brother was when she left for the Conclave at the tender age of seventeen, nearly a year and a half ago. His satchel dropped to the floor, his sword in the freshly fallen snow.

Aleska ran into her brothers extended arms, his one arm around her waist, the other across her back. For a moment, her feet left the ground as Kayden lifted her, when her feet touched the snow once more; her eyes took in his facial features. Even he teared up, but refused to let the tears fall.

“Thank you,” Aleska placed one arm around Dorian’s neck and the other around Jonas’. Both men pulled her into a hug.

“He found us actually,” Dorian informed her. “Stole a kill from Ser Grump over there.”

“I am not—” Anselm huffed, his sentence only halted by Aleska’s extended arms, barely an inch from him.

Aleska stopped, realizing at the last moment what she was about to do. Time stood still for both of them, neither sure of how to proceed. Be it out of habit or impulse, Anselm’s arms were inches from her waist. Ready to pull her in—but this was not to be. Aleska cleared her throat, stepping back from him; her hands rested against her side.

“I am pleased to see you’re well, Lord Trevelyan.” Aleska turned back to Kayden, “are you hungry? I am sure they are about serve lunch now. I know you could easily pack away that whole table.”

“Oh good,” Dorian chuckled. “Someone to out eat Jonas, out smoulder Anselm. What will you surprise us with next Master Kayden? Out sass me?”

“I think my sister has that covered.” Kayden draped his arm around Aleska’s shoulders, laughing as he led her towards the Great Hall.

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The smell of the beef stew filled the Great Hall, all around the table servants had lain out the porcelain and silver for the Lady Inquisitor and her guests. Aleska sat in her usual space, with Cullen on one side of her and Kayden on the other. The two men locked deep in a conversation about the variations between Chantry and Dalish training. Beside Cullen, sat Sophia, listening intently to their conversation; while Mia, Cullen’s sister, sat across from him – observing the table settings with the careful eye of an experienced housewife.

*I hope it meets with her approval…* Aleska thought, before being distracted by the sound of her brother loudly enjoying his lunch

“Can you stop slurping,” Aleska scolded. “We aren’t exactly back home. My apologies Lady Sophia, Mistress Rutherford… it seems my brother grew up in a barn.”

“Forest, thank you very much,” Kayden wiped the gravy from his chin. “Not all of us were trained in etiquette by Maela.”
“I am going to apologize for how this will sound,” Sophia passed the flask of wine to Cullen, who refilled his and Aleska’s goblets. “How does a Dalish elf learn Human etiquette? I never suspected it to be a thing among Dalish clans.”

Aleska took a sip of her wine, thinking how best to phrase her answer.

“It usually is not,” She said, wiping the corner of her lips with a dab of her napkin. “My grandmother was a serving girl for one of the lesser Ostwick noble houses, I believe it was di Ritzzi. When she was older, she became the personal maid of the Lady of the house. When the Lady passed away, her heirs weren’t exactly enthralled with the idea of having an Elven attendant. So she left and found the clan. My father thought it best to have one of us pass as a human when the time came. She taught me all she learned, from walking and talking to playing the piano and singing.”

“You play?” Sophia smiled, “I—”

“She does, bloody brilliant too,” Jonas spoke up, remembering the time when he heard her and Anselm. “You gotta play for us all ‘Leska.”

“Uhm, no—my duties don’t permit any free time,” any excuse could have sufficed, but out of all of them; that seemed most believable.

“Is there anything you cannot do?” Cullen observed her reaction.

“I can’t tell a joke to save my life,” Aleska pushed her bowl aside. “The one I told you about the Tavern wench, I stole from Varric when he had one too many to drink.”

“Mistress Lavellan, the scandal if he found out,” Cullen laughed. “I don’t think he’d let you live it down.”

“That would normally be the case,” Aleska leaned closer. “I have one thing on my side, he doesn’t remember anything of that night.”

“Di Rittzi…” Sophia mused out loud, “I’m trying to recall if I know any of them…”

Anselm chuckled quietly as he took a sip of wine.

“Fabiano di Rittzi; fat man, thinks he can play backgammon; wandering fingers…”

Sophia pressed her hand to her mouth to stop herself from laughing out loud.

“I remember him now! Didn’t he try to…”

“At the Opera, yes.” Anselm said with his familiar smirk. “Thank you for reminding me…”

*He seems almost his old self again* Aleska noted, as the conversations continued around her, although she couldn’t help observing the air of slight nervous tension around him. He must have guessed that Leliana had uncovered the forgery, or he wouldn’t be sharing the same room with her – let alone taking lunch together. To her right, she could hear Kayden asking Jonas about Reaver training.

“I ain’t a Breaker, so I dunno about all of it…” The big man said, visibly pleased at the attention. “But I can show you some of the moves later… if you want.”

“A physical demonstration sounds perfect.” Kayden filled up his glass with a quiet smile. “We can
always go into the finer points some other time.”

Aleska gave him a warning glance; fighting techniques had better be his only motivation. The last thing she needed was to have to deal with some of his less reputable antics.

Aleska got up from her seat as lunch ended; laughing softly at some random comment of Dorian’s. As she walked up the aisle, she noticed a very impatient Harrit waiting for her.

*Shit, I forgot about our armour measurements.*

Aleska exhaled, running her fingers through her loose hair and mentally preparing herself for the pinching which always followed his armour fittings.

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“When are you going to admit you’re angry with me?” Mia asked, folding her arms and looking steadily at Cullen once he’d shown her back to her room. The Commander closed the door gently behind him, exhaling slowly to try and quiet the anxiety churning inside him.

“I’m not angry, Mia; I’m just…” How could he even begin to put it into words without sounding callous and hurtful? That after 18 years apart they were virtually strangers? Rosalie had only been 5 when he last saw her, and Branson had a family of his own now. How could he tell her he was afraid they wouldn’t recognize, or even like, the man he’d become; because he wasn’t sure he recognized or liked him either? He took a deep breath…

“We’re in the middle of a war, with an enemy who could strike us at any time without warning. After what happened at Haven…”

“You don’t need to remind me about that!” She said sharply, twisting her hands around each other as she tried to keep composed. “I lay awake at night for weeks, not knowing if I should be praying for your safety or lighting a candle for your soul…”

The façade she’d been holding onto finally began to crack and she started to cry helplessly. Cullen strode over to her, putting his arms around her.

“Mia… I’m sorry… I’m so sorry. I… I should have…”

“Two years…” she choked out between sobs. “Two years without a word and barely a letter a year before that. Maker… what did they do to you?”

They made me an addict, and a murderer; and all but destroyed my mind…

She’d had so much of her own to deal with; raising Branson and Rosalie on her own, in a strange place, with the chaotic aftermath of Blight and civil war all around. Every year he’d sent as much of his wages as possible, hoping that it would help them rebuild something of the life they once had, praying they would never know the ugliness he endured every day and night. How could she have understood all that? She was still thinking of the boy who’d ridden off with the Knight-Captain all those years ago, dreaming of being the perfect Templar; a living embodiment of the Maker’s justice and Andraste’s mercy. He’d seen enough of what Justice could do…

“I’m still me…” he assured her, feeling his voice catch in his throat, trying to believe that was true “But… there are… things I can’t talk about; not yet, anyway. I’m still trying to… to find a way to make amends; to put things right.”

“You always wanted to do what was best.” Mia said quietly, resting her head against her brother’s
shoulder and wiping her eyes “I remember when you were at Chantry School, you used to split your lunch with anyone who couldn’t afford one. Ma was furious at you coming home hungry every day.”

“I remember too; and Pa would say ‘Well, you’re the one who taught him to share!’” He hugged his sister gently then stepped back, “I promise you; I’ll write every month, and come to visit when this is over, but please – after Satinalia – go back to South Reach. I’ll sleep easier, knowing you’re safe at home.”

Mia looked at him thoughtfully for a moment, noting the heavy shadows around his eyes. She doubted he’d had an easy sleep in a very long time.

“And what did Sister Eglantine say about broken promises?” She asked, with the faintest hint of a smile.

“That each one is a new flame in Andraste’s pyre…” Cullen gave a dry, throaty, chuckle. “Maker! She was a gruesome woman.”

Mia took hold of his hands, shaking her head sadly.

“I’m sorry if I upset you by coming here unannounced; but I had to see you, to know for sure you were safe.” She let out a quiet sigh. “I can’t begin to imagine what’s happened to you these past years, I’m not sure if I even want to; but in all this time we’ve never stopped thinking about you… or loving you.”

“Mia…” Cullen began, but she shushed him, “Don’t! You’ll set me off again. I told Lady Sophia I’d help with the garlands for the chapel and I don’t want to turn up all puffy-eyed.”

“Soph… Lady Sophia asked you to help?” Cullen was unsure why he felt anxious and surprised. Lady Sophia had a gift for getting people involved in things; he was certain that, but for her, they would have had a far tougher time integrating the rebel Mages into their ranks.

“Yeeesss…” Mia said slowly as she carefully eyed him. “What’s the matter, Cullen? Worried about me gossiping with your new ladyfriend?”

“She’s not my…!” He stopped as he saw the twinkle of laughter in her eyes and pulled her into another hug. “Oh Maker! I have missed you.”

***

“You ready for the Wicked Grace match?” Varric knocked on Aleska’s door; she wasn’t sure why he bothered, he’d already opened it and leaned, grinning, against the doorpost. The Dwarf had a unique idea of what privacy entailed. “Charmer wants to play, and your brother seems eager to learn. We need one more person and Curly is “busy”, so you in?”

Aleska placed the quill within her inkwell. It had been quite sometime before she’d had an adequate break from all of this. Ever since accepting the title of Inquisitor it had been almost impossible to keep business far from her mind. Her gaze flickered to the reports piling upon her desk, then to Varric waving a bottle of wine as a means of a bargaining chip. There was nothing urgent in the pile of paperwork and the idea of spending the evening with her brother appealed far more.

“Where will this be taking place?” Aleska grabbed her coat, sliding it onto her shoulders.
“Downstairs in the Herald,” Varric fiddled with a coin within his grasp. “I rented a private room for us to play in… well when I say rent, I mean took it on credit.”

“Spend all your money on—” Aleska began.

“Nothing like that,” Varric chuckled. “You coming or what?”

Aleska nodded, fixing her hair in the mirror. Varric held up his hand indicating she had five minutes before they began without her. Looking at her reflection, Aleska noted how the new armour fit her; showing off her figure without being vulgar.

Anselm is quite a card shark. She mused, remembering how much Varric owed him. Perhaps I need to up the scales.

Ushering Varric out the door and closing it firmly, she swiftly unlaced her waistcoat and threw it over the back of the chair; the chemise came next, followed by the breeches, until she stood before the mirror in only her small clothes. Aleska proceeded to put only the waistcoat on, tightening the strings to give her bust more of a shape. The waistcoat allowed for her midriff to be exposed, revealing the lines of the vallaslin snaking around her taut abdomen. Changing into one of her tighter pair of breeches, Aleska adjusted the buckling to ensure they flattered her figure well enough to distract Anselm from his hand of cards.

Completing her outfit with a pair of heeled boots, she took one final look at her reflection, satisfied with her overall appearance.

I know it is deceptive, but I can’t hope to win on my own.

Fluffing her hair a few times, she headed downstairs; bumping into Cullen talking with his sister.

“Thoughts?” Aleska pirouetted. “I need to distract Anselm from his game tonight, I know it is cheating… but someone ought to teach him a very expensive lesson.”

Aleska stifled a laugh as Cullen opened his mouth only to close it, the same motion repeated as she tucked her coat over her arms. The silence was all she needed to know as Cullen lowered his portfolio.

“I’ll take your stunned silence as “you did a decent job, Inquisitor.” I’ll also most likely have those reports for you tomorrow morning; depending on how this evening goes.”

Aleska walked past, noting it took Cullen longer to resume his conversation with Mia, who appeared amused at her brother’s flustered stammering.

From what he tells me, she is quite formidable. Perhaps I should offer her a position within our ranks.

Still laughing at the thought, Aleska stepped into the room that Varric had rented out for this purpose. Already the game had begun, Kayden had a shining stack of silver coins before him; the platters of food lay on the ends of the tables as to avoid them getting muddled up with the cards or bets.

“I know you said five minutes—” Aleska cut Varric off, sitting beside her brother. “Is it just me, or is it really hot in here?”

“I don’t—” Anselm began, only to be stopped mid-sentence.
“Well,” Bull bellowed, “now you’re here, pull up a seat Boss. Things got interesting.”

Aleska unbuttoned her coat, sliding it off her shoulders slowly to ensure she captured his attention. The first thing to become visible were her arms, tanned from the time she spent within the sun. Her head to the side and her teeth capturing her lower lip, her hands moved her hair over her shoulder, and she leaned forward.

“So I’ve never played,” her voice dropped to a seductive purr. “Would you mind going a bit easy on me… being a beginner?”

Aleska’s hand brushed Anselm’s wrist; her fingertips tingling from the brief contact with his skin even as she slowly withdrew them.

_Not my finest moment, but perhaps he may be distracted enough to be off his game. Now to get a few drinks into Varric and my brother._

Aleska picked up her cards, rearranging them and throwing her bet on the table.

“Let the games begin,” Kayden smirked, nudging his sister.

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The small room filled with laughter at one of Varric’s anecdotes, Aleska had a savoury biscuit in her hands, the rosemary and garlic infusion had been too good to resist. Two flavours she hadn’t thought to working, but they complimented one another quite well. A wine bottle rested on its side, the last of its contents dripping onto the cobble stone flooring.

The fire had died down long ago; merely embers, and ash shifting in a faint breeze from the partly-open window, but no one dared enter the room to reignite the flames. Cigar smoke drifted lazily in the candle-light. The sound of coins scraping against the wooden table caught her attention. Varric counted each one to ensure Anselm hadn’t stiffed him.

“Come on Charmer,” Varric placed the money in a pouch and tucked it into his belt. “Don’t be so blue, you were just off your game.”

“I can think of a reason for that,” Anselm grumbled, watching Aleska play with the pendant of her necklace.

“I can think of two,” Kayden chuckled, glancing towards his sister’s low neckline; earning himself a sharp nudge in the ribs. “Come on Varric, I think I need one more drink; then I have a guest waiting for me upstairs.”

Bull’s glance flickered around the group, his one eye bright and alert.

“I’ll give you a hand carrying them…” he said casually, getting up and following them out.

Aleska smiled quietly to herself, leaning back in her chair and watching the three of them leave. Taking this opportunity of solitude, Aleska grabbed the deck of cards from the pile; examining each one and where they lay. Counting each card individually, she recalled the evening’s play.

_The cheat!_

Aleska laughed, giving him a sidelong glance as she reshuffled the cards.

“ Took you long enough to figure it out, and skilful cheating is an intrinsic part of Wicked Grace –
hence the name” Anselm piped up, clearing his throat. “Would you put a coat on? I am getting cold just looking at you.”

“It isn’t that chilly,” Aleska unlaced the strings of her waistcoat. “In fact, we Dalish have high body temperatures. I’m feeling rather hot.”

For a moment she kept her composure, before her laugh echoed through the small room. Lacing up the waistcoat once more, she set it so that her chest had now been fully covered. Sliding her coat on, she buckled the belt around her waist and tied her hair up into a messy ponytail. *It served its purpose I suppose.* Aleska noted Anselm’s breathing patterns, how his breaths were shorter but sharper; his hand inadvertently resting on his leg, tapping his thigh in a nervous rhythm.

“Better,” Anselm stated, removing his hand from his leg and draining his glass.

“It couldn’t have been that distracting; surely you’ve been around women far prettier and with far more… desirable figures.” Aleska picked up another savoury biscuit, watching his reaction; the way he shifted his position told her more than his words ever could. “I do have a request to make of you, since the fight with Ser MacHugh, Cullen has given me a form for you to sign. As you are my companion and not a soldier—he thought it best that I handle this one. Ser MacHugh signed this morning.”

“What is it?” Anselm’s face grew pale, had it been the discharge papers he’d been dreading. He hadn’t seen Declan since; assuming he was either keeping a very low profile or had been temporarily assigned elsewhere.

“Just a formal agreement that,” Aleska began, inhaling deeply. “You and Ser MacHugh understand that should this incident happen again that you both will be discharged. I would prefer it not happen again, you are too valuable to me; I can’t lose you…”

She paused, carefully considering her next words.

“…I can’t lose your skills in the field. It’s fortunate that Ser MacHugh hadn’t formally signed his officer’s papers at the time, otherwise it would be a far more serious situation”

Anselm nodded, his hand sliding across the table and taking hers. “I will sign whatever paper you put before me. As long as it means I can remain at your side until this mess is sorted.”

*I don’t know if this is genuine, or just another clever little game.*

Aleska removed her hand from his, watching Bull and Kayden carry the refreshments. Taking her wine glass she finished the contents. Rising from her seat.

“Awe come on Allie,” Kayden pleaded. “One more game, I think I finally have the hang of this.”

“Lord Trevelyan and I have some business to discuss,” Aleska calmly stated. “I also need to get some work done, Cullen will have my head if I leave these reports to linger any longer.”

Anselm rose from his seat, the pair of them walked up in silence; listening to the mumblings of those within.

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“And one more here,” Aleska’s finger tapped the parchment.

Standing beside Anselm was more than torture; his scent of musk and cedar, now mingled with the
darker notes of rum and cigar-smoke, enveloped her senses once more. He was standing closer to her, closer than normal; leaning over her desk as his pen flowed over the parchment, leaving his elegant signature in its wake.

He glanced at Aleska, standing beside him lost in thought; a distant look in her eyes as he signed his name on the final page. He knew why she was doing this. Sister Leliana would have been quick to detect the forgery, but Aleska would need to see for herself; to be sure in her heart. Her words to him still stung, and he could feel she’d drawn back from him, but perhaps this meant there was a little hope left…

“Anything else?” Anselm looked down at her. “Nothing else you want me to sign? Or tell me?”

“No,” Aleska shook her head. “This should be the last of it and I will have it looked over by Cullen tomorrow. Good night Lord Trevelyan.”

Anselm walked past her, only to stop halfway towards the door. “Oh, fuck it!”

Aleska looked up as his hands cupped her cheeks, bending his mouth to hers and kissing her eagerly on her lips; the inkwell in her hand fell to the floor, breaking and spilling its dark contents on the bright carpets. His hands tore at the buckles of her coat, sliding it off her shoulders and throwing it to the floor as she tugged his shirt up and over his head; not caring as the costly fabric ripped in her grasp.

She heard him groan as her nails traced down his back, towards his waist, the muscles firm and supple beneath her fingers; the scar on his side a raised, warm, ridge just above the waistband of his breeches.

Teasing, her hands moved up to his chest, the heat of his bare skin intense against hers… his lips to her neck; exploring with his hungry kisses, the light scratching of his close-trimmed beard almost unbearable. His fingers worked the strings of her waistcoat and her hands responded with unlacing his breeches, pushing them down his legs. With a sweep of his arm the contents of her desk went crashing to the floor and he hoisted her onto it; laying her down with sudden tenderness, his hand cradling the back of her head as his lips moved down her throat towards her breasts.

“Mi amata…” he growled, in his native Marcher, sending a shudder through her…. “Aleska...”

“Aleska?” His voice echoed through her head, snapping her out of her haze. “Aleska?!”

“Hm? What?”

Aleska looked around, the inkwell still closed within her hands and her desk still had the contents resting upon it. Each piece of paper left in the precise position to which she left it.

Was I day dreaming?

Looking down, she noted not a single article of her clothing had been removed. Her quarters seemed undisturbed.

“Is that all you need me to sign?” Anselm repeated.

“Uhm,” Aleska paused, quickly placing the closed inkwell upon her desk. “Yes, that will be all; good night Lord Trevelyan.”

Aleska watched him walk towards the door, pretending to busy herself with her reports; he stopped halfway towards the door and her heart did a small flip as he turned around.
Was that a dream... or a prediction?

Aleska put her reports down, using her desk for support. Her heart raced as he came towards her.

His hand extended towards her, touching the pendant which rested against her neckline, realigning it towards the centre of the chain and straightening it against her skin. "That has been driving me insane all night."

"Is that the only thing?" Aleska swallowed the lump in her throat, which all but choked her.

Anselm smirked down at her and, with a wink, left her to the reports which she claimed she needed to return to. Aleska slumped down in her chair, looking down at the pendant now resting upon her chest. With a small scoff, she shook her head, preparing herself for a long night ahead of her. Beginning with comparing the signature he’d provided her with the forged letter that Mme Delilah had supposedly received from him.

Seems the baron isn't as clever as he likes to think, Aleska smiled to herself; looking at the way Anselm’s graceful handwriting twisted and curled, where the forgery did not. This is another game where I may need to up the stakes.

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The Herald had all but emptied, only Bull and Varric remained; Kayden had long since disappeared for his mysterious appointment. The cards had been dealt and the players had begun their final game. Varric sipped the ale within his mug, in normal circumstances, he detested the stuff, but on this night; he found a new tolerance for it.

"You saw them tonight?" Varric picked up another card. "What do you think?"

Bull smiled softly, taking a swig from his hip flask, throwing away two cards and replacing them he brooded over the question for a moment.

"He loves her, but he admitted it at the wrong time and got burned – more than he’s willing to admit. She loves him and needs him, but she doesn’t believe she can trust him; I don’t think either of them fully understand how much they need one another. When they finally work that out; then, it’s gonna be real interesting!"

"I’ve written many tragedies," Varric chuckled, placing his bet on the table. "I know exactly where those two are going, they can pretend it won’t happen; but the Count won’t accept it. She is an elf for one, the Inquisitor for second. Charmer’s the closest thing he’s got to a suitable heir in the immediate family; and when that old fox makes his move, it won’t be as clumsy or obvious as a forged letter!"

"I wouldn’t count on it," Bull stroked his lower lip with his index finger. "There is that to consider, but he doesn’t strike me as being the sort to back down when he’s set him mind on something."

"If you tell me he’d give it all up to be with her,” Varric shook his head. “I will vomit right now, even I won’t even write that kind of cliché.”

Bull nodded. "When a man is in love, really in love, he’ll give up the world. The next few months will determine how they handle this. I just have the feeling that she’s become his world; only she can’t see it yet."

Varric thought to himself for a moment. “What about Curly and Princess? What does your Ben-Hassrath training tell you about them?”
“Don’t fucking get me started on those two,” Bull brought his hand down on the table, knocking the ale mugs off and spilling the amber liquid on the cobble stones. “We’ll be here all night!”

Varric chuckled, picking up his mug and reaching for a fresh bottle.

“I got a little time.”
The sword passed wide over Anselm’s head as he ducked down, bringing the edge of his blade up hard and fast between his opponent’s legs. The recruit dropped to his knees with an anguished squawk; clutching at his groin as Anselm rolled to one side and sprang to his feet, spinning the wooden training-knives in his hands.

“If these were real blades your guts would be all over the ground…” he told the gasping soldier. “You need to watch the man, not the weapons; drop your guard like that in battle and you’re dead, doesn’t matter how big a weapon you’re swinging.”

One of the other recruits, a brawny redhead from the Anderfels, sniggered behind his hand. Anselm turned to him, with an evil smile.

“It seems like we have a volunteer for the next round…” he announced, tucking the knives into his belt and strolling to the water-barrel at the edge of the training ring. “Get yourself ready and find a cold flannel for Edric!”

He dipped a mug into the barrel and took a long swallow of water as the unfortunate recruit was helped from the ring by his colleagues.

“And I thought I was hard on them!” Aleska laughed as she leaned on the barrier. “Thank you for agreeing to this.”

Anselm shrugged. Despite the morning chill he was flushed from the exercise and he emptied the dregs of the mug over his face.

“They’ll be marching out to the Western Approach as soon as you get back from Val Royeaux.” He said, drying his hands on a coarse towel. “And there won’t be much training during the Feast; they’ll be too full of roast beef and ginger pudding.”

If he was annoyed at not accompanying her to the capital after Satinalia was over, there was no overt sign of it; although Aleska couldn’t shake her discomfort at his current mood of slight detachment.

“I wish I didn’t have to go…” she muttered. It was stupid and pointless, some Orlesian functionary creating petty problems for the Inquisition troops in the city; but Josephine thought her presence would serve to smooth things out with the local nobility and the Commander wanted to personally inspect the status of the soldiers. “And I didn’t imagine you’d relish being stuck in Cullen’s company for a fortnight.”

Anselm placed the towel down on the edge of the water-barrel and rested his hands on the railing;
close enough to hers that she could feel the heat radiating off his skin.

“Oh, you never know. The Old Man and I might have bonded over some shared interest like… breathing.” He paused and glanced sidelong at her. “Or we could have gone for ice-cream again.”

Aleska shook her head slightly in warning. This was dangerous territory, especially in public. Anselm nodded with an air of resignation.

“I know… we have to be careful. Eyes and ears… blah, blah, blah…”

“Young victim is ready…” Aleska said as the big Anders entered the ring, hefting a wooden sword and shield, “and I need to go for another fitting. Try not to cripple this one and I’ll speak to you before the Feast.”

She walked away, forcing herself to not look back; but unable to suppress a small laugh as the soldier’s yelp of pain reached her ears.

Aleska resisted the temptation to race up the stairs to the Great Hall two at a time; the Inquisitor was expected to show the proper amount of dignity in public – as the Lady Ambassador frequently reminded her – but the change of mood brought by the preparations for Satinalia made it harder than usual to resist. Mia stood at the halfway landing, watching in amusement as Anselm sent another hapless soldier sprawling in the icy mud.

“He’s quite a force of nature, isn’t he?” She said to Aleska. “Half your men will be nursing bruises tomorrow”

Aleska smiled, allowing herself another glance at the training ground. Most of the troops probably thought Anselm would go easy, because of the times he spent drinking and gambling with them. Watching them realise their mistake was entertaining to say the least.

“It’s a lesson they’ll remember and, if it saves their lives, the bruises are worth it…” The two women watched for a moment before Aleska turned to Mia, “Cullen tells me you won’t be attending the banquet.”

Mia shook her head, pulling her cloak a little closer round her shoulders as the breeze started to pick up again.

“I’m grateful for the invitation, but I’d feel out of place among all those nobles. Cullen’s agreed to tear himself away from his desk long enough to have dinner, and Messere Tethras has invited me to join him for a drink in the Herald afterwards.” She smiled mischievously “He’s promised to tell me a few anecdotes about my brother’s time in Kirkwall; if I share some about what he was like as a boy.”

Aleska couldn’t hold in her laugh. “Perhaps you’ll indulge me in one or two of those anecdotes. Varric has been suspiciously quiet about it, which means one of two things; either they are really good… or downright embarrassing. At any rate, it sounds like you’ll be having a better time than me! And at least we don’t have to bother about him having a proper meal today.”

Mia hesitated, adjusting the collar of her cloak.

“Thank you for taking care of him…” She said quietly. “It means a lot to me, knowing he has people looking out his well-being.”

Aleska heard the clock in the Hall chime eleven; she’d need to cut the conversation short or risk keeping Sophia and Mme. Vivienne waiting.
“Your brother’s a good man; I value him as an adviser and even more so as a friend.” She gave her a friendly nod. “Enjoy your day, Mistress Rutherford, and tell Varric that he is not allowed to drink himself into a stupor again; you don’t want to know what happened the last time.”

###

Cullen nodded to himself in quiet satisfaction, scrawling his signature at the foot of the report and placing it on the pile for discussion at the next strategy meeting. He sat back, taking another mouthful of coffee and rubbing his eyes, before turning his attention to the requisition requests. He looked up, briefly, at a burst of laughter and song from the Lower Court. The Gate Tower was far enough from the Great Keep for the sounds of the Feast not to reach him, but there were plenty of revellers in the castle courts; gathered around the fires to dance and drink. The Feast of Fools on the first night of Satinalia was a Free-Marcher and Antivan tradition, not commonly celebrated in Orlais or Ferelden, and it had never been held in the Gallows. Misrule, even if sanctioned by Chantry and custom, had never met with Knight-Commander Meredith’s approval. He doubted anyone would miss his presence in the Great Hall tonight, there would be diversion enough to compensate for the lack of his poor company.

He grunted in irritation at the knock on his door; he’d left clear orders to remain undisturbed after dinner, but there was always some messenger foolish enough to believe their despatch was too important for Knight-Captain Rylen or one of his other subordinates to deal with.

“Enter!” He barked, preparing to unleash the full force of his lungs at the interloper; the fury turning into an awkward cough as the door opened. “L-Lady Sophia? I… I wasn’t expecting…”

She looked… beautiful; that was the only word for it. Lady Sophia was a lovely woman by anyone’s standards but tonight; dressed in a festive gown of gold-brocaded crimson silk, with emeralds glinting at her throat and in her hair, she was breath-taking. No wonder Varric called her ‘Princess’. Gossip said that, before her magic manifested, she was to have wed Lord Seamus Dumar – uniting the thrones of Ostwick and Kirkwall; even that King Maric had briefly considered her a potential consort for Cailan.

She stepped forward into the room, the hems of her skirts rustling on the stone floor, closing the door behind her with a graceful smile.

“I hope I’m not interrupting?” She asked. “I know you said you would be busy tonight, but…”

“No… no, not at all. I could probably do with… a break.” He cleared his throat. “I assumed that with the feast…”

Sophia shook her head with a laugh.

“I can survive without hearing Sera and my brother murder ‘The Three Little Holly-Trees’; Aleska is currently making her debut and I didn’t want to risk outshining her; also… I wanted to bring you this.”

She held out a thick, oblong, package; wrapped in blue and silver paper. He stared at it in blank surprise for a moment before taking it from her hands.

“For… me?”

“In Ferelden this is the Night of Gifts, isn’t it?” Sophia asked, still smiling. “I hope you like it.”

As a child he looked forward to this night as much as he did his birthday. Exchanging gifts was the first thing they did after returning home from the Chantry. Simple, practical, things usually; a new
pair of boots or a pocket knife. He remembered the time Pa surprised Ma with a real bone-china tea service, all the way from Amaranthine. He'd bought it at the Summer Fair in Redcliffe and kept it hidden in the hayloft for half a year. It was her treasure, sitting proudly on the kitchen dresser; dusted every Sunday and only brought down for special visitors. He wondered what became of it, probably smashed into fragments by the Darkspawn…

“Are you all right?” Sophia had come a little closer, concerned by the Commander’s silence and his wistful – almost mournful – look. He nodded.

“Ye… yes; just… memories…” He turned his attention to opening the parcel, his eyes widening as he saw what it contained “Brennan’s ‘History of Queen Moira Theirin’! Where did you find this?”

The definitive biography of Ferelden’s Rebel Queen had gone into only one printing; the plates and galleys for the second, together with many of the original sources, destroyed during the Fifth Blight – making it a much sought-after treasure by historians and bibliophiles alike.

“I have my contacts…” Sophia gave him a sly look. “Actually, Olivia told me about an estate sale near Highever. There was an auction and I got someone to put in a bid…”

Cullen ran his hand appreciatively over the soft leather binding and carefully opened the book. It was virtually mint, even retaining the coloured frontispiece of the Queen’s portrait; carefully protected behind a sheet of fine tissue-paper.

“Thank… Thank you. But… you needn’t have gone to so much effort.”

“I know how much you wanted a copy…” Sophia said, standing beside him and looking down at the picture. “My father met her once, when he was a very young man. He said she was an awe-inspiring woman; almost as tall as a man and able to wear full armour, but still with all the charm and grace of a true-born queen…”

He turned a page gently, trying to hold his hands steady. Her scent filled his nostrils; roses, with a hint of benzoin and cypress, and he could feel the warmth of her cheek close to his as they bent to examine the book.

“Thank you… once again.” He straightened up and closed the book, placing it flat on one of the shelves. “I shall treasure it…”

Sophia glanced towards the door with a sigh.

“I ought to get back before Josephine has a heart attack, I also promised Aleska I’d help her through tonight. I really wish those women would just relax and enjoy themselves for once. The stewards know what they’re doing.”

“One moment…” Cullen held up his hand and turned back to his desk. “I’m not very good at wrapping things, I’m afraid, but… Happy Satinalia, Lady Sophia.”

He handed her a pair of soft kidskin riding-gloves, the backs decorated with an intricate knotwork pattern. She gasped in delight.

“Cullen! They’re lovely…”

He gave her a shy, lopsided smile.

“You mentioned something about needing a new pair. I saw these in the market and thought…”
He’d agonised over the appropriateness of the gift for days; it seemed nothing, compared to what she’d given him, but her appreciation was unfeigned.

“Thank you so much. This is so thoughtful of you”

She placed her hand on his shoulders and kissed his cheek, her lips soft against his skin, and Cullen felt a shudder run through him.

“Sophia…” It came out hoarse and deep; without thinking he raised his hand, his fingertips lightly brushing her shoulder. Their eyes met; she looked surprised but gave no sign of pulling back, leaning into him as he tentatively bent his head towards her. Taking her face in his hands he kissed her on the mouth; lightly at first but with deepening intensity as her arms wrapped around his neck, pulling him closer as he staggered back against the wall with his own arms now about her waist – almost lifting her off her feet. Eventually they parted, flushed and breathless. Cullen ran the fingers of both hands through his hair, a sudden surge of anxiety threatening to choke him. What madness had possessed him?

“My… My Lady… Forgive me! That… that was…”

She stepped forward and placed her fingers on his lips then kissed him again, softer and gentler this time; before laying her head against his shoulder.

“That was what we both wanted…” she said quietly, “it’s not something either of us can deny.”

He stroked her hair gently and held her for a moment; scarcely able to form words.

“Is… is this wise?” He asked, eventually; her head still pillowed against the thick fur of his collar and her eyes closed.

“Probably not.” Sophia replied. “But I really don’t think I care.”

Cullen chuckled softly. There were so many reasons why this was a terrible idea but, right now, none of them mattered

“I don’t think I do, either.”

They held each other in silence a little longer before Cullen cleared his throat and, unwillingly, relaxed his embrace.

“You… you should go back to the hall, before you’re missed.” He ran his fingers gently along her cheek “We should talk about this… very soon.”

She nodded, taking his hand and kissing his callused palm.

“Meet me in the Chantry garden tomorrow, after breakfast.”

###

“Darling! What happened? Did you slip on the ice?” Sophia glanced in a nearby mirror as Mme Vivienne bore down on her; one of her braids had come loose and was hanging over her ear “Here, let me”

“Thank you, Vivienne…” She said lightly as the First Enchanter pinned it back into place “It is very frosty outside; be careful if you go out for some air.”

“I’ll bear that in mind, my dear.” Vivienne said, slipping her arm through Sophia’s “Now, lets go
and rescue poor Josephine from that dreadful Viscomte Beaumarche!”

Bull chuckled throatily to himself as he watched the two women head through the crowd. Varric owed him fifteen Royals.

The music echoed through the Great Hall, chatter intertwined with the enchanting strings of the orchestra. Men and woman gathered upon the dance floor, swaying to the music. In the center of the room, Sophia caught glimpse of Aleska; dancing with Duke Lorenzo de Maquis. A man well past his prime, but still handsome; his silver hair elegantly pushed back and his weathered face betraying nothing of whatever conversation he was having the Lady Inquisitor.

The dance soon ended, and the woman curtsied before their partners before breaking apart. Sophia noticed Aleska walking with a small limp. Taking two goblets of wine from the serving tray, she extended a hand to Aleska.

“Are you all right?” Sophia smiled.

“He was spritely,” Aleska lifted her glass, tapping the rim against Sophia’s. “Especially for a man in heels.”

Both women broke into laughter, sipping their wine.

“Yes,” Sophia agreed, pausing to savour the vintage. “Mother says the Duke was known for having two left feet when he was young, and I don’t think age has improved his skills!”

Aleska raised her glass to Jonas; cornered by two richly-dressed Orlesian noblewomen, and looking like he was trying to burrow through the wall with his shoulderblades. “I believe your brother is feeling a little bit overwhelmed, perhaps someone should go rescue him?”

Sophia squinted, attempting to get a better look at the woman’s features; or at least the heraldry on her mask and gown. Then she gave an annoyed little huff.

“Janine de Soubirs, I might have guessed.” She glanced sidelong at Aleska “Watch out for her; she’s another of Celene’s cousins and one of the most poisonous little vipers in the Imperial court. Do excuse me…”

Aleska nodded and, as Sophia left to extricate her brother, turned her attention to the servants setting the dessert table. Anselm warned her not to fill up on the main course; having heard a rumour that Josephine had arranged a selection of treats from across Thedas. Her gaze shifted to a tray of familiar cakes that were too tempting to pass up.

###

Aleska bit into one of the cakes from the table she’d carefully positioned herself next to, watching the performers with rapt attention as music filled the Great Hall; a sombre tune, shot through with lighter notes which slowly came to dominate the theme. The fantastic, grotesque, masks and costumes of the dancers appeared to flicker between darker and brighter shades of colour; becoming more brilliant as the dance progressed. She knew enough about the Dalish Midwinter celebrations to recognize the symbolism; Light triumphing over Darkness. The costumes and music might be different, but the underlying meaning remained the same and she found herself wondering, yet again, if Elves and Humans were truly that dissimilar.

She joined in the general applause as the performance ended and the dancers took their bow,
turning her attention back to the cakes while the hum of conversation resumed around her. She’d discovered that she had something of a sweet tooth since finding herself in human society; especially the little cakes, rich with fondant and softly-coloured icing, for which the Summer Bazaar in Val Royeaux was famous. Aleska wasn’t sure how many favours Josephine had called in to have these shipped her, but it made her more inclined to at least tolerate the next lecture on proper etiquette.

Aleska caught sight of Anselm making his way carefully towards her through the crowd. She’d been trying not to pay too much notice to him all evening, but without success. In the garishly-clad assembly, the elegant plainness of his attire stood out; jacket and breeches of deep blue brocade, with sparkling silver buttons she was sure were set with real diamonds. A contrasting waistcoat of silver, embroidered in blue, caught the light of the hundreds of candles flickering in the chandeliers and wall sconces.

He’d chosen not to wear a cravat, leaving his shirt collar to hang wide open; a scandalous option, judging by the glances some were giving him, and the crisp white linen stood brightly against the tanned skin of his throat.

“You look… magnificent; like some enchanted princess of legend.” He said in a low voice, taking two glasses of wine from a passing servant and handing her one. “You can almost feel them sizzling with envy.”

A subtle blush crept upon her features, taking a napkin, Aleska wiped the residue from the fondant from her lips. She could feel her heart beating faster as she caught the whispers the whispers of the nobles; even through the masks they wore.

*I can’t appear to be snubbing him for the sake of a few whispers,* Aleska reminded herself. *It would only cause worse.*

Aleska glanced down at her dress, even though the dress had been tailored for her; she suddenly felt out of place in it.

The gown left her shoulders bare; the bodice cut low and tailored to highlight her slender waist before fanning out into a long skirt of ivory and silver gauze. It would have been indecent, but for the close-fitting breeches of ice-blue silk she wore beneath. A single fillet of silver bound her black hair, leaving most of it free to fall down her back in carefully arranged curls. It shimmered like the morning frost on last night’s snowfall. ‘You are the Inquisitor, darling!’ Vivienne had informed her, when she’d questioned the daring style. ‘You must set the fashions, not follow them.’

“This is thanks to Vivienne and Sophia” Aleska admitted. “I don’t know if I’d have had the courage to choose this myself.”

Anselm smiled and took a sip of wine.

“Of course you would have. You love to make an impression…” He lowered his voice further, lips barely moving as he edged closer towards her. “May we speak alone, please?”

Aleska hesitated. It felt like a bad idea, especially on a night when so many eyes were on her, but it felt unjust to deny him this request. She gave him an almost imperceptible nod.

“Go up to my chambers and wait there; I’ll join you as soon as I can.”

###
Aleska closed her chamber door softly behind her; resting her hands against the polished wood for a second and taking a deep breath before turning to face Anselm.

“I can only spare a few minutes.” She warned him “Vivienne was looking for me earlier, some Orlesian matter. Sophia’s keeping her occupied for a while, but I would like her to have some chance to enjoy the Feast.”

Anselm laughed quietly to himself.

“Mme du Fer thinks everything in Orlais matters, but I understand…” He walked over to the couch and crouched down, pulling out a parcel wrapped in silver-foiled paper. “I had one of the maids hide this here earlier, hoping you would find it and know who it was from, but I’d rather give it to you in person.”

“You didn’t have to…” Aleska said, taking the parcel from him. It was lighter than it appeared, and the paper intricately patterned with a design of leaves; matt against the shine of the silver. “I wasn’t expecting anything.”

Anselm smiled fondly at her, his fingers lingering on its edge.

“I didn’t have to, but I wanted to. I hope you like it.”

Aleska sat down and began to unwrap it; feeling an unexpected sense of glee and anticipation. She opened the box and pulled back the layers of tissue paper within and lifting out her gift.

“All…” she exclaimed, her eyes bright with surprise. His smile widened; it was the first time she’d called him by name in days.

The wrist bracers were of fine, pale blue, leather; stiffened and padded in exactly the right places to provide maximum support. The stitching was overworked in gold thread, which continued in a pattern of vines around the edges. Instead of lacing, they were secured by buckled straps; the buckles cunningly designed to be fastened one-handed.

“They were made by the same leatherworker who makes my Aunt Catarina’s gloves; he claims to have been trained by the Dalish…”

“I can believe it…” She said, still examining them in delight. “They’re beautiful!”

He sat down beside her and took the empty box from her lap. She didn’t know what to say. What could she say? Thank you didn’t seem sufficient for a gift like this.

“Try them on.” He said encouragingly. “I sent him one of your old pairs to get the measurements right.”

Aleska slipped them on over the sleeves of her gown; it took barely a couple of minutes to have them securely buckled in place. She stretched out her right arm and flexed. The fit was perfect.

“They’re wonderful; thank you!” She paused as a memory of one of their earliest conversations came back to her; the first day they’d ridden out to meet the enemy. “You told me of designs like this back in Haven.”

Anselm nodded, with a gentle laugh.

“I remember, and I always knew you’d be too stubborn to get a pair for yourself.”
“And you’re not a man who gives up easily…” Aleska lowered her hand and began to unbuckle the bracers. She caught her bottom lip on her teeth, fighting the urge to tell him she’d been afraid he’d never come back. Putting the bracers down on the couch she got up and walked over to the closet as Anselm watched her with an intent, questioning, silence. She took out a large, flat, leather case; laying it carefully on her desk and beckoning him over.

He came and stood beside her as she opened the case; the question he was about to ask turning into a surprised choke as he saw the guitar inside; the wood polished and inlaid, the frets and pegs of snow-white ivory, the silver mounts shining in the candlelight.

“There were nights when I couldn’t sleep…” she murmured, her hands resting on the case as he lifted the guitar out and began to test the strings “I’d sneak around the town, hiding from the guards. Sometimes, when I passed your cottage, I’d hear you playing; there was one piece that always stayed with me. It sounded Dalish…”

Anselm nodded thoughtfully, brushing his hand across the strings and calling forth a bright, clear, chord.

“Corazon de mi Corazon… it’s an old Antivan ballad, one of my favourites; maybe they got the tune from the Dalish. Would you like me to play it for you now?”

Aleska shook her head.

“Later perhaps… but I miss those nights in Haven, listening to you play.”

He sighed, placing the guitar back in its case. His old one lay crushed and burned beneath the ruins of Haven and, somehow, he’d never got around to ordering a replacement.

“I miss it; I never thought I’d say that, but we could be ourselves there. Half of Thedas wasn’t begging for your time and we didn’t need to…”

“We didn’t need to worry about what half of Thedas thought;” She finished for him “but we do, whether we like it or not.”

“I know how the game’s played…” Anselm said, still looking down at the guitar; bright against the red velvet lining of the case. Trevelyan Red, she even got that right… “But I hate seeing you get dragged into that world; they’ll stab you with a smile and call it courtesy.”

“They can try…” She said with a confidence she hoped she felt “But they won’t see me smiling when I stab them back! At any rate, I promised myself I wouldn’t dwell on such things, not tonight. Tonight we forget all of that for a while and enjoy ourselves a little. The first viper to bow before me only to conceal his blade, will find himself with one less hand.”

Anselm chuckled softly, closing the guitar case and turning to face her.

“I almost pity them… Thank you for this; it’s a truly beautiful gift. It will always make me think of you.”

“Perhaps…” Aleska hesitated as he stood there smiling at her “Perhaps I might sneak past your chamber one night, in hope of hearing you play.”

He cocked his head to one side; that familiar twinkle in his bright eyes.

“Then I’ll be sure to play that Antivan ballad every night; unless you wish to hear something else… My Lady.”
Aleska felt a shudder run down her spine.

*Those damned words!*

She opened her mouth to say something but was interrupted by a knocking at the door and a servant’s voice.

“Pardon, Your Worship. Mme Vivienne asks if she can have a few moments of your time.”

Aleska cleared her throat as Anselm swore under his breath. Stepping away from Anselm, Aleska cleared her throat, a forced smile upon her lips.

“Tell her I’ll be right down.” She called, looking at Anselm with a resigned shrug. He gave her a wry, long-suffering look.

“First Varric, then a Dragon, now the Ice-Queen! Will we ever have a moment’s peace?”

“Perhaps, but not today…” She said wistfully, adjusting the sleeves of her dress. “I’ll go down first…”

Anselm winked at her

“Why don’t I take the ‘private’ stairs” he suggested “At least allow me the pleasure of being your scandalous secret!”

###

With no council meeting to worry about this morning, Aleska could afford to linger over her breakfast. The morning was too cold to take it on the balcony but, curled up on the couch with a fresh pot of coffee and a plate of sweet rolls, this was a pleasant way of spending the first part of the day. The Lady Inquisitor’s presence would be expected at the mid-day High Mass; despite her being Dalish this was still an Andrastian Inquisition, and certain conventions needed to be upheld.

It was no great burden; she was not required to actively participate and there was a certain rhythmic, almost hypnotic, beauty to the rituals of the Chantry and - until then - her time was her own. The feast would last until the end of the week, Sophia had explained, to be followed by a week of fasting and prayers after which the normal business of the Inquisition would resume. There was still much being done behind the scenes, but the change to the routine was a welcome one.

She tried not to show her irritation as a servant showed Commander Cullen in. He knew how little private time she had and wouldn’t be interrupting without good reason. Putting her book to one side, she waited until the maid closed the door.

“Is there a problem?” She asked, motioning him to sit; Cullen remained standing for a moment, fidgeting with the hilt of his sword, before accepting her offer.

“Not a problem, no…” He said, clearing his throat. “And I apologise for interrupting your morning, but this is to do with a… erm… personal matter.”

“A personal matter?” Aleska looked perplexed. The Commander kept his personal business strictly to himself, informing her of his quitting Lyrium was the most he’d ever shared and only because it could potentially affect the execution of his duties, and she could think of no reason for him to break that rule. Unless… “Is everything alright with your family?”
She’d not had much of an opportunity for private conversation with the Commander since her return. He seemed more at ease with his sister’s visit now, but she could tell it still unsettled him. He looked surprised for a moment then shook his head with a smile.

“They’re well, Maker be praised; although Mia had some sharp words over my failure to keep contact.” He laughed ruefully. “It appears my brother Branson is married, and I am an uncle; although I’m not sure if things happened in exactly that order.”

“Cullen, that’s wonderful news!” Aleska smiled happily. “But, how long is it since you wrote to them?”

He gave an embarrassed cough.

“I… er… may have omitted to write to her since first joining the Inquisition.”

“Commander; that’s shocking!” She exclaimed in mock-reproach, getting up and walking over to one of the cabinets. “I know it’s early, but I think this demands a drink to celebrate.”

He raised his hand in polite refusal.

“Later, perhaps. Thank you; and that’s not what I wanted to talk to you about.”

She looked at him questioningly, then closed the cabinet door and sat back down again; pouring him a cup of coffee, which he accepted willingly.

“Now I’m really puzzled.” She said. “Something’s changed, Cullen; you seem different this morning.”

The commander took a mouthful of coffee and sat quietly for a moment.

“Last evening, during the Feast, Soph… Lady Sophia and I had a conversation. During that conversation I…” He paused, collecting his thoughts and Aleska sipped her own coffee quietly; waiting for him to continue. He cleared his throat and carried on. “During that conversation I found myself expressing certain feelings for her, and… it would appear… those feelings are reciprocated. We spoke about it again after breakfast and are agreed that these… these mutual feelings… are something neither of us wish to ignore.”

Aleska put down her cup. Part of her wanted to get up and hug the Commander but she felt he might explode with embarrassment if she did that; instead, she confined herself to reaching over and taking his hand.

“Cullen, I don’t know what to say; this is marvellous.” She exclaimed, unable to contain her excitement; which did little to unfluster the blushing Commander.

“I know…” He gave her a shy smile and Aleska realised, for the first time she’d met him, that Cullen was happy; the stress lines habitually creasing his face had relaxed and left him looking younger and lighter. “It was unexpected, for both of us; and that is why I wished to speak with you as soon as possible.”

“I understand.” Aleska refilled their cups. “You haven’t told anyone else?”

Cullen shook his head, taking a mouthful of coffee and swallowing with a slight grimace; Aleska liked her coffee brewed sweeter than he preferred.

“For several reasons; La… Sophia and I would like to keep this between ourselves as long as
possible; while we work out what it means for us. As you may know, recent years have been
difficult for both of us; especially for Sophia.”

He didn’t need to spell out their reasons; Aleska knew most of them already and could easily guess
the others. A thought occurred to her; things might be a mess with Anselm, but there was
something she could do for Cullen and Sophia.

“Lady Sophia should accompany us to Val Royeaux; her presence would be valuable in dealing
with the Marquis, and it would give you both some time away from Skyhold’s eyes and ears.”

Cullen glanced at her in grateful surprise.

“Thank you! But I thought Mme Vivienne…?”

Aleska gave him a sly look.

“I’m not convinced Mme Vivienne has quite the influence she claims to have. I hear whispers that
her star was setting well before the rebellion.” She took a sip of her coffee. “And I see no evidence
of these ‘Loyal Mages’ she supposedly commands. I think the Inquisition offers her far more than
she can give to it. Not bad for a little Dalish girl from the Eastern Marches, is it?”

Cullen shook his head with a wry laugh.

“You are becoming dangerously good at this. Should I warn Leliana?”

Aleska resisted the urge to giggle and spoil the effect; but the Commander with a sense of humour
was something unfamiliar.

“I don’t think our spymistress need fear for her position just yet.” She sighed and rolled her eyes as
the clock chimed Twelve and a knock at the door signalled the arrival of her maids “Uurgh, is it
that time already?”

“So,” Aleska took a few moments to bring out the platter of cakes she snuck away from the
banquet, offering one to Cullen on a plate. “How did you like the book?”

“How did you—” Cullen looked at her, a smile crept along Aleska’s features.

“Who do you think placed the bid?” Aleska smiled, winking at Cullen.

The door swung open, Cullen got to his feet, instinctively resuming his professional stance and
tone, as the maids entered and curtseyed.

“I apologise for interrupting your breakfast, Your Worship.”

Aleska gave a dismissive wave of her hand.

“No apology needed, Commander. I appreciate you updating me on these developments; I’ll see
that the necessary action is taken before we leave for the capital.”

There was the faintest hint of a smile at the corner of the Commander’s mouth as he bowed and
took his leave. Aleska finished her coffee as the maids set about the business of getting her outfit
ready for Mass and sudden heaviness filled her heart while she watched them. She was happy for
Cullen and Sophia, they’d suffered much and deserved to find some joy, but it was a harsh
reminder of the happiness that dangled just out of her reach; constantly tempting her to be foolish,
or brave, enough to seize it.
Chapter Summary

The meeting with the Duke yielded a new player in the Game, one who set his sights upon Aleska. With Cullen and Sophia distracted elsewhere; Aleska used the solitude to clear her mind—only to have one of Cullen’s old acquaintances return to settle a vendetta.

“I will need the horses saddled and ready by the time we leave,” Aleska’s hand trailed across her desk, ensuring each parchment had been put in the correct place. “Also tell Commander Cullen and Lady Sophia not to be late; if Commander Cullen’s door is closed however—ensure you knock.”

Aleska couldn’t stop herself smiling. It had been in this room that she’d listen to Cullen ramble about his Satinalia with Sophia. For the first time since she’d known him he’d been genuinely relaxed, happy even, and she would ensure his smile remained. He deserves it, they both do. Aleska cleared her throat, placing the cloak upon her shoulders, she tied the strings around her neck.

“Knock, my lady?” The servant enquired, looking at her with mild confusion.

“Yes,” Aleska raised her head. “Lady Sophia has offered to give Commander Cullen one last piece of council; the Commander is a Bull in a porcelain shop when it comes to diplomacy.”

“Of course, Your Worship,” the servant curtsied. “Will there be anything else, my lady?”

Aleska shook her head, slipping her hands into the gauntlets that Anselm bought her for Satinalia, how they fit her hands like he promised. Clenching her fists, the leather had moved with her, the most comfortable pair she’d owned. He did this all for me, Aleska shook her head, watching the sun wake. I cannot ask him to wake for me. She grabbed her bow and quiver, walking down the steps.

The castle had never been so quiet, not even the fires crackled in the hearths, the winter chill had settled within the large hall. For the first time in a while, she heard her own feet echo, and the silence seemed to make her thoughts sharper. Even the stained-glass window of Andraste appeared brighter, not that she looked at it much.

Hearing rapid footsteps, she turned to see Anselm walking up the hall, his coat half dragging upon the floor, and his shirt still hanging open. She sighed gently, unable to contain her smile, as he came close and put his arms around her; his hair all over the place and eyes still bleary from sleep. The quiver slipped from her fingers; the rattling of the arrows hitting the flagstones loud in the chilly silence of the Hall.

He rested his head against hers, one hand toying with her her hair, enjoying every moment she was within his arms; her warm breath against his neck, the sweet scent of jasmine and honeysuckle, the feel of her skin upon his.
“I wish I could come with you,” Anselm’s hand ran through her hair, each strand touched his fingers. “I can be ready within the hour. I will even watch my tone with Cullen… I just want to come with you.”

“I wish I could have you by my side,” Aleska whispered; guiding his arm into the sleeve of his coat and lacing up his shirt. “I would desire nothing more, but with Cullen coming with me and Rylen scouting the Approach for these Grey Warden tracks; I need you here.”

“There are a thousand of generals at your command,” Anselm’s fingers stroked her cheeks, moving towards her lips. “I am no more important than those experienced men.”

“But I don’t trust them in ways I trust you,” Aleska looked up at him, seeing the earnest plea in those sleep-clouded eyes. “I promise, when I return from Orlais with this matter to rest we can—”

“My lady, Inquisitor,” a guard called for her. “Commander Cullen is waiting at the stables for you. With the diplomat you requested.”

Aleska felt the muscles in his arms tense, and ran her hands along them to calm him down, the fire blazing within his eyes told her that if the guard took one more step towards them, he would soon find himself thrown off the battlements. With a gentle hand, Aleska guided Anselm’s face back towards hers, his hands resumed their usual place upon her waist.

“I will only be gone for a couple of weeks,” Aleska combed her fingers through his hair in a bid to neaten it. “Why don’t you go to back to bed, get some more sleep; the time will pass before you know it.”

“I can be ready in five minutes,” Anselm pleaded one last time. “I promise the pompous Orlesian will still be fuming mad regardless of when we get there, even more so if we disturb his morning meetings with his Mistress.”

“Anselm,” Aleska laughed at the infamous Trevelyan persistence shining through. “I know exactly what will happen if I say yes, chances are, we won’t leave the room for two weeks—”

“Would that be so bad?” Anselm held her hands, placing a kiss upon each finger. “To spend two weeks forgetting our troubles, away from prying eyes—”

“Walking right into the Lions den,” Aleska shook her head, claiming her hands back. “The Empress will have spies everywhere and I am hanging onto my self-restraint by my finger nails. Don’t make this harder than it has to be.”

“Then grant me one last request,” Anselm’s fingers rested beneath her chin, his thumb upon her cheek. “And I shall stay here and train the recruits night and day if that is what you desire.”

“And what request would that be?” Aleska raised a brow.

“This.”

Anselm’s lips pressed against hers; his powerful arms around her waist lifting her until she was on the tips of her toes, before setting her down once again and breaking away with a teasing look. Picking up her quiver he handed it to her, allowing the tips of his fingers to linger on her palm in a way that made them both tremble. She left the Hall quickly, without looking back and he fought the urge to race after her and grab a horse. The chime of the Chantry bell in the gardens alerted him to the time. He had a whole pack of soldiers to terrify this morning, and he’d promised to let Jonas and Kayden in on the fun.
“I love you,” He murmured towards the empty doorway; knowing she couldn’t hear her, but hoping his words would reach her in some fashion.

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Aleska hurried down to the stables, seeing Cullen and Sophia already waiting for her. Sophia wasn’t dressed in her usual finery; her attire had been simpler than what Aleska had been accustomed to see her in. Wearing one of Aleska’s coats, she fiddled with the hood endlessly.

“How do you wear these things?” Sophia muttered, adjusting the buckles of the close-fitting waistcoat. “I swear they’re worse than corsets!”

Aleska laughed, accepting Cullen’s aid onto her horse before he climbed onto his.

“Practice I guess; and, for an archer, they’re good for maintaining the posture. What I really want to know is how you wear those dresses all day; the skirt alone would make me topple down the stairs.”

“If you like support you should try mage robes!” Sophia laughed. “And they’re incredibly flattering to the bust.”

“Maker’s Breath!” Cullen muttered as they rode towards the gate. “Are the pair of you going to be discussing clothes all the way to Jader?”

Sophia caught Aleska’s eye and the two women tried not to giggle.

“Perhaps we could call into a tailor’s shop at Val Royeaux and have a new coat made up for you; like Josephine’s always suggesting.” Sophia said, her chin trembling slightly in amusement. “Something in amber or wheat-coloured brocade to match your eyes.”

Aleska laughed out loud at the Commander’s expression; caught halfway between astonishment and exasperation.

“Last one to Val Royeaux buys breakfast!” Aleska nudged Vesenya’s sides with her knees and galloped out of the gateway leading to the valley below Skyhold, with Sophia and Cullen not far from behind.

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The coins hit the table and the servants hurried to clear away the plates for them. One of the waiters approached, bringing them a coffee menu as well as an assortment of cakes, compliments of the table across from them.

“Isn’t that Viscount Gerard?” Sophia whispered, glancing over to a neighbouring table. Her hood was still up, and she wore a plain velvet half-mask, rendering her indistinguishable from many of the café’s other patrons. “He hasn’t been able to take his eyes off you.”

Aleska glanced over her shoulder and saw the man in green and rose brocade seated at a table nearby. The Viscount was handsome; his well-defined Rivaini features standing out among the masks that surrounded him. Even in an unmasked gathering, his tanned skin, deep-chocolate eyes and sensual mouth would be striking. Trays of tea and cakes were brought to them, one ornate mug in particular caught her attention. Probable one of Sophia’s specialty teas. Aleska smiled softly, thanking the waiter who served them.

To Aleska’s astonishment, the ornate mug had been placed before her, a rich chocolate liquid
swirled within; the heavy scent filling her nose with its sweet aroma. It reminded her of the time Anselm brought her the same beverage; that time where she was so uncertain and he soothed her. Back in Haven when everything seemed simpler and it had been easier to forget who they were.

“I hope this wasn’t too presumptuous,” The Viscount came over and took a seat at their table, “Are you not Inquisitor Lavellan?”

With a quick glance towards Cullen and Sophia, Aleska cursed quietly to herself; wishing she had thought to disguise her own appearance the way Sophia had.

Damn this all the Abyss. She placed the mug carefully on its saucer. Now I wish Anselm had been part of my journey, then I could have skipped this.

Aleska cleared her throat, resting her hands in her lap.

“Indeed I am,” Aleska kept her tone calm, knowing that any attention drawn upon them could be scandalous to Sophia. “Is there something I can do for you?”

Viscount Gerard laughed, lifting her hand to his lips.

“It is my honour, Lady Inquisitor.” The stubble of his beard tickled her skin. “Had I known I would be speaking to a Dalish elf the way I do the high ladies in my father’s court; I would have been more knowledgeable of the appropriate way to greet you.”

Aleska reclaimed her hand, even Cullen could detect her discomfort in the topic of conversation. Aleska felt the lump within her throat grow; her levels of diplomacy had not yet reached the points of defusing this situation, nor could she asked Sophia to step in and risk the Count hearing of this.

“There is no true way, my Lord,” Aleska forced a smile. “Whilst the lovely gesture was not presumptuous—”

“You are not what I expected …” Viscount Gerard leaned back within the seat. “A woman of fine taste, beauty and grace. Had someone told me you were born a Dalish elf, I would have strung them up in the marketplace with my own hands.”

“Inquisitor,” Cullen spoke for the first time. “We shouldn’t be late for the Duke’s meeting.”

Aleska slowed her breath in a bid to calm her nerves. She’d hoped that Anselm would have been defiant enough to ride on horseback after them as soon as they had a head start. Every horse that passed them sent her heart racing, only to fall with disappointment. A creature like this would never have dared to come near if he was at her side.

“If the Lady Inquisitor wants some Ferelden dog Lord to speak for her, she would ask him to.” Viscount Gerard all but spat at Cullen.

“And if I wanted a noble lord to insult my military general,” Aleska retaliated. “I would ask him to do that. Commander Cullen, Lady Victoria.”

Aleska rose, leaving the coin purse on the table, and walked out of the café; barely able to contain her temper.

I know I shouldn’t have done that… She thought as she paced the pavement, waiting for Cullen and Sophia to join her.

...If he writes to Josephine and says I publicly humiliated him.
Aleska sniffed, taking the coat off her shoulders in attempt to get more air.

“Are you all right?” Cullen asked; coming up behind her with Sophia at his side, he placed a hand on her shoulder to calm her down.

“I should be asking that of you,” Aleska shrugged his hand away. “He had no right to call you that! Viscount or not, no-one insults you in my presence.”

To her surprise, Cullen laughed quietly.

“I have been called far worse, believe me…” He said, as Sophia handed Aleska the scarf she’d left behind in her haste. “The Kirkwall street-urchins were more inventive, and I paid them as little regard.

Aleska drew a deep breath, exhaling slowly through her nose.

“You are my friend, as well as Commander of the Inquisition.” She said, dropping her voice to a whisper as she adjusted Sophia’s hood. “I refuse to have you insulted in front of me or Sophia.”

It had been a while since Sophia had spoken; she had never been this quiet all day and it frightened Aleska.

Don’t tell me I just made a powerful enemy.

“The Viscount is a dangerous man…” Sophia cautioned. “His family does some business with ours and I believe he has some connections with Anselm’s father; which makes his interest in you doubly concerning. If I know him, he is going to play this to his advantage; and pray you caught him in a good mood.”

“Should I go apologize for my outburst?” Aleska placed her hands across her stomach to try and soothe the sudden nausea she felt. “I don’t want Josephine to find out, I’ll have to endure her lectures for a week.”

“No,” Sophia cautioned. “It will make you look weak, he likes women who openly speak their minds. His gesture was a test and you passed. Josephine won’t hear a word of it, but he is not going to simply give up because you proved you had a bark as big as your bite. Pray to the Creators, Andraste if it pleases you, that Anselm doesn’t find out though. He duelled du Barras over far less an insult and if he hears that the Viscount had taken interest in you… then not even my father would be able to restrain him.”

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“This is an outrage!” The Duke’s fist slammed against the table once more, knocking his wine glass over. “The Inquisition soldiers should be drawn and quartered for what they have done!”

Aleska thankfully picked up her glass within time before it joined the two toppled over, wine spilling onto the oak table. She’d had to endure the Duke’s temper for over an hour now, mirroring Sophia’s actions as to not rile him up further. Listening to the Duke’s rant one last time, Aleska inhaled deeply. He is all but foaming at the mouth, isn’t he afraid of choking? A smile touched her lips.

“Do I amuse you?!” The Duke stood up, all but knocking the table over.

“No, of course not,” Aleska rose as well. “I vow to you as both the Inquisitor and a woman of my word, that Commander Cullen and I will deal with this situation swiftly and appropriately. I shall
let him know that drawing and quartering is your request—but with the tensions rising high, my Lord, I don’t want to condemn those men to that fate until an investigation is held. If they are lying, Nightingale will find out and your request will be carried out; but if they are honest I will show them mercy. We do not want to make a decision based upon anger; for what will that say about us as leaders?"

“Yes,” the Duke lowered himself, his temper subsiding. “I expect to be updated on the progression of this investigation; thank you, Your Worship, for agreeing to handle this with the utmost care and importance.”

Aleska lowered herself into a curtsy. “I hope this will only improve on our relations, not wear them thinner. Good day, my Lord.”

Aleska exited the room, the guards lowering their heads before her, Sophia by her side rubbing her hands together with an air of quiet satisfaction.

If he thinks he has us over a barrel, then he’s very much mistaken. Aleska thought as the Duke’s mistress gave her the slighted of nods. Her smug grin told Aleska all she needed to know about who the source of the problem was. Leliana will run rings around him, and ferret out exactly who Lady Frederika is working for…

“Are you all right?” Sophia smiled towards her. “I am proud of you, you handled that with grace and dignity. I doubt Josephine would have anything to complain about.”

“If I get to go one week without one of Josephine’s lectures,” Aleska hooked her arm with Sophia. “It will be a wonderful few days for me; the last time that happened was when I had settled into my new quarters.”

“How many compliments did that cost you?” Sophia laughed.

“Not an amount I am willing to confess,” Aleska led Sophia to her chambers. “And we must get you ready for tonight.”

***

“I hate doing this to your hair.” Aleska said; combing the dye carefully through to turn the heavy read tresses a lustrous black. “But it washes out, and we need to be careful; it wouldn’t do to advertise your presence – for all sorts of reasons.”

“I doubt Anselm suspects…” Sophia examined her reflection in the mirror “He’s probably just glad I’m here to chaperone you! I don’t like keeping him secret, but I’d rather he didn’t find out about Cullen and me until we’re sure of it ourselves.”

“I intend to keep it that way…” Aleska set down the comb and tied Sophia’s hair into a loose bun, “…for as long as possible. My lips are sealed.”

“I know this cannot be easy, given the tensions between you and Anselm.” Sophia turned to look at her. “Seeing someone else happy can sting.”

Aleska picked up the kohl-stick; her heart racing at the mention of his name. It was hard, worse than she’d thought, not having him by her side. Dipping it in the water, she placed her hand beneath Sophia’s chin to examine her features before applying the kohl to Sophia’s eyelids; trying to keep it as straight at possible.

“I know it is a weird sensation,” Aleska admired her handy work, pinching Sophia’s cheeks.
“Sorry, but I have more pink cheeks. I’ve seen more sun in my days. I know pretending isn’t how you want to be with Cullen, treating this like some dirty little secret, but we don’t know how your father will react to the news. Given Cullen’s station and modest upbringing.”

Aleska smiled, placing the kohl sticks down and helping Sophia untie her hair, running a brush through her now blackened hair. Even the way it curled looked exactly like hers. Removing the necklaces and bracelets; placing them in a locked box for their safety. Aleska helped Sophia up, admitting her handy work. It wouldn’t fool anyone who knew her but, to a spy watching from a distance, even a superficial resemblance would throw them.

“My father isn’t a heartless man; but the fall of the Circles has changed many things. We don’t know what, if anything, will replace the Nevarran Accord. When my Magic manifested, it freed me from the world of political and dynastic marriages. That may no longer be the case…”

Her voice tailed off quietly.

“Magic exists to serve man and never to rule over him,” Aleska recited, as if the Chant had been told to her since she was a child. “Even with the Circles fallen, I doubt you could be dragged back into that world. Anyway, Cullen cares for the woman you are, not for the lands or titles you can potentially give him.”

“I know that,” Sophia straightened her posture. “Why would he—”

“I know you know that Cullen’s affections are genuine; but, sometimes, we all need reassurance in our lives, despite our hearts knowing the truth.”

“Or are Cullen and I a metaphor?” Sophia took Aleska’s hands. “What is really on your mind? Is it Anselm? I am your friend, you can be open with me as I have always been with you.”

Aleska exhaled deeply, taking back her hands and rubbing them together to calm her anxiety. Just thinking about it made her heart race. She poured a glass of wine, swallowing half of it in a single mouthful. Only with Kayden or Maela was she ever able to be completely honest about her feelings; enquiries from others would usually raise a wall of ice so swiftly that even Mme. Vivienne might be impressed - but Anselm was one topic which gave her pause; something she’d spent hours, days and even weeks thinking about.

“Anselm and I are complicated.” Aleska finally said, the wine helping to loosen her tongue and override her inhibitions. “How could I have expected it to be different? He isn’t some lesser Lord who has minor lands and titles to lose; he is Count Boniface’s nephew, if rumours are to believed —his heir. He needs to marry a woman of title, to bear him noble sons. I cannot do that.”

The glass fell from her fingers as she collapsed, sobbing, on the bed. Just by speaking her fears she’d given them a sharp reality that cut to her heart. Sophia sat beside her, putting her arms around her and resting her cheek against the top of Aleska’s head. The first bit of real physical comfort she’d know in far too long.

“I know,” Sophia whispered, her one hand placed upon Aleska’s cheek holding her as closely as she would her own brother, or sister—if she had one. Aleska sniffed, hoping to hide the tears that she so desperately needed to cry since the situation began.

“When that whore,” Aleska got up. “When she was in his arms, I wanted to slit her throat. For days I tore myself up, thinking that he lied. I would tell myself that lie each night as I fell asleep; convincing myself that, if he had invited her here, I could easily close my heart off to him as soon as I began to open it.”
“I see the way he pined for you during those few days,” Sophia kept her tone calm. “You didn’t see it. I won’t say I wouldn’t reacted the same way if the same had happened to Cullen—”

“Cullen could never be a philanderer, it’s not in his nature.” Aleska poured herself another glass, half the bottle gone already. “I’ve never seen him even look at another woman when you are around, that is love. That is a man who knows that he will spend the rest of his life with the woman by his side.”

“Aleska, calm down,” Sophia rose, taking the glass from her fingers and setting it on the table. “This is exactly what my uncle was trying to do…”

“I am calm,” Aleska ran her fingers through her hair in frustration. “I didn’t want to admit that Anselm Trevelyan all but destroyed me. Is that what my court wanted to hear? That a man of noble blood destroyed me for those few days; or that I am desperately in love with a man I know in my heart will never truly be mine. When he needs to, the Baron or your father will flaunt some beautiful and elegant woman before him as a perfect match and I will either be cast off or reduced to his mistress. I couldn’t bare either, I love him Sophia, the mere thought of it frightens me.”

Sophia fixed Aleska’s hair and, dampening a cloth, began to wipe the kohl stains from her cheeks; looking at her with a serious and thoughtful expression. Picking up the kohl-stick she started repairing the damage Aleska’s tears had done to her make-up.

“I am going to tell you something and I don’t want you to take this personally but, when we get back to Skyhold, put your big girl breeches on and tell Anselm you love him before you lose him. I know he loves you; but his tolerance for your rejection won’t last forever. Should you keep pushing him away… one morning you may wake up and find him gone forever.”

She put down the kohl stick and handed Aleska the mirror; stepping back with her hands neatly folded at her waist. Aleska looked down at her reflection, seeing the slight puffiness of her eyes and generally forlorn expression. Had anyone else spoken so bluntly, they would have felt the full weight of her anger; but Sophia knew Anselm better than anyone else – and certainly had more experience in matters of the heart that she ever had.

She was an Enchanter in the Circle for years… Aleska thought, with a faint smile. I’m probably not the first tearful, lovesick, girl she’s had to counsel…

She put the mirror down with a quiet sigh. Sophia was right; there was nothing she’d said that Aleska hadn’t thought herself. Anselm’s rank might create risks, but this holding back was causing them nothing but pain. There were only two choices and she knew it; either end things once and for all, or take the plunge into the unknown…

“I have destroyed your evening with Cullen,” Aleska hugged Sophia tightly. “Go, have fun and be free, even for one night of this. If anyone comes near you—”

“Keep my hood up,” Sophia smiled, leaving Aleska to her thoughts.

Aleska waited for enough time to pass to know she was utterly alone. She had no desire to stay in a room which made her feel more trapped than the halls of Skyhold. Flinging a coat around her shoulders and picking up a small purse of coins, Aleska hurried downstairs. The Innkeeper got to her feet as she saw Aleska approach and curtsied low.

“Your Worship; is something wrong?” She asked.

“Nothing is wrong,” Aleska smiled. “Although I have a small favour to ask?”
“It will be an honour to serve you, my lady.” She gave Aleska another bow, her eyes flickering to the purse in her hands in anticipation of the rewards this favour might bring.

“If anyone asks where I am,” Aleska gave her the purse. “I am upstairs, asleep and you received a message to not be disturbed under any circumstances.”

***

“This place is worse than a market during the day…” Sophia’s voice was barely a whisper in the soaring arcades of the Grand Cathedral. “But, at this time…”

The lamps and candles burning before the shrines and altars created tiny pools of light in the cavernous nave, the pillars and arches lost in the silent darkness above. A single, crystal-clear, voice from somewhere near the High Altar sang the Chant; another voice briefly blending in and taking over as the cantors changed shifts. The scent of frankincense and benzoin filled the air and, apart from the handful of priests and worshippers present at this late hour, they were alone.

“I never imagined it would be so huge…” Cullen tried not to gawk like a bumpkin as he attempted to get a measure of the space. As a boy, he’d thought the village Chantry was the biggest building in the world, but even the towering height of Kinloch Hold didn’t inspire the same awe as this place. Despite later refurbishments, it retained much of the elegant simplicity of Kordillus Drakon’s original design; no other place of worship in Thedas came near to rivalling it. “Thank you for bringing me here.”

In the darkness he couldn’t see the sadness in her smile as she looked towards the black-draped Sunburst Throne. The last time she was here it had been a different world; one where she’d shared Justinia’s conviction that common sense and reason might still prove the victor, and it had been Guenthier at her side – come to seek a blessing before the perilous journey back to Ostwick. It wasn’t an auspicious thought and it made her shudder slightly. Cullen removed his coat and placed it around her shoulders.

“You’re cold…” he said, pulling of his gloves and rubbing her hands. “I wouldn’t like to be responsible for you catching a chill.”

He was so like Guenthier in many ways; that was the thing that gave her pause, fearful of treating him as a replacement. But perhaps that was also what drew her; the courage and thoughtful quietness, coupled with the sense there was a part of his soul that would never leave her. Words from Justinia’s last letter came back to her...

…do not let your grief turn into bitterness, dear child. You were born to love, and to be loved; the darkness of this present time cannot overwhelm that, and an open heart will never fail to be consoled – even in the most unexpected ways...

She pulled the thickly furred collar of the coat a little closer around her; the scent of oakmoss and elderflower filling her nostrils. Most Holy had been right, she usually was about these things; of course, gossip said that Divine Justinia’s own interpretation of celibacy had been ‘creative’ – so perhaps she had better knowledge of such matters than some of her predecessors.

“I forgot how cold it can get in here at night.” She said, still unable to shake the sense of foreboding that had taken hold of her. “We should probably get back to the inn. I don’t like the idea of leaving Aleska alone for too long; not in this snakepit.”

***
The moonlight flickered on the calm surface of the Miroir de la Mere, and the quiet sound of water lapping against the steps calmed Aleska, as she breathed in the cool night air. *I just opened my heart, to a woman who knows what loss feels like; yet she is frolicking somewhere in Orlais and I am miserable.* She leaned her elbows against the stone balustrade, looking down into the cold, dark, waters which could cleanse her head of all this madness.

*I love him,* Aleska repeated to herself. *Why is that so hard to admit, even to myself? The frustration burned within her. Even she could no longer deny it, how she longed to have that moment with him; a moment which would change so much for her.*

*I hear he is fantastic in that department, according to what the whores in Haven used to whisper…* The thought brought a sudden fear tugging at her insides. *But I still have my virtue intact, he has had more experienced woman in his bed. How can I be enough for him? I don’t know how to please a man, not even the first thing about what to do.*

Aleska laughed to herself, picking up a small rock and skipping it along the waters. *A high-ranking noble Lord, an elven woman; start of every bad love story Varric attempted to write. Even Swords and Shields wasn’t good, I don’t know what Cassandra sees in those books? I suppose it is the ideals of a happy ending and romance which appeals to her.* Another rock followed the first, her mind a blaze with a thousand and one thoughts.

*If he loves me, if Sophia is right, what if I am pushing him away? Taunting him with stolen moments is more damning than just giving in. Aleska inhaled deeply. I want to, Creators I want to. Nothing would please me more.*

Aleska rubbed her face, feeling her eyes stinging again.

*Well, perhaps one or two things could—I need to tell him! I have to tell him! The moment I return.*

She turned, hearing footsteps, and saw a shadowy yet somehow familiar figure approaching. The light of a lantern glinted off an arm greave embossed with the Templar insignia.

*Of course, he’d find out and come looking…* She inwardly cursed at the innkeeper who couldn’t keep her mouth shut, turning to face the shadowy figure. *I’ve got so clumsy I can’t even sneak away from Cullen*

“You’re awfully quiet,” Aleska shook her head. “Normally I would be enduring one of your lectures about safety and how dangerous wandering the streets of Orlais can be by myself. Well Cullen, I don’t need you to tail me, I am fine—Better than fine actually… and you should be making the most of your time with Sophia.”

The figure stepped into the light. Even before she recognised the haggard, sallow, face, the Red Lyrium protruding out of his armour made Aleska’s blood run cold. She felt the edge of the balustrade pressing into her back; it would take a moment for her to jump into the lake, but she was hardly dressed for swimming. The weight of her clothes would drag her down long before she reached the other shore.

“So… Cully-Boy has a new lady friend? That’s handy to know.” Samson’s laugh was hard and coarse “But it wouldn’t be the first time a pretty Mage made his tail wag…”

Aleska reached for her blade, but other shapes lunged out the shadows; pinning her arms as Samson pressed a damp cloth over her mouth and nose, muffling her scream. A heavy, sickly, scent filled her senses, dulling her awareness and lessening her will to fight with each moment passing.
“That’s a good girl…” She heard him say as the blackness rose up and took her. “This’ll go much easier if you behave.”
Chapter Summary

With Aleska missing, tensions and animosities run high in Skyhold; while Samson has another twist of the knife prepared for the already-pressured Inquisition. Anselm grasps at the one hope they have for finding her alive and well, and decides to take matters into his own hands.

Sophia knocked on the bedroom door for the third time.

“Aleska, wake up! Breakfast is almost over.”

She waited for a moment but there was no sound of movement within. She knocked again, harder and louder.

“Aleska! Say something or I’m coming in!”

Sophia let out an exasperated little sigh. Aleska could be worse than Jonas or Anselm when it came to mornings. Receiving no response, she knocked for one last time and opened the door.

“Wake up dormiglione! It’s nearly…” She stopped; the vague anxiety she’d been feeling since last night congealing into a sour knot of fear. The room was silent and empty, the bed unslept in. She hurried through to check the dressing room in the hope Aleska might already be awake and getting ready, but that was empty too. Everything seemed unchanged from yesterday; except for the folded piece of paper lying on the writing desk. She picked it up, her hand shaking, and Aleska’s pendant slipped out onto the desktop; the clasp broken and stains of dried blood on the chain. Sophia bit down hard on her thumb to stop herself from crying out.

Swallowing hard to fight her rising nausea, she unfolded the note carefully. The few words sent a chill running down her spine.

*Knight takes Queen. Check.*

###

“How can you stay so calm?” Cullen paced the floor, unable to contain his agitation, gripping the hilt of his sword so tight that the pressure of his knuckles was visible through the leather glove.

“I’m far from calm, believe me, but panicking isn’t going to help us find Aleska…” Sophia sealed the last message and handed it to the waiting scout. “Deliver that one to Revered Mother Lucette at St. Genevieve’s, on Rue de Blanchard.”

The messenger saluted and left, and Sophia sank her head into her hands with an exhausted prayer.

“I am to blame for this…” Cullen muttered angrily. “I should never have left her alone.”

“We should never have left her…” Sophia raised her head and looked at him; prowling up and
down the room like a caged beast, trapped and frustrated. “And Aleska should never have left here without an escort, she should have known better. You can’t take sole responsibility for this, that isn’t fair on you”

Cullen turned sharply to her, his face dark with anger.

“They? Why not?” I hadn’t been distract…” He caught himself before the words came spilling out. “Forgive me! I didn’t mean to imply…”

He lapsed into a confused silence and Sophia got to her feet, biting back the response she would have made in different circumstances. If they started lashing out at each other it would only benefit their enemy. She walked over to him, placing her hands on his shoulders. Releasing his grip on his sword, he put his arms around her, holding her close to his chest.

“Forgive me.” He repeated, resting his forehead against hers. “I spoke without thinking. I didn’t mean to imply—"

Sophia was silent for a moment, drawing some much-needed comfort from Cullen’s embrace. Despite the man’s own agitation there was something quietening about his presence.

“We can’t let go of hope…” she said in a near whisper, almost to herself. “We don’t know who has Aleska, or where she is, but we have to believe she’s still alive and that we have a chance to find her.”

“What…” Cullen hesitated at the thought of putting his deepest fear into words. “What if she isn’t?”

She lifted her head to loot at him with an expression Cullen had only seen once before, when the Red Templars swarmed Haven; no longer the gentle and devout scholar, but the ferocious descendant of the warrior-Counts who’d held Ostwick undefeated against Darkspawn and Qunari alike.

“Then we exact a vengeance that will make our enemies tremble.”

Aleska lay still on the narrow cot, waiting for the fogginess and nausea to clear. She couldn’t be sure how many days had passed, only blurred memories of riding in the back of a wagon along uneven roads; kept in a perpetual, passive haze by whatever drug had first been used to knock her out. Apart from some chafing from the ropes they’d used to bind her wrists she was unharmed, although that was little comfort. Samson had gone to a lot of risk to capture her alive when it would surely have been easier to cut her throat and throw her body into the lake. It might have been days before she was found. Why he wanted her alive frightened her, but it meant she still could find a chance to escape if she was careful… and lucky.

Head pounding, Aleska attempted to make sense of her surroundings, the mist escaping her mouth with each breath told her she was in a colder climate, but where? Too cold for Ferelden, they wouldn’t be that stupid. With each thought the pounding worsened. Her vision cleared, allowing her a better look at her surroundings.

As the sense of sickness ebbid, she raised herself on her elbows and took stock of the room. It was long and narrow with a vaulted ceiling built of finely dressed stone; too fine to have been built as a prison cell, unless for the most exalted of captives. A delicately arched window, set high in the wall opposite the door, allowed some light and air to enter without permitting a view. The
carvings on the window arch were familiar in a way she couldn’t explain; dismissing it as an effect of the drug distorting her perceptions. Aside from the cot, the only other furniture was a table, with a covered jug sitting on it, and a stool beside the door. She sat up slowly, realising that one ankle was secured to the wall by means of a long chain; light, but sturdy looking. Aleska carefully got to her feet, supporting herself by leaning against the wall, and inched along to test the limits of her movement. At the chain’s fullest extent, she could get halfway to the door; just far enough to reach the table with the pitcher.

Removing the cover, Aleska sniffed at the contents. Water. She poured a little into her hand; it looked clear, smelled untainted, and she realised she was desperately thirsty. She lapped at her wet hand with her tongue. It tasted fresh and she gave the pitcher a longing look; eager to swallow the contents down but unsure if that would be safe or even wise.

“If I was gonna just poison you, I wouldn’t have gone to all that effort to get you here safely…”

Aleska recoiled in surprise, the jug slipping from her hands and smashing on the floor. She’d been so engrossed with testing the water that she hadn’t noticed the viewing hatch in the door being opened. She heard a rattling of keys and bolts, the door swung open, and Samson stepped into the room – shaking his head and tutting.

“What a mess! I’ll get someone to clean that up and bring some more water…”

He barked an order at one of the Red Templars standing guard outside the door then dragged the stool a little closer to the table, but still well outside the range of the chain, and sat down. The crystals of red Lyrium embedded in his armour cast a sickly red glow in the gloomy chamber, allowing Aleska to get a better look at Corypheus’ general. He was tall, but leaner than she’d expected; almost skinny despite the size and weight of his armour. Thinning black hair reached almost to his collar, framing a haggard and pockmarked face; his eyes bloodshot but still alert and sharp. Cullen said he’d spent years begging on the streets of Kirkwall and those years had left their mark.

“What do you expect me to be grateful for not killing me outright?” She asked. Samson merely chuckled.

“I’m not doing you any favours; I’m to deliver you to the Master when the time is right…” he shrugged. “But this ain’t personal. I got no beef with you; behave yourself, and I’ll see you get treated with respect. No need to make this unpleasant.”

“I suppose that deserve some thanks…” She replied, trying to keep her voice steady. He nodded approvingly.

“You got guts, I appreciate that. Just a pity you were in the wrong place at the wrong time; but, that can happen to the best of us.” A Templar entered carrying another jug of water; a leather one this time, Aleska noted, they clearly didn’t want any more breakages. She backed away from the table and sat down on the cot as the Templar placed the jug down and crouched to pick up the shards; throwing Samson a sour look as he did.

That struck her as odd. Why did Samson have one of his men performing such a menial task in front of a captive? The Templar looked young, with close cropped reddish-blond hair and a rash of angry red nodules running down one side of his face and neck. There was something about the line of his nose…

Samson laughed quietly as he saw the look of shock on her face.
“There is a bit of a resemblance, ain’t there? Think I might use him to deliver my message for Cully-boy. Wonder how that old fox in Ostwick will react when he learns one of his precious bloodline serves the Elder One?”

Aleska sat silently; waiting for the Templar to finish his task and leave. Beneath the shock, and the swirling fear, one thing stood out. If Samson was sending a messenger to Cullen it meant they couldn’t be too far from an Inquisition presence or outpost; a few days ride at most.

“Where have you brought me?” She asked once the door had closed, getting up and walking over to the table. She was steady on her feet now, but her throat remained dry and sore; her thirst so strong she could almost smell the water from here. Samson watched her carefully as she picked up the jug and took a long swallow.

“Sahrnia, in the Eastern Dales…” he said at last “But if you’re planning on an escape attempt, I wouldn’t suggest it. Even if you could get out of here, there’s worse than my boys out there.”

Sahrnia… she knew the name; it had come up in some of the scout reports from Emerald Graves. Something about a quarry and lyrium caravans. Aleska wiped her mouth on the back of her hand.

“I’ve survived worse.”

“You were lucky…” Samson growled “And there ain’t no-one here to run to your aid; so be smart and don’t give me or my men any trouble.”

Aleska returned to the cot and sat back down.

“It seems like I’d be foolish to try…” She said despondently. Samson got to his feet.

“Smart girl. Now you’re awake I’ll get them to send some food. It’s all Orlesian muck, but it’s hot and filling…”

Aleska paused, attempting to gain a better idea of who she was dealing with. “You are under the assumption Cullen will personally come to my rescue, when he has an entire army at his command. A little ambitious of you.”

“If I know Cully-Boy,” Samson stopped at the door. “He’ll come, you might not be the one to get his tail wagging, but you’re a pretty one; a whole sight better than Meredith. If he ain’t got some blood pumping when you’re around, you colour me surprised.”

Once he was gone, and the door firmly locked, Aleska lay down facing the wall. Slowly, inch by careful inch, she worked one hand down between the cot and the wall; feeling carefully with her fingertips. After a short while of searching, they brushed against the shard of jug that had ended up there when the pieces scattered. Only an inch or so long – too small to have been noticed – but sharp as a blade along one edge. She withdrew her hand. Safer to let it lie there for now until she could think of a place to hide it. It was a start…

###

“It might work, even without the blood” Dagna agreed, examining the pendant through a magnifying lens. “Although there would need to be some way to ensure the charm didn’t dissipate. Perhaps an adapted binding rune...?”

“How long would that take?” Sophia asked, before the Arcanist launched off onto another tangent. It was hard not to sound impatient. Time was passing and the circular arguments in the Council Chamber showed no sign of letting up. Dagna sat in thought for a moment. The normal spells for
creating a phylactery were simple. It had been such a routine practise in the circle that almost every Enchanter was trained in them, but those required far more organic material than they had; and it needed to be fresh.

“What tracking spells are you going to use?” She asked. “I haven’t run across any that only rely on a base object, even if it does belong to the person.”

Sophia exchanged glances with Dorian who have her a slight wink in return.

“There are ways to revitalise dried blood and, with the right augmentation, even a drop should be sufficient for our purpose.” He said with a touch of satisfaction. “They’re not exactly legal in the south, however, and I’m a little shocked that a respectable Mage like Lady Sophia has even heard of them.”

Dagna’s eyes lit up with glee.

“Necromancy? Wow! That’s... I mean, I tried to get hold of a copy of the Necrologia Nevarrica, but the Mortalitasi refused to release one.”

“It’s frightfully dull and contains far too many chapters on pickling.” Dorian informed her, with a mildly disgusted pout. “I’ve never been able to look at a gherkin the same way since. What’s important is that the revitalised blood remains viable as long as Aleska lives, and Solas assures us that she does.”

Solas might be cryptic at times, but he had been emphatic about sensing Aleska’s living presence in the Fade – as if trying to find him through the shifting landscapes of dreaming. It was a faint hope at best, but Solas was also certain that the place she in was Elvhen. Not much of a clue, there were ruins all over the place, but another piece for the puzzle.

“I’ll need to strengthen the matrix of the rune, that might take a couple of hours, but I can have it ready by nightfall.” Dagna said, returning to her examination of the pendant. “If I try to speed up the process...”

“Nightfall will be perfect Dagna, thank you.” Sophia said. This was their one chance and rushing could be as fatal as undue delay. “It gives us more time to fine tune the spells.”

As they climbed the stairs from the undercroft Sophia suddenly stopped, clinging onto the wall as a sudden rush of dizziness threatened to overwhelm her. Dorian took hold of her other arm, giving her a concerned look.

“You should rest; this hasn’t been an easy day for you. I’m surprised you can still function!”

“I can rest when we’re done.” She insisted. “I’ll be fine!”

Dorian sighed quietly. The Trevelyans might have branched off from House Pavus centuries ago, but they had a truly Magisterial stubbornness.

“For the sake of avoiding argument, I’m willing to pretend that’s what you actually feel; but you will get an hour’s sleep before we continue. That isn’t negotiable!”

As they entered the Great Hall, a page hurried up to them.

“Pardon, milady; Seeker Pentaghast requests your presence in the Council Chamber...”

Dorian snorted in amusement.
“If there’s no rest for the wicked then you, my dear, must have been very naughty recently; I’ll expect details…”

###

“I should have been there with her!” Anselm raged, storming up and down the floor of the Council Chamber. “What were you thinking of, leaving her alone like that?”

“The Inquisitor requested some time to herself!” Cullen snapped back. “And Lady Sophia had business at the Grand Cathedral; perhaps I should have let her go unescorted instead? If you weren’t always encouraging her to take foolish risks…”

Anselm turned on his heel, glaring angrily.

“Don’t you dare! Don’t you fucking dare! I’ve always been there at her side; I’m not the one who’s been treating her like she needs to be on a leash all the time!”

“What?” Cullen scoffed. “I’m to let her have her liberty but still be her gaoler?”

Anselm glanced at Kayden standing in the corner, his hand rested upon the hilt of his sword, despite his silence; the silent rage which seethed within him hadn’t reached the point where he felt the need to vocalize it. That would come after this meeting. Even the tone of his breath told Anselm all he needed to know—Cullen was safer behind that table and far enough that Kayden wouldn’t throw him out of the window.

“Enough! Both of you!” Cassandra shouted, slamming her hands down hard on the table; causing the map markers to rattle and jump.

“These arguments are taking us nowhere; we need to concentrate on finding the Inquisitor, then we can decide who’s fault this is.” Leliana sounded calm, but there was an unmistakeable edge of anxiety in her voice. “Lady Sophia; you said that you and Lord Dorian might have a possible solution?”

Sophia nodded; briefing them on the discussions in the Undercroft while omitting those details that would be difficult, at best, to explain. She was in no mood for the arguments to spin off on the tangent of what did or did not constitute Blood Magic.

“That is something…” Josephine said, with a small sigh. “If only we knew who had her.”

“And what good would that do?” Cullen muttered, scowling at the map as if he could intimidate it into giving up Aleska’s location. “I doubt a firm, but polite note would solve the matter…”

Josephine opened her mouth to respond, but a knock at the door announced Knight-Captain Sidony.

“Pardon for the interruption; but out men have intercepted a Red Templar under flag of truce. He says he has a message from General Samson.”

A cold silence fell on the room; this was the unspoken fear they’d hoped would not be the case.

“What is his message?” Cullen asked; his voice flat and expressionless. Knight Captain Sidony shifted awkwardly.

“He said he would only deliver that in person…” She hesitated, glancing around the anxious faces in the room “To Commander Cullen and Lady Sophia; no-one else.”
Anselm’s fists clenched hard, the whites of his knuckles shown, the pain radiating through his wrist became more apparent.

“Void take him!” He growled; his face pale and dangerous. “Give me ten minutes with him…”

“He is under a flag of truce.” Leliana interjected. “If Samson has Aleska then her safety depends on him.”

Cullen turned to Sophia.

“I cannot compel you to do this…”

Sophia took a deep breath and exhaled slowly to calm herself.

“Samson is playing a game of his own.” She said, carefully folding her hands to disguise their trembling. “Until we know what it is, we have to play by his rules.”

###

They’d brought the Templar in through one of the sally-ports to avoid attracting attention; placing him in an isolated cell, well away from anyone else. The man stood in the middle of the cell, hands behind his back. The moment they entered, Cullen felt Sophia collapse against him; and he caught her round the waist to stop her falling.

“Giacomo!” She gasped, in horror and distress. “Beata Andraste… what have they done to you?”

“I have seen the light, sweet cousin; the true light…” The young Templar replied coldly; beneath the Marcher lilt was a harsh, insect-like, buzzing. “Tell your father to submit to the Elder One and cast down his false idols; or House Trevelyan and all it’s pride will be trampled into the dust.”

“Enough of this!” Cullen snarled; fighting both his revulsion and the desire to run this creature through where it stood. “Speak your message.”

“General Samson has no interest in your Herald. The Elder One will claim her in His own time.” The Red Templar who’d once been Knight-Lieutenant Giacomo Trevelyan said; still with that warped buzzing in his voice. “It’s you the General wants, Knight-Captain. Surrender yourself to him, and the Elf will be released unharmed.”

Kayden stepped forward, his hand firmly around the Templar’s throat, shoving him into a wall with a heavy thud. He’d had enough. The Templar’s feet dangled, Kayden’s grip tightened restricting the air from his lungs. Sophia saw the fire dancing in Kayden’s eyes, he wanted to strip the flesh from Giacomo’s body inch by inch. The thought nauseated Sophia.

“If you bastards have lain a single hand on my sister, I will send you back to your Master in fucking pieces! DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME?!”

The tone to which Kayden had assumed even brought a jolt of adrenaline to Sophia, Cassandra’s fingers unlaced Kayden’s from Giacomo’s collar, the Templar fell to the floor, his hand around his throat coughing as the air rushed back into his lungs.

“He is under the flag of truce,” Cassandra warned Kayden, a firm hand against his chest. “We share your anger, but we cannot kill this man.”

“There is nothing that states I can’t send him back to his master in pieces,” Kayden spat. “As long as he arrives back alive. We have fulfilled our oaths.”
With a wave of her hand, Cassandra had guards enter the room, even she knew if Kayden stayed there would be nothing to hold him back from exacting his anger on the Templar at his feet. Giacomo struggled to stand, be it from the shock or from the force Kayden used to slam his body into the wall, his legs felt limp.

“Oh, before I forget,” the corner of Kayden’s lips twitched, even Cullen took a step forward.

It happened in slow motion, the moment Kayden’s fist collided with Giacomo’s nose had been the breaking point, the Templar fell to his knees as blood poured out through his fingers, dripping onto the stone flooring. It took the two guards and Cullen to restrain Kayden from doing something worse to their messenger.

Each one of them had truly seen the Lavellan temper for themselves, the one thing they could all agree on was that they didn’t want to imagine the horrors which befell Samson should any harm come to Aleska.

###

Varric winced as the smash echoed down the hallway.

“Ten shillings says that was the mirror!”

Bull shook his head, listening intently to the shattering of the glass within the next room.

“Nah; chamber pot, or one of those fancy Orlesian vases.” There was a louder, more prolonged, shattering. “That was the mirror!”

Varric jumped to his feet as Kayden came racing up the stairs. His face still red from his confrontation with Giacomo, Bull sat back in his seat, observing the elf’s posture.

“Slicer…”

“I heard the whole story on the way up the road, he can be lucky that was all I did to him” He said sourly, Leliana’s messenger had reached him just as he was finishing patrol and he’d pushed the horse to it’s limits galloping back. “I thought you fuckers were supposed to be taking care of her? How could you let this happen??”

“Boss wanted some alone time.” Bull said, attempting to defuse another potential fight, one Kayden would lose. “Cullen didn’t expect she’d go wandering, not by herself and not at night”

“If he hasn’t learned by now, she never does what she’s expected to, then he’s thicker than I thought!” Kayden ran his hands over his face, a thought ran through his mind which even gave him pause. “Creators! This is a real shitstorm. When Bae finds out, and pray he doesn’t, he’ll set Skyhold ablaze…”

“We’ll find her…” Varric said firmly, the thought even sent shivers through his spine. “Then you can put your blade to good use on the bastards that took her.”

“They’ll fucking regret this; I promise you that.” Kayden muttered, then looked around “Where’s Pretty-Boy?”

The noise of more breaking was heard from the end of the hallway. Bull gestured towards Anselm’s door with his thumb.

“Redecorating with his fists. Samson’s messenger…”
Kayden sat down heavily between the Dwarf and the Qunari. “This is some seriously evil shite. My poor sister, I should have gone with her! Kept her safe!”

Varric nodded glumly. Samson always had a reputation for being a slippery bastard, but this was a low one; even for him. A hand resting upon Kayden’s shoulder, giving it a firm and reassuring squeeze. All of Skyhold felt the loss of their Inquisitor, as if ready to mourn her when she came back on a pyre.

“Princess is a mess; luckily Sparkles was able to do the necessary without her, and Syrup’s locked himself away in his room all day…”

Kayden let out a low groan.

“Well, at least that smarmy Vint’s good for something…” He said, pulling out a bottle. “Drink?”

Varric shook his head.

“I’ll pass for once…” He threw a glance in the direction of Anselm’s door. “Someone’s gotta be the responsible adult right now.”

Bull let out a low rumble of laughter as he took the bottle from Kayden and pulled the cork out. Pouring Kayden and himself a full pint, knowing he would need it.

“If that’s you then we are in serious shit!”

Anselm slumped back against the wall, sinking slowly to the floor; his rage exhausted for now and replaced with near-silent, shuddering sobs as he fell over onto his side with his knees pulled up to his chest. They’d taken her from him; that was the only thing his mind could register. They’d taken her and he had no idea if he’d ever see her alive again. Nothing else mattered apart from that; if he believed, even for a second, that Samson would honour his bargain then he'd hand Cullen over to him – gagged and hogtied – without so much as a thought. Maybe he’d do that anyway; just to teach the bastard a lesson…

It was dark when he woke from a restless, nightmare-haunted sleep; his muscles sore from his cramped position. Hauling himself to his feet, he lit a candle and surveyed the wreckage of his room. It was a stupid and childish thing to do, but his head was clear now and he knew exactly what he had to do.

Varric was alone in the hallway, dozing over his book, and he looked up in surprise at the dishevelled, red-eyed, man in front of him.

“Charmer! What the…?”

Anselm held up a finger to shush him.

“I need you to do me a favour.”

Jonas stared at the blank page in front of him. Even on the best days it was hard finding the right words, or getting them to make sense, but writing – no matter how slow and painful a process – helped make his thoughts real and he wanted the past week to not be real. Every night he prayed this was just a bad dream he was stuck in; that he’d wake to find everything was normal and Aleska
was impatiently waiting for him to go and hunt something with her. Dipping his pen in the ink he slowly and carefully wrote out the date in large, curving, letters

17 Hairing Haring. 9:41 Dragon.

He put the pen down again, resting it on the edge of the pen stand so the ink wouldn’t drip and cause a stain. It would be Firstday in two weeks, one of his favourite holidays, and he didn’t want to think how it would feel if they hadn’t found Aleska by then…

The knock at the door made him jump despite its quietness. He stood up, stretching his neck to ease the stiffness of sitting for so long, and let Kayden in.

“Saw you still had a light burning…” Kayden put a bottle of rum down on the table. “Couldn’t sleep either and figured we both needed a bit of company.”

Jonas glanced out into the hallway, anxiously checking to see no-one else was around, and closed the door gently. Even he sensed the alcohol excreting from Kayden’s sweat, the elf handled his alcohol well, but even he couldn’t hide the smell.

“Weren’t sure if you wanted to see me…” he mumbled as he turned to Kayden. “Feel’s like you been avoiding me…”

“We’ve all been a bit on edge, Big Fella.” Kayden said, running his hands up the other man’s arms until they rested lightly on the solid curve of his chest. “My sister is one of the most important people to me next to my son, I promise it’s nothing personal…”

This was a bad idea, and he knew it. The big warrior was a sweet lad, if a bit slow on the uptake about some things, but he was wanting more from this than Kayden was willing or able to give. He’d been planning to let him down gently, without too much hurt, before anyone found out; but then this happened, and all he really cared about right now was anything that could take his mind off what might have happened to Aleska. It was clear they both needed a distraction from this waking nightmare.

I’m going to fucking hate myself in the morning… but, what’s new?

Jonas pulled Kayden close; bending his head for a slow, deep kiss.

“I’m going to fucking hate myself in the morning… but, what’s new?

Jonas pulled Kayden close; bending his head for a slow, deep kiss.

“Missed you…” He whispered, as their lips parted.

###

Anselm crouched and directed the narrow beam of the bulls-eye lantern to the lock on the cabinet, examining it carefully. This was Dagna’s work he was dealing with, no telling what little surprises it might contain. Lockpicking hadn’t been part of his formal education, but he’d never been one to turn his nose up at a potentially useful set of skills; it wasn’t hard to learn if you found the right teacher and had got him out of - and into - a variety of unusual and interesting situations.

He inserted the second pick and moved it a fraction, holding his breath as he tested the resistance of the lock.

No spikes up the arse yet, that’s a good beginning…

This wasn’t something you could rush, especially with a lock like this, break a pick and it would be irretrievably jammed. Every time he adjusted the position of a pick, it was with the anxious expectation of hearing that sickening little snap. Wiping the sweat off his hand, Anselm made
what he hoped would be the last move and let out a long, quiets sigh of relief as the lock made a satisfying click and the doors moved. He paused, waiting for any of the telltale noises that would warn him of a trap being set in motion, and then slowly opened the doors – moving to one side just in case; Dwarves were fond of crossbow traps.

Once Anselm was sure he wasn’t going to get shot, poisoned or impaled, he shone the beam of the lamp into the cabinet and saw Aleska’s pendant lying there on a small velvet cushion. It glowed faintly in the darkness and felt warm to his touch. Dagna’s enchantment, combined with Dorian’s spell, held firm. For the first time in days Anselm felt a shred of hope; according to the Arcanist, so long as it remained warm it meant Aleska was alive.

He took out the map he’d shoved in his belt and spread it out on the table; holding the pendant over it by the chain and moving it carefully over the various regions. Eventually it began to swing in slow, lazy circles and – for the first time in days – a smile flickered across Anselm’s lips. This was going to work!

Wrapping the pendant in a silk handkerchief he placed it securely in his tunic and closed the cabinet again, taking the time to ensure it was re-locked. The extra time that could buy was worth the effort. He folded up the map and stuck it back in his belt. Now to get the others…

There was no answer at Kayden’s door, which meant he was off bedding some maid or stablehand, so Anselm headed to Jonas’s quarters as quickly as he dared without attracting attention. Enough time had been wasted, they had to get moving before anyone realised where they were or what they were doing. Impatience was getting the better of him and he burst into the room without knocking.

“Joe; get dressed and meet me down at the stables. I’m going to find Kay…” his voice tailed off as he saw his cousin’s companion. “…den.”

“I’d say this wasn’t what it looked like…” Kayden said with an awkward grin as he adjusted the bedcovers. “But that would just be a barefaced lie, wouldn’t it?”

Anselm stared at them both in silence for a second then shook his head to pull himself back to reality.

“Both of you… get dressed and get your kit. We need to get moving now.”

Kayden grabbed for his breeches and began pulling them on.

“They’ve found where she is?”

Anselm took the pendant out of his pocket.

“The spell worked, we can use this to locate her. According the map she’s somewhere in Emprise de Lion, and alive.”

“That’s a pretty big area…” Kayden said doubtfully as he buckled his belt and pulled his shirt on. Jonas, red faced and silent, fumbled for his boots.

“The closer we are, the brighter and warmer it gets…” Anselm told him as he put the pendant back. “It’ll tell us when she’s near.”

“Handy little thing; maybe we should all have one of those…” Kayden paused and looked directly at Anselm “So why the sudden midnight rush? Not that I’m complaining, sooner we get her away
from those bastards the better.”

Anselm grunted.

“They’ll argue for hours over what to do and who to send. That’s more time wasted that Aleska may not have. Riding fast and hard, the three of us can be there in five days, maybe less if we change horses on the way.”

Kayden nodded, he liked that plan better than anything else he’d heard so far.

“Can’t see the Seeker or the Commander liking this much…” He warned.

“Void take them!” Anselm replied with a harsh laugh. “I only take my orders from Aleska.”

Once Kayden left to collect his equipment, Jonas turned to Anselm; tugging nervously as the lacing of his tunic.

“Look… Ansie; you… you ain’t gonna tell…?” He stammered; but Anselm cut him off with a pat on the shoulder

“I’m just glad it’s not Cullen you’re fucking; that would have been awkward…” He gave Jonas an encouraging smile. “Right now, I just need you to focus on getting Aleska back.”

Jonas nodded, biting his bottom lip anxiously. He wanted to believe they could do this, but it didn’t stop the nagging fear in his stomach.

“What about Cuddles?” He asked. They wouldn’t be able to take him on a hard ride like this but the idea of leaving him behind still stung,

“I’ll get Varric to take care of him.” Anselm assured him “He knows the plan and he can stall the others about what direction we might be heading in. I don’t want any more delays; get what you need and meet me in the stables.”

###

Leliana took a small sip of her tea, watching the candle-flame dance in the draughty air of the rookery. Other than the stirring of the birds and the occasional cough from one of the night-clerks, engaged in the encrypting and decrypting of messages, all was silent and still. On nights like this, she could almost imagine being back in the hidden attics of the Divinal Palace by the Grand Cathedral, carefully manipulating the hedge of secrets and lies protecting the Divine from her hidden enemies; except she would never again get a message calling her to a midnight game of chess, or to play one of Justinia’s favourite songs.

She looked up as Charter approached her desk; the agent’s nod confirming the bait had been taken.

“Who is with him?” she asked, already suspecting the answer.

“Messere Jonas and Ser Kayden.” Charter confirmed. “Do you wish me to leave now?”

Leliana shook her head and took another sip of tea. She’d counted on Anselm’s frustrations getting the better of him. In this matter, with Inquisition intelligence potentially compromised, his impetuousness served better than any amount of careful planning.

“Wait an hour. We’ll still have his trail and we don’t want to make it too obvious. I can convince Cullen and Cassandra you’ve been sent to bring him back; that should prevent any unwanted
interference. I’ll leave it to your discretion as to when you make your presence known; but I would suggest you do it before reaching Montsierre.”

There was no such place in Emprise de Lion, of course, but Charter was familiar with the location in question; and with who Leliana expected them to meet there. She nodded in acknowledgment and left the spymaster to her thoughts.

Leliana relaxed back into the busy silence of the rookery. A bitter smile on her lips as she recalled Varric’s most recent attempts to cajole her into joining them at Wicked Grace. Cards tended to lose their savour when you gambled with lives every night.
A Winters Kiss

Chapter by x_bellaczarina_x

Chapter Summary

With the help of an unexpected ally, Aleska managed to escape Samson's clutches, finding Anselm, Jonas and Kayden in time. The trauma of her capture left Aleska wondering whom to trust and whom to be weary of. Whilst Anselm rejoices in her rescue, the question still remains on who their new ally is and what motivated him to betray his Master.

The winds howled outside the keep, with it came the cold. This did little to aid Aleska’s plan,

*I know Samson said there are things worse out there than his boys.*

She held the shard of glass firmly within her grasp, gritting her teeth as every movement deepened the cuts and the blood slicked upon her skin.

*There is no way I can hide these.*

The blood seeping out of her wounds made it difficult to hold the glass, much less cut through the rope which Samson saw fit to bind her hands.

The sound of metal clanking against the cobble stone flooring outside the door caught her attention. It wasn’t time for her to be fed, or the slop-bucket emptied; apart from that, she was left strictly alone on Samson’s orders

*Cullen would not be stupid enough to forge some daring rescue plan; the man doesn’t have a daring bone in his body.*

Aleska inhaled deeply, feeling the bonds loosen around her wrist; allowing her the freedom of movement to try and un-knot the last of them. The scratching from the rope became an annoyance she couldn’t ignore for much longer. There had been one factor she hadn’t taken into consideration.

*Anselm—*

A single heart beat almost cost her the very escape she’d planned for days, the shard slipped from her fingers and she was barely able to grab it with her fingertips before it fell out of reach. A sharp exhale escaped her lips, a sigh of relief. The pacing stopped, not a single sound had come through her door.

*Anselm, please don’t tell me that is you.*

Samson had already gloated over what he was going to do to Cullen if the man was brave. Or stupid, enough to try and hand himself over in his place. The thought of what he might do to Anselm made her run cold with fear.

The door flung open, and in the flickering candle light could Aleska see the shards of Red Lyrium glistening through the man’s skin.
“My, my,” the Red Templar took another swig from the bottle, his sweat reeked of alcohol. Aleska sensed that much. “You really are a pretty one, my Commander said not to ‘urt you and I won’t—much.”

Aleska watched carefully, with the last of the bonds cut and sitting in ribbons behind her, she had the upper hand; how long it would remain so was anyone’s guess. Heart thudding within her ears, she watched the Red Templar unbuckle his belt; she wasn’t stupid or naive, she knew what he meant to do. The glass shard firmly within her left hand; the sharp edges had already lacerated her skin so a few more cuts wouldn’t matter.

With each footstep he took towards her, Aleska had needed to plan her movements with precise timing. Preparing to strike her would-be attacker, someone had beaten her to it. The blade pierced through the Red Templar’s neck, blood ran down his skin, over the crystals protruding from his flesh.

Blood stained his white collar, the blade removed revealing her rescuer. A man stood before her, the Red Lyrium twisted around his skin, transforming him into the things mothers warned their children of. Aleska observed his reaction, his hand trembled and the realization of what he had done dawned upon him.

“I—I couldn’t let them,” he said, falling to his knees. “Please, have mercy, Your Worship. I was only trying to feed me hungry sister and her new born. I didn’t want this life…”

The boy’s sobs reached Aleska’s heart; how many men and women were forced into this because they saw no other means of survival, coerced into this servitude which had terms no better than slavery?

“They told us it would make us stronger… better warriors… then we started to change…” The young Templar continued to babble. “Maker, forgive us… wha… what have we become?”

“It is all right,” Aleska placed her hand upon his head, the dried blood rubbed off into his golden hair. “You saved my life… or a fate worse than death and that, if anything, is deserving of mercy. There is one last thing you need to do for me before my absolute forgiveness can be give and my protection.”

“Name it, Your Worship, I’ll do anything!”

“Get me the fuck out of this castle!”

***

“We have been searching for hours,” Kayden threw a snapped twig into the snow, his frustration flaring. “Are you certain that spell is long lasting? My Bae is a mage and all magic has a time limit.”

“No!” Anselm felt the pendant once more, the warmth radiating from it had been the only thing to give him hope. “She is in Emprise, she has to be.”

“Have you taken into account how big this region is?” Kayden rose from the snow; any tracks would have been covered with a fresh layer of snow within a few days. “It will take weeks to comb through this area—assuming my sister has that kind of time.”

The frustration burned through Anselm, they had been out in Emprise for hours and Harding warned them of the impending blizzards that threatened the lands. Where are you? Anselm’s fingers ran along the gemstone of the pendant, it’s heat almost burning his fingers. With Jonas and
Kayden reminding him of how large Emprise had been, the frustration had only amplified.

“She has to be here,” Anselm placed the pendant within his top pocket, “the pendant had been warmer since we moved in this direction. Meaning she has to be this way.”

“The only thing that way is some abandoned Keep,” Kayden kicked the snow at his feet, causing the flakes to hit Anselm’s shoulder. “Those ruins cannot even contain a force let alone hold people captive.”

Listening to the wind howl, Anselm knew the blizzard had been on their doorstep. A deep inhale filled his lungs with the winter air, the sudden expansion hurt his chest, the crisp winter air threatened to freeze his lungs. The sun shone through a break in the clouds, Anselm’s vision caught a glimpse of something shiny, the glimmer was too high up for a gemstone to be catching the sun’s rays. The closer Anselm stepped towards it, the more he realize what he had stumbled upon.

“Jonas, Kayden,” Anselm ran towards the cage, his fingers bending around the iron bars. “Over here.”

“Please help us,” one of the occupants pleaded, blood dripped from the corner of his mouth, the bruises on his cheeks and body told Anselm all he needed to know. “We will do anything.”

Fumbling for his lock picks, Anselm’s fingers touched over the cool metal of the thin pins, kneeling in the snow; Anselm had been eye level to the lock. Click-click-click, the picks hit against each metal pin holding the lock in place, finally the last click sounded through the small alcove and the lock fell into the bed of snow, pushing up the flakes.

“This does not come without a price,” Anselm and Jonas helped the woman and children from the cage.

“We have little money, but take it, we owe you more,” The man stated again, resting within his palms had been a few silver coins he kept from his captors. “My name is Julian, I was the mayor of Sahnia.”

“No,” Anselm pushed his hand away, “it is not your money I want, did your captors mention someone when they were about their patrols? A Dalish elf?”

“Ser?” Julian’s brows furrowed, his eyes darting across the snow at his feet. “We only saw one Dalish elf, she was not treated with mercy, we heard the screams—those savages they…”

Anselm sunk to his knees, only his imagination had been able to conjure up what they had done to her, tears stunk at his eyes, the cold winds froze them in place; his head within his hands and a shake of his head helped clear his thoughts. Jonas knelt beside his cousin, helping him up.

“What did she look like?” Kayden called, he had been the only one to not allow the emotions to gain the better of him. “This elf, what did she look like?”

“She had hair black as the night skies,” Julian searched his memory, gathering the small details he recalled of the elf who had been held prisoner. “Eyes blue as sapphires they were. They took her in the middle of the night, her screams still haunt me.”

“Those bastards,” the back of Anselm’s hand served as a handkerchief, “I will not rest until their blood runs like a river through this snow—”

Kayden held up his hand, calling for silence. “Let me make this more simple, did she have these
markings on her face?” The tip of Kayden’s fingers traced along the Vallaslin upon his face. “Not like mine, but any markings at all?”

“Yeah,” Julian’s eyes widened, remembering the Vallaslin upon the elf’s face. “She had one that look like them whiskers? I dunno their name, all I know was she had them.”

“It isn’t her,” Kayden’s hand tapped Julian’s shoulder, conversing with him away from Jonas and Anselm.

“We’ll find her Ansie,” Jonas’ arm placed around Anselm’s shoulder.

“I’m not worried about finding her,” Anselm sniffed, wiping the tears from his cheeks. “I’m more worried about the condition we’ll find her in, if they harm a single hair on her head—”

“Don’t think like that,” Jonas nudged him. “Knowing ‘Leska, I’m more afraid what she’ll do to ‘em.”

Words that were meant to soothe did little else, Anselm produced the pendant from his pocket one last time, placing the warm gemstone to his lips, closing his eyes as the faint pulse pounded against his lips. *I will find you—I promise.*

***

“Not too tight?” The binds held Aleska’s hands behind her back, a shake of the head confirmed he hadn’t tightened them. “I wish I had a better idea, but I don’t. No one dares disturbs Samson whilst he is in his prayers; the last man who did… well it wasn’t pretty what happened to him.”

Aleska nodded, the bandages around her hands had been less of an aid than intended. *It isn’t his fault, he is trying to help.* Aleska reassured herself, walking along side the Templar. Except a few looks from the patrolling guards, no one said a word to either of them, the Templar’s grip tightened around her arm, a show if nothing else.

“I didn’t get your name,” Aleska kept her voice soft, as not to rouse suspicion.

“Aleska,” he responded in equal softness. “My name is Antoine. Am I hurting you? I hope you understand there might be a call for me to get a bit rougher.”

“You needn’t explain to me,” Aleska cleared her throat. “I understand this is what is supposed to happen. It is far better than the alternative.”

The two walked in silence until Aleska came to -what she could only assume- was the Great Hall, only two men stood guard at the entrance, in the corner, beside the Throne, one of those oversized monstrosities stood. There was nothing more upon his body which resembled a man, Behemoth is what the soldiers had taken to calling it; the Red Lyrium stripped them of everything they once were, the only thing Aleska could faintly make out was the head, a small dot compared to the spikes of Red Lyrium protruding from the rest of the body.

“I have orders to escort the prisoner to the quarry,” Antoine’s tone kept steady, but despite his composure, Aleska could feel the tremble in his hand.

“On whose orders,” the guardsman eyes Aleska, licking his dry lips.

Antoine pulled a sealed letter from his tunic and the guardsman took it without a moment’s hesitation; apparently seeing Samson’s official seal was sufficient confirmation. He handed the parchment back to Antoine, unopened.
“Make sure she sees what we have done to some of her precious Inquisition scouts,” the guardsman lips curled upwards, displaying the yellow teeth. “I am particularly proud of the ones in the South Quarry.”

The corner of Aleska’s lip twitched, Cullen had spent weeks wracking his brain attempting to figure out how a battalion of trained scouts had simply vanished from Emprise without much of a trace as to there whereabouts. Antoine’s grip tightened upon Aleska’s arm, the bonds around her wrist had been loose enough that she could slip her hands in and out when the time came; one wrong move and their deception would be all for nought.

“Come on,” with a forceful move, Antoine jerked Aleska out of the doorway, heading down the path which led them to the quarry.

Once they were a safe distance away from the Keep, Antoine pulled the last of away from her wrists; her cuts stinging as if a thousand Marcher ants nipped at her exposed flesh. The bandages had done little to stop the bleeding, but the blood swiftly dried in the freezing air.

“We don’t have much time,” Antoine warned, leading her down the path which led to Sahnia. “They may be dim-witted at the best of times, but it won’t take them long to figure out that Samson was not at his prayers.”

Aleska’s whole body shook, the winds pierced through her armour and down to the underclothes leaving a winters kiss upon her skin. With a shudder, Aleska’s hands rubbed along her arms, generating enough heat to gather her thoughts.

“No doubt they would come looking for me—” Aleska’s statement halted, another tremble travelled through her body. “They would go to Sahnia first, we have camps there… perhaps we would find my men along the way.”

“It seems like a good place to start,” Antoine’s gaze turned behind them, by now someone would have seen Samson within the bath house.

With the howl of the dogs echoed through the air, their time had run out.

***

There was only one way to lose the dogs’ and that was through water. Aleska looked at the small river running down beneath the alcove of dead trees; it ran fast enough that the ice had been unable to form.

*We could drown, or freeze, but what choice do we have?*

Aleska grabbed Antoine’s collar, dragging him down the rocks as they heard the hounds draw closer. This was their only chance; Aleska had spent most of her life as a hunter.

“You cannot be serious!” Antoine’s eyes widened, his jaw hung open. “We’ll freeze to death.”

“It’s that or the hounds… make your choice!”

Aleska jumped down the embankment. The water was shallower than she thought, barely up to her waist, but the numbing cold ripped the breath from her. She stumbled, her head going under the water; for a moment she thought she’d never regain her footing, but she felt Antoine grab her arm and haul her upright. Even through the leathers she wore, the cold penetrated with burning intensity.
He pulled a knife from his belt and quickly sawed through the straps holding his breastplate and pauldrons, hurling them to the far bank, and they began to move downstream as swiftly as they dared; the icy water numbing their flesh.

The overhanging bank afforded them brief shelter as they heard gruff, angry, voices coming closer.

“The hounds have lost the scent, Ser…” One of them said. “We’ll never find them once it’s dark!”

“Then try harder!” Another snapped. “Or the General will peel our skins off with a blunt knife!”

Aleska’s frozen fingers could barely hold the dagger Antoine handed her, and the Templar’s skin was blue with cold. Neither of them was in a condition to fight but, if they could take them by surprise…

She heard the sound of an arrow striking, and a gurgling choke followed by alarmed shouts and an angry bellow. Aleska caught Antoine’s eye and he shook his head; they had no way of telling who, or what, was attacking. It was only as the short, brutal, fight came to an end that the sound of a familiar voice made her heart leap.

“We should have taken one alive… found out where Aleska is…” she heard her brother grumble.

“KAYDEN!!” She cried out scrambling from beneath the overhang and struggling to the bank as the three men turned in shock and surprise.

“ALLIE!” Kayden yelled, running down the bank and grabbing her arms. From the corner of her eye she saw Anselm raise his bow as Antoine emerged.

“Don’t!” She called out. “He’s a friend!”

“You make some fucking strange friends…” Kayden choked, tears running down his face as he pulled her closer. She felt a thick, fur-lined cloak around her shoulders and looked up, seeing Jonas beaming at her with gleeful relief through the fog of cold and exhaustion as she felt Anselm’s arms around her as well; the welcome warmth from the three men flooding into her, even as the returning circulation brought sharp needles of pain digging at her limbs.

“Oh Sweet Maker,” Anselm’s arms held her tight, keeping her upright as Kayden relinquished his grasp. “I am so grateful we found you Aleska. Alive.”

Aleska nodded, the feeling of Anselm’s forehead placed against hers, his hands on either side of her head, stroking her hair assuring her she was safe at last. Aleska’s hands ran through his hair and down towards his neck before she pulled him back into a hug that she’d never wish would end.

“I’m fine,” Aleska stated, almost as if to convince herself. “I’m fine. I’m fine.”

With that, her control finally broke and she began to sob; shaking violently as Anselm continued to hold her, stroking her hair and making gentle soothing noises.

“It’s all right… you’re safe.” He assured her. “I’m never going to be away from your side again…”

She must have fallen unconscious as, when she woke, they were at a makeshift campsite with a fire burning and blankets wrapped around her.

“You’re back…” Anselm said with a smile, stroking her hair and helping her to sit as he handed her a mug of broth. She still ached from head to foot, but the pain was less intense, and her wounds were dressed.
“I wasn’t planning on going anywhere…” Aleska said, swallowing some of the broth. “Not without you anyway.”

“I… I changed your bandages; the other ones were filthy.” He said, his voice still shaking a little. “And I took care of your friend.”

He nodded to where Antoine sat with a blanket around his shoulders and a mug in his hands; staring into the fire.

“Thank you…” Aleska said, then called over to the Templar. “That note, the one you fooled the guards with, what did it say?”

Antoine produced the piece of paper from his pocket, Samson’s seal unbroken. “See for yourself. I was tasked with being his secretary if you were, it allowed me some privileges—like sneaking into his office to use his official stationary.”

“I am almost starting to like you,” Kayden scoffed, breaking the seal. “It’s blank?”

“I told you,” Antoine laughed, scratching the stubble upon his cheek. “Dim-fucking-witted.”

Anselm shook his head in bewildered astonishment.

“Let’s get you back to the main camp, and your wounds properly looked at. Then we can hear the whole story!”

***

The tent proved warmer than the keep, the fire burned in the centre, enough to keep her warm but low enough to keep the material of the tent from catching alight. A blanket around her shoulders, her hair all over the place. The blood smear on her cheeks had Anselm worried, even she could tell that.

“Here, for the pain,” Anselm handed her a mug, she dropped it instantly. The heat burned her fresh wounds. “I’m sorry! I shouldn’t have been so careless… your wounds—”

“Hey,” Aleska smiled, tugging him to sit beside her. “Stop blaming yourself, this isn’t your fault… I should have known better than to wander the streets of Orlais by myself.”

Aleska felt his arms around her, even the sound of his heart told her all she needed to know, he suppressed the sobs he desperately wanted to express. Just grateful she was alive and unharmed, for the most part. Aleska nuzzled into his neck, breathing in the familiar scent she loved, the blanket tightening around her.

“If they lay a single hand on you,” Anselm sniffed, even his words threatened to choke him. “I will wring each one of their necks myself.”

“Just hold me,” Aleska whispered. “All I need you to do right now is hold me, make me forget these last few days, I feel safer when I am with you.”

Anselm’s grip tightened around her shoulders, his lips repeatedly pressed against her head, a reassurance to them both that she was safe. The fire was the only thing to be heard they enjoyed their moment of solitude. This was not to last; the tent entrance opened to reveal an elderly woman with a weathered face greeting them both.

“I am Sister Genevieve, Your Worship,” she said, her calm voice held the same tone as Maela. “I
would like to examine your wounds, perhaps ask you a few questions involving your captivity.”

Aleska nodded, making room on the bench for the healer to set up. The look upon the woman’s face confused Aleska, Anselm’s hand gripped hers tightly, afraid to let go. *He won’t let a stranger near me now. I don’t blame him.*

“Your Worship,” the healer spoke again. “I mean no offense to Lord Trevelyan, but there are some things I wish to ask; some things that might be difficult to speak of. I would prefer Lord Trevelyan wait outside.”

Aleska knew the questions to come and had been anxiously anticipating them. With a gentle nod, Aleska placed a kiss against his cheek, sniffing her own tears back. “No, what ever you have to ask me, I want Lord Trevelyan to bare witness, so my words can never be twisted.”

“Your Worship, I really must—”

“She said no,” Anselm growled, his grip upon Aleska tightening, his statement meant to serve as her only warning.

Aleska inhaled deeply, watching the healer unpack her bandages and antiseptic ointment before her. Gently, the woman began to undo the basic dressings and examine the cuts covering Aleska’s hands and wrists.

“How long were you captive with those men?” She asked softly, giving Anselm a cautious look.

“A—About a week, maybe a bit more,” Aleska struggled to recall the days gone past. “I don’t know how long I was unconscious for.”

“Did you suffer any pains,” Sister Genevieve applied the ointment to Aleska’s cuts. “When you awoke?”

“Other than a stiff neck,” Aleska shook her head. “None that I recall… why… what are you implying—”

“When a beautiful young woman is captive, in a Keep full of men… more often than not—”

“I am going to stop you right there, nothing like that happened,” Aleska stood up, applying the bandages herself. “If it did, would I allow Lord Trevelyan to even touch me, let alone feel safe with him?”

“I meant no offense, Your Worship.” The old Chantry Sister stood up, lowering her head. “I just wanted to be well informed of the state of your capture. Nothing more.”

Aleska moved closer towards Anselm as he keenly watched every move the healer made. Once they were alone again, Aleska exhaled slowly; closing her eyes and relaxing into Anselm’s arms. Resting her head on his shoulder, her nose nuzzled into his neck.

Neither of them wanted to ruin this moment with the possibilities of what could have been. Aleska’s hands touched her wet breeches, despite the fire within, the coldness had set into her bones.

“I need to dress into something warmer,” Aleska cleared her throat.

“I shall be outside—” Anselm’s statement halted by her finger placed against his lips.
Aleska shook her head, turning around and pushing her hair to the side, as if the question had been silently asked, his fingers worked the lace strings of her waistcoat, down her back and ending at her hips. The leather slid off her arms and landed at her feet with a heavy thud, the buckles clinked as they landed on top of one another. She tugged at the hemline of her chemise, lifting it over her head and throwing it to the ground.

These sensation of his warm hands running along her bare shoulder sent an all too pleasant tremble through her skin, his hands worked the hair tie holding her hair up, allowing her ebony locks to fall upon her shoulder, a brush glided through the knotted ends, working the knots out of her hair; leaving only a smooth river of black hair along her shoulders.

“Shall I—” Anselm stopped, even though her back had turned to him, he could see she’d been working the lace of her breeches. “Shall I tie it back up.”

“Please,” Aleska’s voice dropped.

Sliding the breeches down her legs, she stepped out of the crumpled material at her feet, grateful the waters only came up to her knees. To her amazement, Anselm’s hands worked her hair into an elegant bun, a smile crossed her lips. Walking across to the dresser Aleska’s hands curved over the knobs, pulling the drawers out. A fresh set of clothing rested on top of the dresser.

The chemise came first, Anselm aided her with that, ensuring it glided effortlessly down her slender body, already the change of clothing had helped. Anselm knelt before her, placing the breeches at her feet.

“Put a hand on my shoulder,” his gaze kept to the floor.

Doing as he suggested, Aleska placed both hands upon his shoulders, listening to his soothing words of comfort, his hand around her ankle, guiding her foot into the leg of her breeches, scrunching it upwards and repeating it with her other leg. His hands gripped the hemline and slid it up her legs as he rose.

“You’re still shivering,” Anselm’s fingers tightened the lace of her breeches. “I have one suggestion, get under a blanket with me, my body heat will help you warm up faster. Especially with the fire going.”

“On one condition,” Aleska smiled, resting her head on his chest, listening to the thudding pulse of his heart. “I want you to tell me a story.”

“A story…?” Anselm looked at her in surprise. “What sort of story?”

“As long as it’s not about one of your misadventures in an Antivan brothel, I don’t care!” Aleska said, lying down on the bed and making room for him. “Anything to take my mind of this…”

Anselm took off his boots and got into bed beside her, pulling the furs over them both to create a thick layer of insulation. Aleska nestled close to him, resting her head against his shoulder as he leaned back on the pillows.

“There’s one that Sophia used to tell me when I was small…” He said quietly. “It doesn’t sound as good in Trade-Tongue though…”

“Then tell it in Marcher…” She murmured sleepily “I’ll still understand it…”

Anselm cleared his throat and began.
“C’ere una volta… Once upon a time; in a land far, far away, lived a little girl whose grandmother dwelt deep in a dark wood…”

Aleska lay there quietly; listening to his tale of the little girl in the red hood. She knew the story but wondered if he, or even Sophia, knew how old it truly was. The Dalish told it in almost the same way; except the Big Bad Wolf was the Dreadwolf, and Andruil the brave hunter who saved the little girl and her maela.

Lulled by the soft sound of Anselm’s voice and his comforting warmth next to her, Aleska began to drift off. She could sleep now, without fear, knowing that she was safe and that he would be there when she woke.
Chapter Summary

As she deals with the lingering aftermath of her captivity; Aleska realises she has to acknowledge and admit the depth of her feelings for Anselm or risk losing him forever. Kayden, meanwhile, comes to a decision of his own which creates some unwelcome complications.

*****

My apologies for there being no update last Tuesday; life got in the way, as it sometimes has a bad habit of doing. Mistress Lavellan and I therefore decided to do a double update today in order to keep the story on track - so watch out for Chapter 28 appearing later this evening! Thank you all for your ongoing support and kind comments; it's hugely appreciated.

Aleska woke with a cry, pushing herself upright, her heart racing and a cold sweat prickling her skin; but the bed was soft and warm, not the cold straw pallet of her cell. Slowly, the fog of panic cleared, and she remembered they were back at Skyhold. Cuddles boffed his head against her arm with a small, concerned, ‘urff’; regarding her with intelligent, liquid-brown, eyes. She scratched him gently behind the ears.

“It’s all right… just a bad dream.”

At first she’d been uncertain about Jonas’ insistence that Cuddles sleep in her room every night ‘till she felt safe’, but she was getting used to the massive hound’s presence; he’d lie beside the bed dozing, but alert to the slightest unexpected noise, although he was still fond of trying to climb up on the couch when he thought she wouldn’t notice.

Having him there made it easier for her to sleep, although it hadn’t stopped the dreams; nor had the healing of her wounds shaken off the sudden pangs of fear that struck her at random moments through the day. The extent to which Samson had got under her skin was maddening; almost as infuriating as her own stupidity at putting herself in such a vulnerable position in the first place. She’d let herself become complacent, forgotten how cunning and dangerous their enemy was, and that mistake almost cost her life. It wasn’t something she could afford to do again.

Aleska lay back against the pillows with a sigh, pulling the covers around her shoulders as Cuddles settled down to continue his watch.

She must have dozed off eventually, as the grey pre-dawn light was beginning to filter through the gaps in the heavy curtains and she could hear voices outside her door. Slipping quietly out of bed, she pulled a chamber-robe around her shoulders and crept over to listen.

“I don’t give a damn what he says…” Anselm hissed in an angry whisper. “Unless there’s a Rift in the courtyard, or Corypheus is at the gates, it can wait until the Inquisitor is ready!”

“But, my Lord, the Commander insisted…” a plaintive voice responded.
“She needs to rest.” Anselm said firmly. “The Commander can stick his dispatches up his…”

“Anselm?”

Both men turned in surprise, neither having heard the door open.

“Aleska…!” Anselm exclaimed. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to wake you.”

He glared at the messenger, who looked as though he wished the floor would open and swallow him. Aleska ran her fingers through her hair.

“I was already awake…” She lied. “What’s all this about?”

“Nothing that can’t wait…” Anselm muttered as the messenger nervously held out the note he carried. Aleska took it and glanced at it briefly.

“Tell the Commander I’ll speak to him after breakfast.”

The messenger saluted and hurried down the stairs; as soon as he turned the first corner, they heard him break into a run. Aleska gave Anselm a mildly reproachful look.

“He’s only doing his job; there’s no need to scare him.”

“And I’m doing mine…” Anselm said quietly. “Let them deal with the busywork for a change.”

“I can’t hide myself away forever. If I do that, I’ve let Samson get the better of me…”

Anselm reached out and gently took hold of her hand.

“You don’t need to hide; but you don’t need to take care of everything personally…” He laughed softly. “If you’re not careful they’ll have you harvesting Elfroot… or looking for runaway druffalos!”

“They’re not that bad… yet!” Aleska smiled in response, squeezing his hand fondly; then she noticed the bedroll hastily stuffed under one of the chairs on the landing. “Have you been here all night?”

“I promised I’d stay by your side…” Anselm paused for a moment then stepped a little closer, stroking her hair with his other hand. “I never even want to think of you having to endure anything like that again. When they first told me you were taken, I… well, I think I went a little bit mad. I would have cut down anyone who got in my way…”

Aleksa drew in a breath. She’d heard from Kayden about Anselm going berserk, and from Sophia about his reckless escapade; running off with the pendant and the map. Even though Leliana made it plain she’d ‘nudged’ him in that direction it had been foolhardy and dangerous – putting himself at risk of capture and only the Creators could tell what would have happened to him in Samson’s hands. Memories of that nightmare-future from Redcliffe surged up; the burning, bloodshot, eyes and hands twisted into claws of red lyrium. She shuddered, something of this new intensity in him scared her; for his sake as well as hers.

“You can’t protect me against everything;” She said, her hand touching his side where the arrow had nearly taken his life at the Forest Villa. “You almost died…”

“I can try, can’t I?” His fingers were still in his hair and he looked at her with a fierce, almost desperate, hunger in his eyes. “I’d take a thousand wounds if it meant keeping you safe…”
That’s what I’m afraid of…

The words had almost left her lips when Cuddles butted against her leg.

“Arff?” Cuddles sat beside them both, determined not to be ignored.

Anselm laughed, the tension ebbing from his face, and dropped to his haunches in front of the hound.

“Looks like someone’s decided it’s breakfast time already! I don’t think the Herald will be open yet; shall we go down to the kitchen and see if Mistress Roviere has something for you?”

“Urff!!!!” Cuddles danced around them happily then raced down the stairs as Aleska found herself laughing alongside Anselm.

“You go with him; make sure he doesn’t empty the pantry…” She said. “And please, promise me you’ll get some proper sleep. I don’t want you getting ill.”

Anselm bowed to her, hand on heart.

“As you command; My Lady…”

Aleska waited until he was gone before returning to her chamber and closing the door, resting her forehead and hands against the cold wood. She couldn’t hold back on telling him how she felt; but every time she tried to, the fear came back – no matter how many times she told herself she was being irrational and stupid. She remembered Sophia’s warning back in Val Royeaux

*If I don’t tell him, I’m going to lose him…*

That decided her; she yanked the door open and ran halfway down the stairs.

“Anselm…!” She called out. “Anselm, come back.”

She heard him racing back up with Cuddles thundering behind. He came into view on the landing below, his face a mask of concern.

“What is it? Are you all right?”

“I’m fine…” She assured him. “But… I need to speak to you.”

He followed her up to her room in a silence unbroken save for Cuddles quietly huffing at the delay to his breakfast.

“Are you feeling ill?” Anselm asked, as she closed the door behind them. “Do you want me to get you something, or call for a healer?”

“I’m fine…” She said again, resting her hand on his arm. “It’s just…”

Creators! Why couldn’t have been the son of some farmer or small-town merchant? Someone she could open her heart to without having to worry about what it might cost her clan, or the precious network of Inquisition alliances that Josephine kept reminding about.

Anselm’s presence was the one thing that made this nightmare bearable. It was a cruel joke that every thought of wanting him was coupled with the fear people might think he was using her, or she him, for some political end…
She knew the words she wanted to say, but her tongue fought against them and her head spun with a thousand different arguing thoughts.

Anselm took hold of her hand; worried by her silence.

“You’re shaking like a leaf.” He pressed his other hand to her forehead. “It might be a fever; I’ll go and get...”

She pulled her hand away from his, apprehension swelling inside her.

“I love you…!” She blurted out, astonished at her sudden directness. He stood there, staring at her with an almost comical expression; mouth hanging slightly agape as if not believing what he’d heard. Aleska took a deep breath and continued.

“I’ve waited too long to say it. Every time I’ve tried, someone or something has reminded me of what a terrible, dangerous thing it is to admit that— but I can’t hold it back any longer; not after everything that’s happened, everything we’ve already risked. All I’m doing is hurting both of us…”

He was still staring at her in surprised bewilderment, but with a smile slowly starting to form as realisation began to sink in. She laughed, reaching up and stroking his face.

“I’ve never seen you lost for words before. If I knew it was this easy to get you to shut up…”

He drew her close and kissed her with a slow, intense, longing; his fingers tangling in her hair as she felt her heart pounding with a strange blend of desire and apprehension. At least she could let her fears melt for a moment as she slipped her arms around his waist and pressed herself against his solid chest. Their lips eventually parted, and he rested his forehead against hers, gazing intently into her eyes.

“Aleska…” He gasped, voice hoarse and heavy. “I hoped… but I never dared…”

“I don’t want to lose you…” she said, still pressing his forehead to his; feeling his breath hot on her cheek. “But… I need you to be patient with me; just for…”

He placed his fingers gently to her lips.

“I will wait for as long as My Lady needs. Just to know that you…” He kissed her again; deeply, passionately. “Sei il mio cuore… You are my heart; I will never abandon you.”

“In Elvhen we say Ma Vhenan…” She told him, running the tips of her fingers along his cheek.

“Vhenan…” He murmured; and the sound of it in his rich, deep, voice caused a shiver to run through her. There was no telling what this might bring for them, or how the world around them would react but – right now – the world could fenedhis lassa! Whatever fate bound the two of them demanded to play itself out and she was tired of resisting.

“Borff!?!?”

They burst out laughing as Cuddles jumped up at them in frustration. The dog sat back on his haunches looking at them impatiently. Why were the humans insisting on playing when it was time for breakfast?

Anselm brushed his lips against Aleska’s forehead.
“Duty calls, it seems…” He smiled down at her. “But know, I am forever at your command…”

Aleska rested her cheek against the palm of his hand; the skin warm and callused from long hours of practice with blade and bow. She took his hand between hers and kissed it.

“He’ll start eating the curtains if you don’t hurry…” She reached up and adjusted a lock of his hair, sighing quietly. “And I have a lot to do this morning.”

“Josephine would never forgive me if that happened…” He laughed, then kissed her again; their lips lingering for a moment. “I love you Aleska; I… I’ve never felt this way before; it… it scares me.”

“We can be scared together…” she murmured, then gave him a playful shove. “Go! Feed Cuddles before he starts giving us his ‘starving puppy’ looks; you know what those do to me.”

“As My Lady commands!” He gave her a comically elaborate bow and turned to Cuddles. “Come on, you soppy monster; let’s go wreck the pantry!”

Aleska laughed at Anselm’s ecstatic whoop as he bounded down the stairs two at a time, then headed back into her chamber; pulling the bell rope to summon her maids. This wasn’t going to be an easy day, but she felt better equipped to confront it with some degree of hope.

###

Jonas stirred slowly as Kayden eased himself out of his embrace.

“You going?” He asked sleepily, trying to pull the other man closer.

“It’s almost sunrise…” Kayden said, moving Jonas’ arm from around his waist. “And your sister nearly caught me creeping down the stairs last time.”

Jonas gave a disappointed grunt, pushing himself up on one elbow as Kayden climbed out of bed and tried to find his breeches in the mess of clothes piled on the floor.

“I wanna tell her… ‘bout us.” He muttered. “Don’t like secrets…”

Kayden felt his heart sink. This was his own stupid fault for letting things go on for so long; he should have stopped after the first couple of nights. The big Reaver was good company, and great in the bedroll, but this was getting far too complicated.

“Look, Joe… I told you at the start I wasn’t looking for anything serious.” He took a deep breath and steeled himself for the inevitable. “I think we ought to call it a day.”

Jonas frowned, unsure if Kayden meant what he thought he did.

“But I like you, Kay… ain’t never been like this with another bloke” He said quietly. “And… I thought you liked me too?”

Kayden pulled on his breeches and began lacing them up.

“I do like you, Joe; but I’m not looking for a lover… you knew that. I… We need to end this before it gets messy.”

Jonas stared at him for a long moment, mouth slightly agape; then rolled onto his side with his back to Kayden, pulling the bedcovers completely over him.
“Go then…” he mumbled from beneath the blankets. “Just bloody go…”

“Shit.” Kayden muttered, grabbing his shirt, and stepping towards the bed. “I’m sorry… I never meant…”

“Fuck off!” Jonas yelled, burying himself deeper in the pile of bedding. Kayden winced, picking up his boots and making for the door.

*Allie is going to kill me…*

###

The room beside Dagna’s laboratory in the Undercroft was comfortably furnished but it still felt too much like a cell to Aleska. Antoine sat by the narrow window, watching the waterfall below, bandages swathing his arms and face where the lyrium growths had been cut out.

“You don’t have to stay in here…”

The Templar shook his head, still staring out at the view.

“I feel… safer… here. People stare, even if they try not to make it obvious; and I don’t want to risk… infecting… anyone.” He looked down at his bandaged hands. “I can still feel it in me, under my skin and in my blood. The growths will come back.”

“We’ll find a way to fix this. Dagna is a genius, and some of the best minds from the Circle are helping with the research.”

Aleska tried to sound more confident than she felt; Dagna, and every Mage she’d spoken to, had been ambivalent about whether such a thing might even be possible. It felt to her like these people, who used and worked with Lyrium on an daily basis, had little idea of what it was or how it really worked. She doubted they’d ever needed to think about it before; it worked, and that was enough.

“Thank you for trying…” He said; turning his attention back out of the window. “Even if you can’t help me, perhaps… someone else…”

She’d seen this numbness descend before, when someone had endured too much for their mind or heart to endure. It had come over Hawke after she found him, lost, and injured, in the forests south of Markham; half dead from blood-loss and infection, and crazy with grief.

She’d known it herself when Mae was killed. It was a natural reaction, the healers said, one that would pass with time. Aleska doubted if this would pass, or if it would even be kind to try and lead him out of it. Regardless of what Dagna might uncover, the chance of a cure for Antoine was unlikely at best and none of the other possible outcomes were pleasant to consider.

“Sister Leliana has sent people to make sure your sister and her child are safe…” She could do this much for him at least. “They will be well looked after.”

“*Grandmere* made me promise to look after them… I thought that’s what I was doing…” He turned to look properly at Aleska for the first time. “Please, don’t let her know what I’ve become. Better she thinks I’m dead; it won’t hurt her so much…”

“If that’s what you want. I will speak with Commander Cullen, draft up some official Inquisition papers for your recruitment and should the worst happen, we’ll say you died in the field.” Aleska said quietly “I’m sorry we can’t do more…”
“You’ve already shown more kindness than I deserve…” Antoine turned to look out of the window again, as if he found some solace in the rushing water far below.

“You helped me. I won’t forget that. Have you eaten at all? I can ask one of the servants to bring you something to eat, even drink; you’ll need your strength in the coming days.”

_And I will see Samson paid back tenfold for this…_

Dagna was still pottering at her workbench when Aleska came back into her laboratory, studying samples with the aid of a magnifying lens.

“It keeps growing even after it’s removed…” The Arcanist sounded intrigued but deeply disturbed; far from her usual bubbling cheerfulness. “I’ve never seen anything like this before; I’d say it was alive but… that’s impossible – isn’t it?”

“If it’s alive, does that mean there’s a way to kill it?”

Dagna made a series of adjustments to the lens as she pondered the question.

“I’ve tried with everything I have; the only thing that seems to work is concentrated mage-fire, that reduces it to inert ash. It wouldn’t be any good for a cure though.”

“What about some sort of purgative?” Aleska asked; she knew it was a futile question, but there had to be some way. Dagna simply shook her head.

“Perhaps in the early stages; but it’s actually growing inside him. The nodules are just what we see on the surface. Eventually…” Dagna paused, then dropped her voice; looking around anxiously even though they were alone in the room. “He… he asked me if I had any deathcap; in… in case I couldn’t…”

Aleska sat down on the stool beside Dagna, taking a deep breath and exhaling slowly. Of course, he would ask for something like that. Deathcap, in a large enough dose, slowed the heartrate and breathing until it induced a sleep from which there would be no waking.

“I know what the infection does…” She said slowly; keeping her breathing steady and slow to stop herself shaking at the memory of the quarry and the things she’d seen there. “Let me know if he asks again, but don’t tell anyone else about this.”

Aleska made her way up the stairs to the Great Hall with a heavy heart. Perhaps she should speak to Cassandra about this? As a Seeker, she might be better equipped to understand the situation and there was no lack of compassion behind the often-abrasive exterior. Her mood lightened as she saw Sophia approaching. She was wearing a gown in deep autumn shades – one of Cullen’s favourites, Aleska recalled – but then she noted her look of agitation and annoyance, something was clearly amiss.

“Have you seen your brother anywhere?” Sophia asked, with an unfamiliar edge to the tone. Aleska shook her head.

“Not yet, but I can easily find him. What has he done this time?”

“That’s what I’m trying to find out!” Sophia tugged irritably at the pendant of her necklace. “Joe’s in a terrible state; he’s locked himself in his room and isn’t letting anyone in. I tried to speak to him but he just said, ‘Ask Kay’!”

Aleska ran her hand over her face with a groan. Knowing her brother’s habits, she had an
unpleasant suspicion forming about all this.

“I’ll speak to him and find out what’s happened.” She promised. “Thank you for telling me.”

“I’m sorry to have to bother you with this.” Sophia said. “You have so much to deal with right now.”

“Including my big brother’s messes, it seems…” Aleska muttered. “Don’t worry about, Sophia; I’ll get to the bottom of this. Go and make sure Joe’s alright!”

*If he’s done what I think he’s done…*

###

It took Aleska all but a single afternoon to gather exactly what happened with Jonas and Kayden, by the time she’d pieced together the information, someone could have sworn they’d seen the steam coming off her person. *I am going to fucking kill him!* Aleska shoved the papers off her desk, knowing exactly where she would find her brother.

Her assumption proved correct, Cullen had asked for Kayden’s help in their training sessions, as a favour to Aleska to keep Kayden out of mischief. Aleska watched him lean against the bannister with Cullen standing beside him.

“Allie,” Kayden’s gleeful expression only angered her further.

With a sharp swing, Aleska’s fist collided with Kayden’s jawline, knocking him back into the bannister. Even Cullen’s eyes widened at her sudden display. Aleska’s breathing became heavy, with a single swirl, Aleska’s boot hit the rest of his cheek, knocking Kayden to the ground.

“You could have fucked ANYONE!” Aleska’s voice raised, towering over her brother who’d just gone pale. “Being the Inquisitor’s brother gave you that privilege! Why him Kayden? He is a sweet man who didn’t deserve it! Who didn’t deserve to be part of your fucking little games.”

Cullen’s hand rested within the crook of Aleska’s arm, placing himself between Kayden and Aleska. “Inquisitor, a word in private if you please?”

Aleska crossed the familiar threshold of Cullen’s office, taking the bottle of wine from his desk, she helped herself to a large gulp of the liquid. Cullen closed the door behind them to ensure they would have a semblance of privacy.

“I don’t claim to understand what happened,” Cullen began, taking the bottle from her. “You cannot throw a punch like that unprovoked in the middle of a courtyard—”

“I wasn’t unprovoked,” Aleska took the bottle back. “I’ll buy you a new one.”

Cullen released a slow exhale, allowing her to continue finishing the contents of his wine bottle. “What did Kayden do exactly, who did he… you know?”

“Fuck?” Aleska said it slowly enough, seeing the subtle uncomfortable tells which Cullen displayed at her vulgar language. “Jonas, my brother and Jonas have been somewhat involved for quite some time now. This morning, my brother in all his brilliance didn’t think about the long-term consequences.”

“Involved?” Cullen leaned against the desk beside her.
“Cullen,” Aleska laughed, swallowing another mouthful, “you are not stupid, use that brain of yours.”

“You have been through quite the ordeal,” Cullen shook his head. “I’m willing to let that one slide.”

“They have been having sex,” Aleska scoffed. “My brother decided to sleep with Count Boniface’s son, who could bring on the wrath of Ostwick upon us with a single pen stroke. I doubt even Sophia has the power to dissuade her father from seeking vengeance on the man who hurt his son.”

Cullen placed an arm around her shoulders, pulling her into a close embrace. “I cannot presume to tell you how to behave but throwing punches at your brother won’t fix that. Perhaps go see Jonas? He may be hurt, but there is no better time to remind him who his friends are than now.”

“What would I do without you,” Aleska laughed, ruffling Cullen’s hair. “Thank you.”

“For what?” Cullen grumbled, fixing the strands now out of place.

“For being my friend.”

###

Kayden pressed the cold flannel firmly to his red and swollen cheek, wincing at the pain surging through every nerve ending.

“I’ll say this for me little sister; she’s got a right hook to be proud of!”

Varric glared at him as he uncorked a fresh bottle of whiskey.

“You made the big puppy cry, Slicer!” He growled, filling a glass, and passing it to Kayden. “From what I’ve seen of Sapphire, you’re lucky she didn’t break your jaw.”

“Now isn’t that the truth!” Kayden took a mouthful of whiskey and squirmed. “I think she’s chipped a tooth though!”

“You deserved it…” Sera muttered, intent on her handiwork. “Shouldn’t have messed him about like that.”

“I didn’t mean to let things get this far! I was going to end things sooner but then… all that business with Allie…” Kayden caught the stare Sera was giving him and took another mouthful of whiskey. “I shouldn’t have used him like that though… I’m sorry…”

“So, you should be…” She said, sticking another verminous looking raven feather into the mass of knotted plaidweave.

“What in the Void is that you’re making?” Kayden asked as Sera held up the crude, hideous, bonnet she’d fashioned.

“Hat of Shame!” She declared proudly. “You have to wear it until we’ve decided to forgive you.”

“I’m not wearing that thing!” Kayden protested as Sera hopped of her seat and approached him.

“It’s this… or earwigs!” She warned him with a venomous stare. Kayden visibly shuddered.

“Those things with the pincers on their bums? Creators! Give the damn thing here!”
“Go ‘way!”

Aleska knocked at the door again, louder this time.

“I said go ‘way!!!”

“I’ve brought you something to eat…” Aleska said quietly; Jonas had an appetite to rival Bull’s, and he hadn’t eaten all day, he must be starving; if food didn’t work, she wasn’t sure what would. “Beef and carrot stew, your favourite.”

There was a brief silence.

“Got dumplings?”

Aleska laughed.

“I wouldn’t forget those…”

A few brief shuffling noises followed, the sound of someone hurriedly struggling into clothes, and a muffled curse as something was knocked over. Eventually Jonas opened the door, eyes red and puffy, with his shirt on inside-out. Cuddles lay on the floor beside Jonas’ unmade bed, watching them both with a sad, intent, gaze. Aleska put the bowl down on the table and gave the big Reaver a massive hug.

“I’m probably the last person you want to see right now…”

Jonas patted her back with a beefy paw.

“Ain’t angry at you, ‘Leska…” he said, softly. “Ain’t really angry at Kay… Just feel bloody stupid…”

“You’ve every right to be angry with him…” Aleska said, still hugging him closely. “He shouldn’t have led you on like that. I am mad at myself for not warning you, for not seeing it sooner.”

“He told me he wasn’t interested in nothin’ serious… I just thought… maybe…” He shook his head and disengaged himself from the hug, sitting down at the table and picking up a spoon.

“Thought what, Joe?” Aleska asked sitting down beside him. He ladled a spoonful for stew into his mouth and chewed for a moment before swallowing.

“Nothing… Just thick ol’ Joe getting his head all messed up again…”

“I hate it when you say things like that about yourself… It’s not true” Aleska laid her hand on his arm. “But, if you don’t want to tell me, that’s fine.”

Jonas chuckled quietly to himself.

“Dor says I ain’t thick, just… ‘differently clever.’ Dunno what that means, but it was nice of him to say it.”

Aleska thought she understood Dorian’s meaning. Jonas might not be academically gifted, and words were a constant challenge for him, but his skills as a warrior and hunter were second to none. She’d seen him holding his own against Bull in full-on sparring matches that would leave other men with broken or dislocated limbs; and there was a gentle, kind-heartedness about him that made
Kayden’s thoughtlessness even more infuriating.

Jonas forked a couple of dumplings into the stew and mashed them in to soak up the gravy; with the familiar frown that told her he was pondering something. Finally he seemed to make up his mind and turned to her, biting his bottom lip nervously.

“Promise you won’t laugh?”

“I promise.” Aleska said solemnly, placing her hand on her heart, and Jonas coughed nervously; wiping some stray gravy from his chin.

“I know it sounds bloody stupid… but…” He put his spoon down carefully beside the bowl. “You got Ansie courtin’ you; Soph and Cully are well… you know. Just felt a bit… left out… Silly, ain’t it?”

He sounded so woebegone Aleska was afraid she might start crying. She cupped his cheek gently, his gaze meeting hers, her fingers running along the stubble of his cheek.

“Oh Joe, I’m so sorry. Kayden shouldn’t have…” Then she stopped in surprise as something Jonas’ just said registered with her. “Wait… you know about Cullen and Sophia?”

Jonas chuckled again and gave her a sly look, picking up his spoon again. Sitting beside Aleska on his bed, patting the space between them for Cuddles to come sit.

“Soph ain’t always as crafty as she thinks— even I know it don’t take an hour to borrow a book — and Cully can’t shake that bloody smirk of his. Ain’t too hard to figure out.” He scooped up a mass of gravy-soaked dumpling and ate it in two bites. “Know why she ain’t saying nothing; Pa still ain’t so happy with her after…”

He stopped, giving her a worried look as if afraid he’d said too much. Aleska found herself intrigued, this was something she hadn’t heard before.

“Did Sophia have an argument with your father?” She asked carefully. Jonas remained silent, his cheeks flushing; and Aleska was about to retract her question when he finally spoke.

“Soph can’t be Heir, neither can Marc, ‘cause they’re Mages; Ansie were still bloody wild and me… well….…” He paused, his blush deepening, and his eyes flickered away from Aleska’s “I ain’t cut out for all that… so… Pa; he wanted to get me married… so I could…”

His voice tailed off and Aleska grimaced as she realised what he was implying.

“That’s dishonourable to force you into marriage… no, surely—” Aleska’s voice trailed off.

Jonas nodded miserably.

“That’s what Soph thought. She and Pa had a blazing row ‘bout it… Said she weren’t gonna see me treated like a stud bull and were taking me to Ferelden with her; and the only way he could stop her was to lock her up… Ma weren’t happy ‘bout it neither…” He put his spoon back down again, fidgeting with the napkin “Pa ain’t a bad man, ‘Leska; but it’s all been bloody crazy since the war started. He’s just trying to…”

Aleska reached out and took his hand, squeezing it tightly.

“Joe, you can’t let people walk all over you like this; not your father, and certainly not Kayden… You need to stand up for what you want. Or else people will take advantage of your tender heart
and sweet nature. I hate seeing you so miserable.”

Jonas laid his other hand over hers, covering it completely. Aleska smiled, trying to meet his gaze.

“Dunno what I want, maybe that’s what’s wrong… Just… don’t wanna disappoint anyone…”

Aleska sighed quietly, she understood that feeling all too well, always forced to be the one other
look up to. The dread of disappointing Bae, when none of his special tricks worked to make her a mage.

“That doesn’t give anyone else the right to make you do what they want, though… Saying no
doesn’t make you selfish… and even if it did, we’re allowed to be selfish every so often.”

Jonas shrugged helplessly and went back to finishing his meal.

“Don’t feel right…” he muttered, in between mouthfuls.

“Maybe you’ll feel better when we get on the road to the Western Approach?” Aleska suggested; it
seemed a foolish thing to suggest, but there was something suffocating and claustrophobic about Skyhold just now. It might only be her imagination, but the thought of being out on campaign again certainly eased her own anxieties. “I’ve heard there’s good hunting out there.”

A soft knock on the door, and a deferential cough outside, told her the Council Meeting was about to begin and, with it, the final decisions on the march to the West.

“I wish I could stay longer…” She said, slowly standing up.

“You got important stuff to…” Jonas looked around at the mess of his room. “I oughta do something about this. Can’t sit around moping in me own bloody stink all day…”

Aleska bent down and kissed his cheek. “Go have a bath and I promise you’ll feel better; maybe have a round of cards with Varric and Bull, it might cheer you and him up. He’s been all mopy since Anselm has been… what was the word you used?”

“Courtin’,” Jonas repeated, the sparkle returning to his eyes.

“Take care of yourself; Lethallin…” She said fondly. “You know where I am if you need me.”

###

“I knew today was going to be difficult. I just wasn’t expecting all this.”

Aleska leaned against the railing of her balcony, watching the sun set behind the mountain. Anselm came up beside her and handed her a glass of wine.

“It started well enough…” He said ruefully. “Pity it turned into several different types of druffalo-dung so quickly.”

Aleska smiled back at him and took his hand in hers.

“It did start well… thank you for keeping so calm over Kayden; I couldn’t have coped with the two of you fighting.”

Anselm took a sip of wine, swilling it around his mouth a few times before swallowing.

“I’m still damn angry; but hearing you cuss him out on the training ground was worth exercising
some self-control…” He stroked her knuckles lightly with the tip of his thumb. “Besides, I’m not really qualified to occupy any sort of moral high ground when it comes to—"

He paused, looking away from her and sighing heavily. Aleska set her wineglass down and gently took hold of his chin; turning his face towards her.

“I need to know the whole truth about you…” She said, looking his steadily in the eyes. “Every lover, every whore, every bored noblewoman you tupped in her box at the opera. I don’t want any unpleasant surprises to ruin things between us. Not now…”

Anselm coughed nervously.

“Funny you should mention the Opera; there’s a bit of an… erm… amusing story connected with that.”

“I can’t promise that I’ll laugh, but I still want to hear it. All of it.”

“Are you quite sure?” Anselm asked, watching her carefully. “Most people, when they say the want the truth, mean anything but that.”

“I’m not most people” Aleska said firmly. Anselm smiled and stroked her cheek.

“No, you’re not; and perhaps that’s one of the reasons I love you so much.” He took a deep breath. “Well, if you want to hear the whole story of my misdeeds; we’re going to need a lot more wine and a lot more time.”

“We’ll have plenty of time on the road to Griffon Wing Keep” Aleska assured him. “But I want to hear that Opera story tonight; I’m eager to see if it’s as funny as you think it is.”

“You’d have heard about it eventually.” Anselm laughed, putting his arm around her. “I think half of Tantervale had a grandstand view of my arse when the curtain went up…”
Chapter Summary

With the location of the Warden’s in hand, Anselm and Aleska head to the Western Approach, only to find there are more than Quillbacks and Phoenixes lurking within the desert. Aleska’s sudden mood shift leaves Anselm wondering if she was having doubts, only to be told a personal secret. One she’s kept to herself.

The preparations had been set, what took weeks of planning between Aleska, Cullen and Leliana had come to a head. None were prepared for what Aleska was close to uncovering. Aleska had been cooped up all morning in the War Room, usually oversized seemed stuffy upon this morning, despite the servants opening the windows to allow for fresh air to flow through the room.

“I still don’t like it,” Cullen pitched in, placing the marker on his map. “You’ll be thrown in with Wardens, demons and Maker knows what else. Why will not you use a bulk of our forces, most recruits haven’t been exposed to a good fight.”

“Exactly,” Aleska counter argued, “I am going straight into the Lion’s den with no means of knowing if they intend to let me leave alive, I need veteran soldiers, not some recruits who would likely piss his pants the moment a Shade emerged and threatened to disembowel them.”

“Have you given any thought to who you will be taking with you?” Leliana’s finger trailed back and forth across her chin, the spark of curiosity danced within her eyes.

“Bull for one, the man has seen enough horrors within his lifetime to not be afraid of anything, Dorian, any magic we encounter he might successfully dispel. Jonas, Anselm, and Cassandra. We’ll be meeting Hawke and his brother Carver there, so between my companions and those two, we’ll be ready for anything.”

“Dorian?” Cullen’s gaze flickered between both Aleska and Leliana. “I thought you intended to take Soph—Lady Sophia with you.”

Aleska’s upper lip twitched into a smile, since her return to Skyhold with Antoine, Sophia had worked tirelessly with Dagna to see if the Red Lyrium could be reversed. That has not left much time for Cullen and Sophia to spent time together. Aleska cleared her throat, a single strand of hair fell out of place, with a finger twirl, she pinned it back.

“Sophia has other tasks which I have instructed her to perform whilst I am away,” the tip of Aleska’s fingers traced the grooves of the war table, her finger bumped along the ridged edges trailing through the Hinterlands and towards the Frostback Basin. “With your help Cullen, this is a very delicate situation with Antoine, need to know basis, not everyone in Skyhold needs to know.”

“R-Right,” Cullen cleared his throat, flicking through his papers. “Now if there is nothing else to discuss?”

“I do have one last thing I was hoping to address?” Leliana spoke up, her features softened as she
glanced over toward Aleska. “Why didn’t you tell us you had a set of Dalish armour? If you’d warn that when Ambassador Cassius makes his visit; the negotiations will go far smoother.”

“First off,” Aleska held up her index finger, “this was my brother’s idea, second.” Her thumb shot out, “It is rather hot in the Approach, so the less clothing the better—third… I don’t have a third, but you get my point.”

“I’m sure Lord Trevelyan would be appreciative of your chosen attire,” Leliana’s tone meant to tease sent a flush of warmth spreading across Aleska’s cheeks. “Not to mention, the Commander hasn’t stopped blushing since you walked into the room.”

“I have not—” Cullen’s hand rubbed the back of his neck, he averted his gaze, even he could not deny he had not looked in her direction since she walked in.

“I’m going to go,” Aleska placed the papers down upon the edge of the table, pushing them closer toward the map to ensure they would not tumble to the floor. “Before Bull breaks a chair with excitement.”

“Why would he do that?” Leliana’s hands rested behind her, a laugh followed her statement.

“I may or may not have promised we’d go Dragon hunting if there was time to spare.”

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The council meeting had ended, Aleska was the first to leave the room, allowing Cullen and Leliana to finish the last-minute details of their departure. This afforded Aleska a few moments to catch her breath and absorb the events of the last few days. Even down to her conversation with Anselm and how he had told her of the Opera house scandal, how his uncle had a mess to clean up afterwards with the woman’s husband.

You did ask, Aleska forced the realization back within her mind. Any anger she had felt subsided, even the tone he used to tell each rendition had been laced with shame and disgust. Had she been anyone else, it might have been a means to boast about his various conquests, but the realization dawned upon him that his track record had left enough room for doubt within her mind.

I must admit, Aleska picked up an apple from the circular tower which had been displayed upon the dining table. That is one detail about the Comtesse de la Faer that was particularly interesting. Her fingers shifted along the apple, the sticky coating around it had broken her focus. There had been an unusual glisten to it, not like the others which had been served at their morning breakfasts. Shrugging, Aleska pushed the thought far from her mind and brought the apple to her lips.

“Don’t eat that!” Josephine quickly took it from her hands, placing it on a tray held by a passing servant. “It isn’t a real apple! The purpose of it was for display only, real apples would turn to rot in this heat.”

Aleska’s eyes widened, the stickiness she assumed was burnt sugar happened to be paint, the redness now stained her fingers and a rich metallic smell reached her, nauseating her. It smells like blood, Aleska brought her fingers to her nose, confirming her suspicions.

“Who is all this for?” Aleska wiped her hand on the warm towel Josephine offered.

“As you are well aware,” Josephine rearranged the forks to be only a fingernail apart. “Ambassador Cassius is due in Skyhold any moment now, when he walks in from the stables. This will be the first thing he shall see; I want his impression to be lasting and would prefer it not be of the soldiers sweating and cursing at one another.”
“Ah,” Aleska still had not gasped why they needed to bow to each nobles demands as if they held no power themselves. “So, is any of this food real?”

“Yes, the éclairs are real, the silver glitter is a magical spell which Madam Vivienne has graciously lent her skills with. To keep them firm and cold until the dinner tonight.”

Aleska’s hand outstretched, the subtle mist from the éclairs touched her skin, sending a rush of cool air through the tips of her fingers and along her palm. Josephine’s hand at once slapped hers away, soon shock of her own actions had registered within Josephine’s mind.

“I apologize Inquisitor,” Josephine lowered her head, her gaze fixed at her board. “But everything must remain as it is seen. No, Delphine. I told you to put the lilies at the entrance of the Great Hall, not behind the doors. Pardon me, Inquisitor.”

Before Aleska had time to open her mouth, Josephine hurried up the aisle to scold the staff member who appeared unable to follow a simple instruction. *I almost feel for the woman, but one does not work for Josephine Montiliyet and not have an eye for her detail.* Soon powerful arms wrapped around her waist, pulling her close to him, the scent of cedarwood and musk gave him away.

“Good morning,” Anselm’s voice dropped to a low whisper, a gentle kiss placed behind her ear. “I hope you slept well?”

“I slept decently,” Aleska felt his warm breath caressing her neck, she all but melted into his arms. “What about you? That was probably the first decent night’s sleep you’ve gotten in what seems to be an Age.”

“I slept better, knowing I was at your side for the night,” Anselm’s finger traced along her exposed naval.

Aleska’s eyes flickered towards the small platter of éclairs and then at Josephine, noticing the Ambassador’s distraction would afford her the opportunity to taste one of these small delights before she endured meals of only bread and soup. *Not the diet I had planned, I am amazed I have not gotten fat.*

A single hand hovered over the small platter, picking up one of the small chocolate balls, the enchantment even extended to her fingers, cooling them down substantially. With a gentle encouragement from Anselm, Aleska placed the éclair upon her tongue, the enchantment only lasted a moment more before the sweetness of the chocolate spread around her tongue.

“Josephine is going to kill me,” Aleska chewed the desert, the liquid within the éclair danced around her tongue before she finally swallowed it, letting out a moan of contentment.

“Doubt that,” Anselm chuckled, “well, not once she finds out the linen, she ordered is more of a honey than a mustard. This will seem like small pickings compared to that.”

“Well in that case,” Aleska grabbed the platter, turning around in Anselm’s arms she saw him properly for the first time and her eyes widened in surprise. “What are you wearing?”

Aleska took a step back, careful enough to conceal the platter from a glaring Josephine who took it upon herself to look up at the commotion which she had caused. Somehow – Creators only knew how – he’d managed to fit himself out in Dalish armour. The leather chest and shoulder-pieces left his arms and much of his midriff enticingly uncovered; while the kilt of leather and padded linen straps fell to barely past mid-thigh; showing off a pair of lean, well-muscled calves. She tried not to let her attention linger too long, or too obviously, on the fine trail of hair leading from his navel.
to the waistband of his kilt

“Your brother suggested it; I think he’s trying to get back into my good books,” Anselm looked at her with a sly smile. “And you’re a fine one to talk… My Lady.”

Aleska looked down at her own attire, in place of her waist coat, she bore a smaller version of that, cut at the ribs displaying her slender stomach. She’d foregone her usual shoulder guards for a full-length coat and close-fitting, charcoal gray, breeches. Her hair done up in a usual elven braid to the side with the rest of her hair tied up in a messy pony tail.

“Yes, well—” Aleska cleared her throat, even she could not explain why she agreed to this.

“It suits you,” Anselm affirmed, placing another chocolate ball within her mouth. “I’d ask you to wear this more often, but I don’t have the energy to remind every man in Skyhold to avert his eyes.”

“Don’t be silly,” Aleska placed the last of the éclairs in a small container. Watching Jonas and Kayden walk up the steps in a sullen silence.

“Jeez Ansie, what are you wearin’?” Jonas laughed, his eyes shifted to Aleska. “What the blazes are you both wearin’?”

“Nothing in particular,” Aleska shook her head, feeling her brother mess with the collar of her coat.

“You’re going to boil in this, Allie,” Kayden slid the coat down her shoulders, throwing it to the ground.

Aleska’s hands went to her arms, a sharp exhale left her lips, the trimmed waistcoat had over complimented her bust. How did I manage these in the past? Aleska lowered her arms, walking out of the Great Hall to spot Varric and Cullen talking with a woman and a man she had never seen before.

“Sweet Maker, Sapphire,” Varric gaped, “are you intending to give every man in Skyhold a heart attack?”

“Not you to,” Aleska grumbled, her boot shifting a loose pebble at the. “I should go change.”

“Don’t you dare!” Varric sauntered over to her. “I bet Bull fifty that Charmer would have his first fight over your honour the week is done?”

“You’re the Inquisitor?” The man beside Cullen said, his jaw slacked after his statement finished. “It is a pleasure to meet you, your Worship.”


“That must make you,” Aleska’s finger shifted to the lady beside them. “Rosalie.”

“Yes, your Worship,” Rosalie smiled warmly, skipping over to Aleska, and embracing her. “I wish Cullen had told us about you, especially how pretty you are. He never tells us anything.”

Aleska nodded, unsure of how to respond to this gesture. “I suppose I have been keeping my Commander occupied. I better go, before Bull rides off without me, you know how excited he gets.”

Cullen lowered his head rigidly fixed to the ground at his feet. “Travel safely, Inquisitor; we shall
discuss the new recruits upon your return.”

“You’re not staying for Cullen’s birthday?” A sudden look of disappointment displayed on Rosalie’s features.

“When is it?” Aleska felt Anselm’s arm around her waist, pulling her against him.

“In a few days,” Cullen cleared his throat. “I hadn’t told anyone, so please don’t get me anything.”

“What’s the date today?” Aleska’s heart thudded within her chest.

“8th Frostfall,” Rosalie’s head cocked to the side. “We’re having a rather warm start to winter, aren’t we?”

Aleska’s breathing quickened, even standing next to Anselm made her suffocate, not too dissimilar from when Leliana tightened her waistcoat to the point where she could barely breathe. Only Kayden knew these exact signs, he stepped forward, placing a hand in the crook of Aleska’s arm.

“I—we—have to go, those Venatori won’t stay idle forever.”

“Shit—” Kayden whispered, watching Aleska walk down to the stables.

***

“Shall I stop for now?” Anselm asked, noticing Aleska had not been paying attention. “I know hearing of my past isn’t the most entertaining thing.”

It had been true, even since the left Skyhold, Aleska had been in her own little world, wondering how the days could have slipped past her to the point she had almost forgotten. Beads of sweat gathered across her forehead, even Jonas had been swallowing mouthfuls of water like a man about to die of thirst. A sudden tremble ran through every nerve ending through her body, not even she had realized that every word ushered by the companions had been met with stone cold silence.

Kayden rode beside her, a gentle hand placed upon hers, only this Aleska seemed to register. Looking at her brother, both the Lavellan siblings mirrored one another’s mournful expressions. The lump within Aleska’s throat all but choked her, it took summoning every bit of will power she had not to burst out crying then and there. What other possibility was there? Tell people? Endure their endless looks of sorrow at the young woman who had been too selfish to heed her mother’s warnings?

“We should be coming up to the main Inquisition—” Aleska’s statement had been halted by a blood curdling roar.

A shadow overtook them all, the large flap of wings sent a gust of wind which kicked up sand that enveloped the travellers. Another roar erupted through the canyon of the Approach, echoing as far as the abandoned ruins in the distance. Aleska held her hand up, informing her party to remain perfectly still. This will be torturous for Bull.

Before them, not even a stone throws away, a Gurnt had been grazing on the few green leaves the desert had to offer. Aleska remembered that they were largely deaf, the perfect prey for a hungry dragon or Inquisition ambush. A roar of flame cascaded down, even the fires touched Aleska’s skin, sending her back to the memories of Haven falling. In the centre of this cone of flames, the burnt Gurnt collapsed, lifeless and blackened.

“Let’s kill her, Boss!” Bull urged, reaching for his axe. “While her defences are down, now is our
“Keep your voice down!” Aleska hissed, holding her hand up and signalling him to put away the axe. “The smallest glimmer from it will catch her attention, we don’t have the man power to take her down. Not yet.”

A grunt left Bull, Aleska knew he was not approving of her choice to leave the beast be. Powerful talons gripped the Gurn’s ribs, the sheer force cracking a few as she ensured her grip was tight enough. With one last wing-flap, she soared off to her nest. *Probably to feed her young, not every dragonling makes it.*

Aleska kicked at Vesenya’s sides, signalling her to move forward. “We shouldn’t be too far off the main camp, let’s get a move on.”

Even Anselm knew something was wrong and neither Aleska or Kayden had been willing to show exactly what that was.

***

“She’s been sitting there for hours,” Anselm said, cutting the fletching down on his arrows, despite the new forge; Harriet still cut them unevenly.

“Well,” Kayden piped up, looking up from his sword. “Nah, never mind. It will just piss my sister off more and I am not in the mood to have my other cheek bruised.”

“Tell me?” Anselm urged, his gaze never left Aleska sitting upon the rock, looking at the Blighted lands before them. “I might even be able to convince them to let you stop wearing that ridiculous hat.”

“All right,” Kayden placed his sword in the warm sand. “You twisted my arm. It is Allie’s birthday in a few days. Not that she is one for recognizing it, it was a challenging time for our family. Especially her, so if you were to divert her attention off her birthday and onto something else… I can’t say she wouldn’t be grateful.”

“Your mother?” Anselm asked, with enough caution to know that if Aleska caught wind of this conversation she would be in a less than pleasant mood. Only Cuddles dared venture near her, her hand running over his ears absentmindedly.

Kayden gave a subtle nod. “Murdered on Allie’s birthday, since then… she has done everything within her power to forget that day even existed. Chances are, my sister is perched on that rock right now bawling her eyes out and only once she had had enough will she come back. I am amazed you spent a year around her and you haven’t gathered that much.”

“Well,” Anselm felt his own heart breaking for her, an understanding of the loss she felt. “She had been exceptionally good at masking it. I think I may have an idea. Joe—how about we go hunting some Quillbacks?”

“Yeah!” The excitement in Jonas’ voice told Anselm all he needed to know, even Cuddles heard the word *hunting* and bounced around Aleska.

“You coming Aleska?” Anselm called out to her, sneaking a bottle of wine and a blanket from within her tent. “Might be fun?”

Aleska got off her perch, her feet touching solid ground in more than an hour or so. Even time seemed to escape her. Grabbing her quiver, she slung it over her shoulder and her bow soon
followed. The vagueness of pink cheeks remained, but even Anselm knew she had been crying.

“What are we waiting for? Killing something sounds really good right now.” Aleska cleared her throat, heading towards where the Inquisition scouts were busy preparing the camps.

###

“I did technically promise Jonas a hunt,” Aleska smiled, walking beside Anselm as Jonas hacked at the Quillback which dared threaten Cuddles. “So, this works nicely, I know it doesn’t leave much time for us to spend time together.”

“I half expected it,” Anselm took her hand within his, lacing their fingers together. “It doesn’t mean I wouldn’t cherish any moment I spent alone with you… even if it was at night.”

“There might be another way,” Aleska smiled to herself. “If you get to tire Jonas out enough to have an afternoon nap, we’d have some time to ourselves. The man sleeps for hours at a time when he is genuinely tuckered out.”

Anselm held up a small bag of bread, “leave that to me, a bit of bread and water mixed with this heat and Jonas will be too tired to even keep his eyes open.”

True to Anselm’s word, Jonas had passed out with Cuddles by a shaded tree, his loud snoring was even enough to rival the dragon. Issuing two orders to the Inquisition scouts to remain close in case the wild life thought them easy prey, Aleska observed the sleeping pair, shaking her head softly.

“Ensure Lord Jonas is well looked after, if I find so much as a scratch on him, it will be reassignment to the Fellowmire.”

“We will not falter, Your Worship.”

With that, both Aleska and Anselm wondered below the Grand Staircase -or so the scouts called it- to enjoy a moment of solitude.

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The wine bottle rested on its side, contents spilling out into the sand and creating a deep crimson smoke as the sun soaked it up. The bread had been scattered along the wine, pecked at by eager birds who had not seen a meal this easy in their lives. Ignoring the two guests which had disturbed their sanctuaries. The sound of the babbling river by their feet helped create a harmonious aura around them, the shade beneath the tree finished off their quiet afternoon.

Anselm’s hand travelled along her waist, the tips of his fingers surging against her exposed skin. His lips hungrily upon hers, claiming hers in a heated kiss. Aleska’s hand upon his chest, moving towards his back and pressing her body firmly against his. Removing his quiver from his shoulder, Aleska placed it beside them, now nothing covered his chest, Aleska’s hand eagerly explored his now exposed torso, her fingers running along every muscular curve on his chest.

His hand travelled down her leg, resting behind her knee, and shifting it around his waist, allowing him to be between her legs. His kiss moved from her lips to her jawline, his hand travelled up her waist, over her breast and cupped the back of her neck. Aleska’s hand trailed along his spine, reaching the base, Anselm’s head buried within her neck.

“Oh, Sweet Andraste!” Anselm growled. “I did warn you I was ticklish.”

Aleska laughed, applying the right amount of pressure once more, another growl left his lips,
gazing deeply into those green eyes she had come to love, her hand placed upon his cheek, her fingers caressing the stubble which he kept for her benefit.

“Anselm,” Aleska whispered, her index finger tracing his lower lip. “I—I thought I could do this, here and now.”

“Did I do something wrong?” Anselm now rested beside her, propped up upon his elbows, panting for breath. “Or did hearing of my past dissuade you from continuing this?”

“No—” Aleska said quickly, a reassuring kiss placed against his lips. “I have just never… been—”

Aleska’s cheeks flushed, she did not know how to phrase this without sounding utterly ridiculous. The tip of her tongue wet her dry lips, sitting up, she crossed her legs. Why cannot I just give myself to him right now. I told him I loved him, that did not send him packing. We have spent a while playing these games.

“Have been?” Anselm reminded her of the statement which she had suddenly cut off. “You can tell me anything, I hope you know that.”

“I’ve never been with a man, intimately—” Aleska’s cheeks flushed with embarrassment, wishing the floor beneath her swallowed her up whole. “My mother always taught me to not hand my virtue to the first boy to smile at me, to wait for the right man to come along.”

“So, the time I kissed you?” Anselm’s eyes saw her, “and just now?”

“Yes, silly isn’t it? A woman of my age still clinging to her virtue as if it means anything in this Age?” Aleska could not help but laugh. It was better than crying. “All the other girls in the clan lost theirs to men who hadn’t bothered to show them an ounce of respect afterwards. I wanted better for myself.”

“I see,” Anselm sat up beside her, his hand beneath her chin turning her gaze toward his. “I just hope to be worthy of it, should you decide that I am the man you want to be with.”

“I never said I didn’t want to,” Aleska laughed, lying him back down, climbing on top of him. “I only want a little bit of time to prepare myself for the eventuality and somewhere more romantic than a desert swarming with a Dragon, Quillbacks and Phoenixes. Also, a bed… a bed would be nice.”

“Oh Maker!” Anselm laughed, tucking loose strands of hair behind her ears. “I hope you believe me when I say I would get you a unicorn if it added to the romantic night.”

“A unicorn might—” Aleska laughed, the sensation of Anselm running his fingers along her ribs to tickle her ended in him bringing her in for deep and passionate kiss.

***

“Where have you two been?” Kayden glanced up, “Jonas had returned from his hunt dazed.”

Aleska cleared her throat, her messy hair and sand laced between the strands would be enough confirmation for anyone, but Kayden wanted an explanation from her lips. I am not telling him anything. I am the Inquisitor here, not his little sister.

“We ought to go,” Aleska’s teeth captured her lower lip. “Our destination isn’t far from here.”

“Right,” Anselm nodded in agreement. His sun kissed skin told Kayden all he needed to know.
Aleska wondered off, relaying the plan with Bull, Cassandra, and Jonas whilst Kayden had backed Anselm. Led to a quiet spot in the camp, Kayden ensured that Aleska had been well out of earshot, even for an elf.

“Judging by the standing ovation in your pants,” Kayden kept his voice a whisper. “I assumed you had a more private plan in mind to distract my sister. I’m assuming she told you?”

“Of course, she did,” Anselm kept his voice lower. “I am not some barbarian who would pressure her into—”

“Defensive, aren’t we?” Kayden joked, a hand upon Anselm’s shoulder. “Just know that if you do decide to dera na aron tuelan consider yourself one lucky son of a bitch. But if that is your end goal and my sister end up like one of those woman you were telling her about, my blade will rip through your insides and I will perch you on a spike and watch the crows feed off you.”

“That will be for me to decide,” Aleska claimed, folding her arms. “Not that I do not love you making death threats in my honour, but you have no moral high ground to stand on. Now go with Bull and try not to seduce him.”

“No promises,” Kayden nudged Aleska, wandering off to his post.

Aleska shook her head, I shall deal with him later. “I hope he didn’t get to you. I now regret saying a thing.”

“That elven phrase?” Anselm pulled her into his arms, savouring the last few moments they could spend together. “What did it mean?”

“In short?” Aleska rested her head beneath his chin. “I lust to touch you like a goddess. In Elvhen, we do not say make love, there is no direct translation. What my brother said was one of the ways. More of the romantic ways.”

“I quite like it,” Anselm’s arm draped around her shoulders. “Shall we try and steal one or two more moments? Or should we deal with these bastards?”

“Anselm,” Aleska nudged him. “I am aware you are excited for this… for us, but we can’t allow it to distract from our duty either.”

“You’re no fun sometimes,” Anselm kissed her forehead. “But I will agree, perhaps when we get back to Skyhold, we shall have more opportunities to steal.”

“Nothing will give me more pleasure, than spending an afternoon in your arms.”

“Well, if My Lady permits,” Anselm teased. “I have one or two things that could.”

***

“They’re about to perform the rituals,” Hawke said, after greeting Kayden and Aleska with large hugs.

“Hawke, a moment.” Aleska pulled him to one side, her curiosity got the better of her. “Did you and my brother ever… you know? After Anders you were so broken, I would dread if he took advantage of that.”

“No,” Anselm shook his head. “I was not about to abuse your father’s hospitality by sleeping with his son… or daughter.”
“Which daughter?” Aleska laughed softly. “I only ask because, my brother’s recent activities had been brought to light and someone got hurt. I would like to know who else he slept with and just how much damage control I had needed to do.”

Hawke let out a hearty laugh, the first Aleska had heard in an exceedingly long time, not since he stayed with the clan. A raised brow had followed, Aleska placed her hands upon her hips, cocking them to the side.

“What’s so funny?” Aleska looked behind her, Carver had already begun instructing the group on the best plan of attack without massive casualties.

“Allie,” Hawke shook his head with a broad grin. “I dare say your brother has a list nearly as long as your paramour.”

“How did you—”

“Well for one, I am a man,” The former Champion of Kirkwall smiled down at her, “second, he has not been able to stop watching you, the kind of looks Andie would give if someone came too close to me; or if I got a bit too flirtatious after the second bottle of wine. Third, his fists are clenching, meaning he is exercising some self-control. You are a beautiful woman, if a man you were seeing did not make these subtle hints. I would be more concerned if he genuinely cared for you.”

“You’re a good friend; Hawke,” Aleska nudged him, walking back towards the crowd.

Listening to Carvers battle plan all laid out, he reminded her of Cullen, especially when the Commander had been in a spirited mood to discuss strategy over a game of chess and some wine. Using a stick to draw the map in small bits of sand which blew onto the stone flooring. Aleska nodded, knowing she would be placed in the centre regardless.

“There are Wardens who may be willing to listen to reason,” Carver looked at Bull in particular. “If we can spare any, I would prefer it.”

“I cannot, in good faith, make that promise Carver.” Aleska stated, knowing that she was stepping into a pit of unknown circumstances. To give Carver even a glimmer of hope would prove to be too cruel. “If any decide to cease action and assume arms against those who don’t, I will offer them a chance at redemption… even then—”

“I’m not asking for a promise,” Carver hissed. “I just don’t want needless deaths to be on my hands. Not every Warden has gone insane to this false Calling that they have been spouting around.”

“How are you doing?” Aleska asked, watching Bull and Jonas give them some privacy, followed by Cassandra, Anselm, and Kayden. “I need you to not be swayed by what we’re walking into.”

“You just worry about keeping yourself alive,” Carver threw the stick to the ground. “I will worry about the rest; how does that sound?”

“The ritual is starting,” Hawke urged them both to hurry up their conversation.

“Are you ready?” Carver unsheathed his sword.

“I should be asking you that.”

“If I said no?”
“You don’t really have a choice.”
Chapter Summary

The Inquisition prepares for the assault on Adamant Fortress. The night before battle affects all of them in different ways, but none of them anticipate the true nightmare that awaits...

The Forest of Trevisanto; on the border between Ostwick and Markham.

9:38 Dragon.

“It was no deer made these tracks, nor one of the People…” Ilaan said, crouching down and examining the ground. She pointed to the boot marks in the soft earth; the water gathered in them told Aleska they’d been made before the rain this morning. “Only Shemlen are that big and clumsy!”

“Why would a shem be this deep in the woods?” Yavven wondered. “A charcoal burner? Or maybe a trapper?”

Aleska shook her head with a sigh. It was lucky that Yavven was such a good hunter as he’d never thrive on brains alone.

“The charcoal burners stick to the fringes.” She reminded him. “And trappers know better than to come into the Heart of the Forest; unless they’re looking to trade, and these tracks are heading away.”

“A fugitive then…” Ilaan said, getting to her feet, “or a bandit. We should follow them, just to make sure.”

Ilaan was the eldest of the three; and the red-haired woman had been a hunter since Aleska was in swaddling-bands, so even she knew better than to argue as they set off to follow the trail. Bae’s decision to lead the Clan into the depths of the great forest that divided the territories of Ostwick, and Markham had been a deliberate one, made after long consultation with the Elders.

War raged in Kirkwall, to the west, after the destruction of the great temple in that city; while civil war gripped the neighbouring state of Starkhaven. According to the word in the human marketplaces, the son of the old Prince fought to take the throne from the cousin that usurped it. Bae’s decision to lead the Clan into the depths of the great forest that divided the territories of Ostwick, and Markham had been a deliberate one, made after long consultation with the Elders.

The found the man by the hollow bank of a nearby stream, trying to reach the water before he collapsed. He lay in the borderland between life and death, skin slick and clammy with fever; as Ilaan approached he made a feeble gesture as if to try and push her away, but even that small effort drained him of whatever energy he had left. He was tall and powerfully built; with thick, black hair and an unkempt beard. His clothes had once been of fine quality but, like him, they were now
tattered and dirty.

“His wounds are festered…” Ilaan said as she drew back the man’s cloak to reveal the stinking gash in his side. “Kindest to cut his throat and end it quickly.”

She was right, Aleska knew that, the man was near to death and the Clan couldn’t risk taking on the burden of a strange. It was the merciful thing to do, but it still saddened her; to be helpless and alone, so far from his own kind. She dipped a piece of cloth in the stream and used it to moisten his dry lips, hoping it would give him some little comfort. He moaned, and tried to stir again, but remained lost in whatever nightmare held him.

Something about him seemed familiar in a way Aleska couldn’t explain and, as she looked a little closer, a memory stirred. She pulled the cloak back further, baring his left arm to reveal an intricate red tattoo winding around his forearm and bicep.

“I know this man!” She exclaimed. “I met him when Maela took me to Kirkwall.”

It had only been for a few minutes. He’d returned her pendant after it came loose and exchanged a few words; but it had been an act of kindness in a loud, unfriendly city.

“Are you sure?” Ilaan sounded dubious. “That was two years ago.”

“He had these same markings!” Aleska replied, indicating the tattoos. “Go back to the camp and bring my father!”

“Are you serious?” Yavven exclaimed “Drag the Keeper out here for some dying shem?”

“I know him…” she retorted, through gritted teeth. He had been kind to her, and she remembered the blond man who’d tugged at his arm and called him ‘Love’. Was he still out there somewhere, waiting for him? “Now go, I will not ask a second time!”

Ilaan glanced at Yavven and let out a long sigh. When Aleska made her mind up about something there was no point in arguing.

“I know him…” Hawke retorted, through gritted teeth. He had been kind to her, and she remembered the blond man who’d tugged at his arm and called him ‘Love’. Was he still out there somewhere, waiting for him? “Now go, I will not ask a second time!”

Ilaan glanced at Yavven and let out a long sigh. When Aleska made her mind up about something there was no point in arguing.

“Very well…” She said, getting to her feet and brushing moss from her boots. “But if he has you on fish-gutting for a month, don’t say we didn’t warn you!”

###

**Griffon Wing Keep: 9:41 Dragon.**

Aleska hadn’t realised a desert could still be so hot at night and she was grateful for the faint breeze as she walked the walls, acknowledging the salutes of the sentries as she passed. The night was cloudless, the moon still below the horizon, and the sky full of stars; almost mirroring the flickering campfires surrounding Griffon Wing Keep.

Beyond them, the sands of the Western Approach faded into darkness; broken only by the baleful radiance of the Abyssal Rift. At a distance from the sentries, Hawke leaned against a battlement, staring out to the west, his features lit by the glowing tip of the strong-smelling Qunari cigar he was smoking.

“That fellow from the University calls it a natural phosphorescence; caused by sulphur and lyrium in the rocks, together with decaying animal matter… The locals just say it’s the light of the Void. I’m more inclined to agree with them.” Hawke took a final draw on his cigar and flicked the stub over the edge, a red pinprick vanishing into night, and turned to look at Aleksa. “I killed Wardens
today… Despite what they were doing, that feels wrong; especially here…”

Aleska joined him at the battlements, looking out towards the barely discernible line of the horizon far to the West. All this had once been rich, fertile, land; until the Abyssal Rift tore open and horde upon horde of Darkspawn poured forth to poison the very soil itself, still bare and desolate 800 years later. The Second Blight had almost destroyed Thedas and helped to create it.

Darkspawn had reached the walls of Minrathous itself, forcing the Imperium to abandon the Anderfels to save the capital from destruction; the Elvhen armies stood by while Montsimmard burned, laying the foundations of distrust that would lead inevitably to the Exalted March against the Kingdom of the Dales. Only the combined forces of Orlais and Nevarra saved the city-states of the Free Marches from utter destruction while Emperor Kordillus Drakon’s advancing forces carried the Chant of Light with them everywhere they went, establishing Chantry and Cloisters in their wake. The Alamarri tribes of the Ferledan Valley united under a single leader while Ameridan, the last Lord Inquisitor, vanished in the Frostbacks and the Nevarran Accord established the Circle of Magi, the Templars and the Seekers of Truth. The war had raged for 90 years, giving birth to the modern world in the process, and now it felt like they had come full circle.

“We gave them a chance to surrender; they didn’t take it.” Aleska reminded him. “It isn’t your fault.”

Hawke laughed harshly, pulling a bottle from his pocket and taking a swig; grimacing as the spirit hit the back of his throat.

“It’s never my fault, at least that’s what everyone keeps telling me whenever anything I touch turns to shit. Varric says it so often I’m wondering who he’s trying to convince; him, or me? If I hadn’t gone to that blighted hole.”

“Someone would have, eventually.” Aleska said, unsure if he was talking about the Deep Roads, or the fortress in the Vimmarks where he had found Corypheus.

“Maybe not for a hundred years, or even a thousand; we’d all be dead and gone, and it would be someone else’s problem.” Hawke took another swig; swilling the liquor around his mouth before spitting it over the edge.

“HOY!!!! You fuckin’ dirty bastard!” An aggrieved voice from below yelled, and the pair of them ducked behind the battlements; Aleska stifling her giggles.

“We ought to move, in case he comes looking…” She said, taking Hawke’s hand and leading him away. She didn’t need Varric to tell her that the former Champion was in a dangerous mood. He’d argued, badly, with Carver about the Warden Mages falling so easily under Corypheus’ influence; an argument that had only ended when his brother left with the advance force heading to the forward camp at Adamant Fortress.

She had kept well out of it, but much of what Hawke said struck a chord. The Warden’s dedication to combatting the Blight by any means left them dangerously vulnerable to corruption. King Alistair had sent her the report of what he and Queen Olivia discovered at Soldiers Peak – along with a welcome contingent of seasoned Fereldan troops, veterans of the Fifth Blight – and it fed her concern about what they would encounter in the fight to come.

“You can’t hold yourself responsible for everything.” She said, they continued walking. “People have to live with their own choices.”

“And people I love have died because of mine…” Hawke muttered, pulling out another cigar and
lighting it. “We should have gone to Rivain, with Isabela, after Kirkwall; but I wanted to stay and keep the fight going… and Anders…”

“That was his choice, as much as yours, you cannot solely blame yourself Hawke.” Aleska reminded him. “Neither of you would ever run from a fight…”

Hawke rested his elbows on the wall; taking a deep draw on his cigar and exhaling a long, thin, plume of smoke.

“I wish you’d had a chance to know him. He wasn’t the monster everyone wants to make him… if there’d been another way…” He shook his head, sighing heavily. “It was always going to end in blood and fire, though…”

“You loved him…” Aleska said, reaching out and touching his arm. “That tells me everything I need to know.”

“Shit has a bad habit of happening to people I care about…” Hawke said, taking out the bottle again and offering it to her. “That’s why I worry about you.”

Aleska took a drink of the whiskey, feeling its welcome warmth flowing down inside her, and handed the bottle back.

“I’m a survivor.” She told him. “Corypheus has learned that once, to his cost; and I aim to teach him a permanent lesson next time we meet.”

“I’ll drink to that…” Hawke said. Raising the bottle to his lips, he paused and lowered it; looking at her with a fond smile. “Little Isenathlen; your fire has become something to be feared.”

Dragon-child… she hadn’t heard that name since leaving the clan; even there, only those closest to her had ever used it…

“Beg pardon… Inquisitor?”

She turned to see Knight Captain Rylen at the head of the stairs, and she groaned quietly; even five minutes in her own company, or that of a friend, had become a rare commodity.

“Is there a problem, Ser Rylen?” She asked, knowing full well there would be. Rylen gave a mild embarrassed cough.

“It’s erm… the Commander, Ma’am. He and Lady Sophia are having something of a disagreement. It might require your… mediation.”

“I’ll be there in a few minutes.” She said and turned back to Hawke. “Are you going to be alright?”

Hawke nodded, indicating the bottle.

“I’ll cope, I just need to get a little more drunk; then I might go looking for something to distract me.”

Aleska noticed the frankly appraising look he was giving the Knight Captain and nudged him sharply in the ribs.

“Just don’t go creating any more problems for me. I’ve had more than enough with Kayden!”

###
“There’s no point in arguing about this further.” Cullen crossed his arms firmly over his chest. “You will not be going to the forward camp.”

Sophia put the book she was holding down on top of the clothes already in her travelling chest and rested her hands on the edge, trying to hold her frustration in check.

“And I’ve made it quite plain I’m not going to sit here staring mournfully out of the window when I can be of use with the army…”

“Maker’s Breath!” Cullen exclaimed. “You are the most infuriatingly stubborn…”

“Stubborn?” Sophia slammed the lid of the chest closed and turned to face him. “Have you listened to yourself recently? I’m not some glass bauble that needs to be kept out of harm’s way; and I’m definitely not some callow apprentice who can’t look after herself in the big bad world!”

“That’s not what I mean, and you know it!” Cullen barked, uncrossing his arms and pinching the bridge of his nose as the headache threatened to explode behind his eyes. “This will be a war-camp; within reach of an enemy counter-strike if the battle doesn’t go our way. I won’t let you be exposed to that degree of risk!”

“And if there’s an attack on the camp you’ll need my skills even more.” Sophia retorted. “I’m not just a healer, if you remember!”

“This isn’t…” Cullen paused and took a deep breath to calm himself. “This isn’t about your abilities; it’s your safety I’m concerned about.”

Sophia gave a frustrated sigh and walked over to the side-table, pouring herself a glass of water.

“And we’re back to this again; ‘Sophia must be protected at all costs…’! Do you know how tired I am of everyone reminding me that I haven’t been well; and coddling me like I’d snap in the first strong wind?”

“So, I’m in the wrong for worrying about you?” Cullen snapped, his temper starting to fray.

“Now you’re the one putting words in my mouth!” Sophia snapped back, slamming her glass down hard enough for water to slop over the rim. “I survived Haven and the trek to Skyhold. What makes this so different?”

Cullen lowered his eyes, fidgeting with the hilt of his sword. In practical terms it was foolish to deny her request. Sophia was a skilled healer and far from helpless, her rank of Knight-Enchanter was no empty honorific; but whether she liked it or not, this wasn’t a purely practical decision. He’d already discussed it Inquisitor and Seeker Pentaghast, suspecting that Sophia would not take his orders well.

“I had no control over what happened at Haven, or after; but here I do.” He sighed and raised his eyes to hers again; keeping his voice as steady as he could. “You are too important to the Inquisition… and to me… for the benefits to outweigh the risk. If we fail at Adamant the Inquisition will need leadership, someone who can rally it together and hold its alliances in place. You are one of the one best placed to do that.”

Sophia looked at him in astonishment. “But… Aleska choses her successor, as much as she trusts me, I don’t think I am her first choice.”

Cullen released a slow exhale. “You sell yourself too short, she has more faith in you than you give yourself credit for.”
“This was your plan all along? Why didn’t you just tell me?”

Cullen gave a slight shrug, having the grace to look mildly embarrassed.

“No Commander likes to admit the possibly of defeat; even if he has to prepare for it.” He walked over and took her hands. “If anything were to happen to you… I couldn’t endure that.”

“And what about you?” Sophia asked quietly, tracing her thumb along the line of his knuckles.

“The dangers you’ll be facing…”

Cullen raised her fingers to his lips and kissed them softly.

“Knowing you are safe makes it easier for me to face them…”

On the other side of the door, Aleska smiled to herself in relief and satisfaction; grateful that it was un-necessary for her to intervene. The idea that they might face defeat was an unwelcome one but Cullen’s argument was sound; it was wise to have a secondary strategy in place, even when the Commander’s motivation in keeping Sophia away from the battle was plainly more than just strategic. She walked along the corridor to the broad terrace overlooking the upper courtyard, where Anselm was putting some of the troops through some rigorous sparring exercises.

He’d stripped to the waist, wrapping his shirt around his head like a makeshift turban. A fine sheen of sweat highlighted the ebb and flow of his muscles as he fought in the torchlight. The bout had attracted a fair few spectators who seemed more interested in him than the fighting and Aleska leaned on the balustrade to enjoy the view. Tomorrow they would be marching out to fight for real and this was a very welcome distraction.

###

Adamant Fortress rose from the edge of the Abyssal Rift in a series of ramparts and towers, rising towards the great central keep. The place was a labyrinth; the walls raised by Dwarven engineers long ages ago, intended to resist hordes of darkspawn, designed to confuse and trap any enemy that breached the gates. Even with the trebuchets hurling great boulders and pots of explosive liquids at the battlements it seemed like an impossible task to Aleska. Griffon Wing Keep had been a minor outpost, held only by a few score Ventarori and easily overwhelmed; Adamant was a small city by comparison.

The Inquisition army spread out on the plain below, waiting for the bombardment to finish its work. Their forces had almost doubled in size in their march west; the existing troops and Fereldan volunteers joined by local Orlesian troops as they passed through the southern provinces of the Empire. Some were attracted by the blessing to be gained through following Andraste’s Herald; while many others sought a more worthwhile fight than the bloody feud between the Empress and her cousin. There were thousands of them now, gathered around their campfires and waiting on the order to advance.

“How does it feel to be making history?” Anselm asked as he joined her on the ridge, handing her a mug of coffee. Aleska took a sip of the steaming brew; strong, and thick with sugar.

“That’s not why we’re here.” She said, watching the fire pots trace glowing arcs through the deepening night.

Anselm gave her a sidelong glance.

“Maybe not, but it’s still what we’re doing. A year ago, there was a handful of moth-eaten recruits and dusty old priests huddled in a bunch of freezing shacks. Today there’s an army that would
give most kingdoms a reason to think twice; laying siege to an ancient and famous fortress. All thanks to a beautiful Elven huntress. It’s better than any opera!”

“Except people don’t die in opera.” Aleska reminded him. “And it wasn’t me who raised this army.”

Anselm shrugged.

“The Seeker and the Old Man might have done the legwork, but its you they follow; your name they cheer whenever you ride past.” He gave her a sly look. “The way they all adore you, I might get a little jealous.”

Aleska laughed, placing a tender kiss upon his cheek, nuzzling into the nape of his neck.

“Not even you could duel an entire army!” Her voice a whisper, smiling to herself.

Perhaps not all at once!” Anselm conceded, slipping his arm around her waist. “But a man can do astonishing things when he has the right reason to fight. We’ll find that out soon enough.”

“I don’t want you taking any stupid risks.” Aleska said, moving closer to him. “No pointless heroics or showing off.”

“Stay close by me…” Anselm rested his head against hers, inhaling the fragrance of her hair. “We’ll guard each other’s backs… just try not to get distracted ogling my arse.”

“You…!!” Aleska laughed and gave him a playful slap on the wrist. “Why do you always have to be such a clown?”

“It’s how I deal with the curse of being irresistible.” Anselm chuckled pulling her in for a kiss, as deep and long as the kiss they shared beneath the trees not far from here.

“We ought to go back to the command tent.” She said with a resigned sigh as their lips parted. “I imagine Cullen, Hawke and Carver have stopped bickering by now.”

“I think they’re at the sulky silence stage now.” Anselm grinned as he adjusted a stray lock of her hair. “We might actually be able to get a word in edgeways!”

“After we’re through the gates, Carver and I will clear the path up to the walls…” Hawke’s index finger traced the approximate route on the plans of the fortress spread across the table. “There choke points we’ll need to deal with if your men are to have any chance of securing the walls.

“Why just the walls?” Aleska asked. The strategies for an assault on this scale was new to her, siege craft wasn’t something the Dalish had needed to know for centuries. “Why not bring more troops in through the gates?”

“Trying to capture a fortress this size by force could take days, time we haven’t got.” Cullen explained. “Once we secure the walls, the priority is stopping the ritual. Provided we can keep the main force occupied, a small group has a much better chance of slipping through.”

“Some of the warriors might be persuaded to stand down.” Carver said, with a hint of resignation in his voice. “They know me, and not all of them are convinced by Clarel’s grand plan. The mages though…”

“Once Erimond’s dead, shouldn’t that break the hold he has over them?” Anselm pondered aloud. He glanced over at Hawke. “Any ideas about that?”
“How about an arrow between his eyes,” Aleska growled. “In my experience, it kills almost everything.”

“That’s the theory. Whilst I am not complaining about your plan Aleska, you may not get an opportunity to do that,” Hawke said. “But I’m no expert on Tevinter magic, so we’ll just have to hope for the best.”

“Another reason to want that slimy bastard dead.” Carver muttered.

They looked up from the table as an officer appeared in the doorway of the tent.

“Beg pardon, Your Worship; the sappers report the gatehouse is weakened enough to begin the assault.”

Aleska looked at Cullen, who gave her an almost imperceptible nod.

“Tell Knight-Captain Rylen to sound the Advance.” She ordered. “We’ll join him shortly.”

She felt Anselm take her hand and give it an encouraging squeeze. Hawke picked up his staff and squared his shoulders.

“Well, let’s see what surprises they have in store for us!”

###

The beast took a step forward, its head moving from side to side as it surveyed the small group penned between it and the crumbling edge of the weir. The mangled form of Warden-Commander Clarel lay beneath it, still alive despite her horrific wounds. Her right arm moved slowly; although Anselm doubted whether they could expect any aid from the dying woman. The dragon’s licked at its fangs with a long, black, tongue; slowly spreading its wings and taking another step, forcing them to retreat even nearer to that plunge into the Abyssal Rift. Carver raised his shield, and Anselm felt the tingling on his skin intensify as Dorian poured more power into the barriers; hoping that might at least diminish the effects of the dragonfire.

He glanced at Aleska and she nodded. The pair of them raised their bows together, an unspoken understanding between them.

Aim for the eyes; it’s our only chance.

Even if they only slowed the dragon’s attack for a few seconds; those precious moments might just win them the advantage. He could see Clarel raising her arm and thought he heard her saying something, although the words themselves were lost in the chaos. He drew back his bow, adjusting his aim for the speed of the wind. He almost wished he was a believer; they could really do with a miracle right about now.

The blast of light and noise staggered and briefly blinded him; someone grabbed the collar of his tunic and jerked him backwards as a monstrous, agonised, shrieking echoed over the sound of the storm. As his vision cleared, he saw Corypheus’ pet rearing upwards on its hind legs – blood gushing from a rent in its side and one wing hanging useless. It staggered towards them, claws slashing wildly; realising too late that the fragile stonework was crumbling under its weight. In trying to regain its balance, its hind leg slipped over the edge and it fell back and down; vanishing from sight into the blackness below.

Anselm realised he had Hawke to thank for dragging him out of the beast’s way, and for stopping him following in its plunge. Hawke hooked one brawny arm around Anselm’s chest and hauled
him to his feet; pulling him into a relieved hug.

“Careful…” Aleska gasped, still trying to catch her breath. “That one’s mine!”

The weir groaned and lurched under their feet; a long, rapidly widening, crack appearing across its with.

“Shit!” Carver yelled. “RUN!”

Anselm grabbed Aleska’s hand and stumbled forward; the slabs fracturing and tilting under their feet as they ran. She pulled away from him to race back and grab Carver as the Warden lost his footing and began sliding down towards the edge, where massive chunks of masonry were already breaking off and falling away. Anselm turned and followed, seizing Carvers outstretched arm and dragging him back to an illusory safety. It was only a few more yards to the solidity of the tower; they could still make it…

With a deep, rumbling, shudder the last of the weir gave way and Anselm felt himself falling backwards; the breath pulled from his lungs. He didn’t know if he was screaming or if that was just the sound of the air rushing past. Everything was blurring, turning a putrid green. Was this what dying was like? If he hit the ground at this speed there wouldn’t be enough left to cremate, even if anyone was brave enough to venture into the Rift…

The air began to thicken around him, like a custard pudding when the cream was added, and his fall slowed to a gradual halt; handing motionless for a second before dropping, face first, into something wet and spongy.

*That better not be what I think it is…*

He pushed himself up onto all fours, wiping the stinking muck from his face. The ground was marshy, with a strange texture – somewhere between mud and wet moss – smelling like fishguts and eggs left to stew in the sun. He could hear movement nearby but couldn’t see anyone else.

“Aleska…!” He called out, cupping his hands to his mouth to amplify his voice “Aleska!!!!!”

“I’m here!” She called out, clambering over some rocks; smeared with same rancid filth but apparently unhurt. “I think I can see the others.”

He lumbered across to her, the mire dragging and sucking at his boots, taking her hand and helping her keep her footing. He pulled her into a tight embrace.

“Maker! I thought we were…” He stopped. “Why aren’t we dead, or are we?”

“I don’t know…” Aleska looked down at the Anchor, now glowing like a beacon in the palm of her hand. “I was falling. I did something, or the Anchor did, and then it stopped.”

“Whatever you did, I’m glad you did it…” Dorian said, using his staff like a walking stick to try and keep his balance while Hawke and Carver waded through the mud behind him. “Although I would have preferred somewhere a little more palatable…”

“Did I hit me head on something…” Jonas asked “…or is there something bloody weird about this place?”

Jonas was sitting on a rock, trying to clean his face and hands with the handkerchief Sophia insisted he always have ‘just in case’. The ground, the rock, and Jonas were at a 90-degree angle to the rest of them. They looked around; beginning to comprehend the fantastic, impossible,
geography of their environment; the ruins hanging in mid-air, the distorted green sky that seemed to be above and below them at the same time.

“I think... this is the Fade...” Dorian said, his voice hesitant with incredulity. “The actual Fade... That... that shouldn’t be possible!”

Carver turned to Aleska.

“You’ve been in the Fade, was it like this?”

Aleska looked around her; the strange angles, that nauseous shade of green. It felt familiar, but there was still so much about what happened that eluded her memory.

“I can’t remember...” she said, quietly cursing her lack of certainty. “It could be... But how do we get back from here?”

“That might be a good direction to head in!” Dorian suggested, pointing in the direction of a swirling vortex on the horizon. “And there even appears to be a path, which is suspiciously convenient. I suggest we exercise a little caution.”

“Stay close by me.” Anselm said as he took Aleska’s hand “I don’t want us to get separated. Maker only knows what we’ll find here...”

Hawke picked up his staff with a grunt that might have been a laugh.

“Don’t take anything at face value here; especially if it seems to good to be true... It always is.”

Anselm squeezed Aleska’s hand as they trudged towards more solid ground.

“I’m normally the one that takes you to interesting places...” He said, forcing a smile. “You really didn’t need to go to all this effort...”

“Just keep walking...” Aleska replied, unsure whether she wanted to laugh or scream. “… and don’t let go of my hand.”
The battle at Adamant won, but the seeds of distrust sewn in the minds of Anselm and Aleska; will they prevail despite what the demon had told them? A year has marked the night since Aleska made her bet and Varric has decided to take matters into his own hands. Cullen's curiosity wielded something about Aleska's past, something he might not be able to let go of.

A few hours earlier…

Nights in the desert were colder than any of them suspected, the howling winds kicked up the sand in swirls travelling through the empty planes. Even the Inquisition scouts pacing along the battlements of Griffon Wing Keep struggled to keep their eyes opened. The sun would rise on the biggest fight any of them had and not everyone had taken the opportunity to sleep.

Aleska sat before the broken vanity, the brush touched her skin applying a small amount of blush to her cheeks, *I hope this works*. She rose from the vanity, tightening the sash around her waist, the silk scarves around her neck, she was ready. Teeth capturing her lower lip, heart pounding within her chest. This had been the craziest thing she had ever done—and she regretted nothing.

Opening her door slightly, no one had been pacing the corridors, not even the guards positioned outside her door stayed long enough to finish their shifts. Anselm’s door had opened ajar, the candles flickered within. *He checked on me throughout the night*. Even now, Anselm’s determination to keep her safe made her both delighted and frightened, to think he was sacrificing his own sleep for her. His own wellbeing.

She snuck across the hallway, opening the door ajar she found him standing before the mirror, fixing his waistcoat. She could not believe how handsome the man was, a smile crept upon her features as she closed the door behind her, the sound of the latch bolting into place caught his attention. He spun around, the view of her in a semi-transparent robe, the tip of his tongue ran along his lower lip.

“If this is a dream, I hope Cuddles doesn’t wake me up this time!” Anselm ran his fingers through.

“So,” Aleska stepped forward, placing the silk scarves upon the bed. “You’ve been dreaming about this moment.”

Aleska’s fingers unknotted the sash tied against her waist, her hand took his and ran it along her stomach, gliding it up towards her neck. His heart thudded within his chest, heavier with each moment that past, his breathing suppressed as his hand snaked around her waist; pulling her closer to him.

“My Lady,” Anselm’s lips pressed to her forehead, a long and lingering kiss against her warm skin, the scent of her hair and feeling of her body against his relaxed him. “If this is your way to motivate me to survive the battle—I’d say you’re succeeding.”
“Perhaps this is,” Aleska’s hands worked the buckles of his waist coat, sliding it off his shoulders. Anselm’s lips pressed against hers, she all but melted in his arms, his hands ran through her loose hair; clenching it within his fists. Aleska slid the robe off her shoulders, allowing it to fall into a pile at her feet. Untucking the shirt from his pants, Aleska lifted it over his head and threw it to the ground. His hands busy working the lace strings of her corset, only to have a hand playfully slap his away.

“Tsk, tsk, I didn’t say you got to touch now did I?” Aleska’s tone playful, her fingers working the strings of his breeches. “Get on the bed, I have a little surprise for you.”

A gleam within Anselm’s eyes told her all she needed to know, Aleska’s teeth claimed her lower lip and Ansel relaxed back on the bed, her fingers brushed along the silk scarves; he placed all the control within her hands and she wasn’t to let it go to waste. Her fingers worked a knot around his wrist, tying it to the bedpost. A rush of excitement overtook Anselm as Aleska climbed on top of him; with his free hand, he traced along Aleska’s neck, between her cleavage and down to her stomach.

“What did I say—” Aleska’s hand grabbed his, a gentle kiss placed on each finger before tying it to the other bedpost. “Not too tight I hope.”

“N-no,” Anselm swallowed the lump within his throat. “Just right.”

Bending down, her lips pressed to his once more, her hands exploring his now exposed chest, the tips of her fingers tracing the tattoo on his chest; a soft moan escaped her lips. Her kiss moved towards his jawline, her warm breath against his neck sent a shudder down his spine.

“I love you,” her voice a whisper as her lips trailed lower, past his shoulder.

“And I adore you,” Anselm breathed, looking at the restraints.

Aleska’s hands wandered lower, her fingers ran along the musculature of his stomach, even for an archer his physique was impressive. The tips of her nails ran along his abdomen, trailing up his chest and resting upon his cheeks. A smile played upon her lips, her fingers running through his reddish-brown hair, along the stubble on his cheek.

“Well, you have about ten minutes to free yourself from these restraints,” Aleska teased. “Before I send someone up here to come get you—survive the battle and then you and I can have as much fun as we want when we return to Skyhold.”

“You—” Anselm breathed, wiggling his wrists. “Who would you be sending?”

“Now,” Aleska laughed softly, placing the robe upon her shoulders. “That would be telling. Ten minutes, My Lord.”

One quick kiss placed on his lips, Aleska left his quarters to prepare for the battle—one she was not even sure she would survive.

***

The Fade…

Aleska’s heart stopped, her hand firmly within Anselm’s and the monster dangling before them; tormenting them. You really think he will change for you? Some common elven woman, what makes you so special? Aleska’s hand pressed to her forehead, the thousand tiny pins piercing her
skull returned, dropping to her knees; she cradled her head. Hawke and Anselm on either side of her, the ringing of Carver’s sword only intensified the pain.

“It’s messing with her head!” Hawke said, his arm around her shoulders. “We need to get out of here.”

“Do you not see that giant demon before us brother? Or did that detail slip your mind.” Carver stood before them, his Warden armour reflecting in the lights which danced around them.

_Do you think you will have your happily ever after? How long will it be before he tires of waiting for you? Before he seeks his comfort and pleasures elsewhere?_ A scream escaped her parted lips, blood dripped from her mouth as the anchor flared once more. The only thing they knew was they needed to find a way to get out of there.

“It won’t let us pass, not all of us,” Aleska rose with the help of Hawke and Anselm, blood running down her face, black blood on her hands and armour from the demons they’d fought to get to this point.

“Then I will stay,” Carver shook, remembering the Warden’s oath. “I can give you all a fighting chance to get out of here.”

“No! This is my mistake, no one else will die for my mistakes!” Hawke interrupted, pushing his younger brother behind him.

“You don’t—”

It happened in a flash, Hawke’s fist collided with Carver’s nose, sending Carver to the ground; head lolled to the side and blood dripped from his nose. The spiked glove would knock anyone out cold without much effort and Aleska sucked in a breath as Bull picked up Carver.

“Why did you—” Aleska began, running her fingers through her hair. “Hawke what has gotten into you!”

“Get my brother out of here,” Hawke instructed Bull, Cassandra and Dorian followed.

The demon hissed, watching them climb up the steps, but made no move to stop them. With a single swipe of its leg, it could have crushed them into a pool of flesh and broken bones; but it did not move an inch. Its eyes fixated on Hawke and Aleska—as if only they would suffice for its attention.

“Anselm, go!” Aleska commanded, her voice shaking watching the spider as large as a mountain lower itself further.

“I’m not leaving—” Anselm protested.

“I am not giving you a request,” Aleska turned around. “I am the only one who can command you to do something—do not defy a direct order.”

Aleska turned her attention back to Hawke, listening to Anselm’s footsteps grow fainter and fainter as he climbed up to the portal opening. She knew she would not have much time; _Cullen would tear open the Fade to drag me out just so he could yell at me for being so stupid_. Aleska joked, sheathing her daggers. She could not hold the tears back any longer, her arms around Hawke’s neck; pulling him into a close hug.

“We… we can fight this,” Aleska’s breath shuddered. “Together we stand a better chance.”
“This is not your fight,” Hawke pushed her toward the staircase. The demon hissed, creeping closer as its wounds visibly knitted and healed. “It wants one of us to stay, I’d jump in the Abyss before I allow you to sacrifice yourself.”

“It is my job,” Aleska retaliated. “I know I won’t live a long and happy life, growing old, having kids playing by the fire place… I’m scared, Hawke.”

“You’ll have all that, and more; lethallin…” Hawke wiped a tear from her cheek with a bloodied thumb. “This is my battle. Who knows… maybe I’ll find Andy; and nothing will ever separate us again…”

“Hawke…”

Hawke’s arms pulled her in for one last hug, listening to her sob upon his shoulder, her warm tears seeping through the fabric of his shirt. “You must go now, don’t look back… no matter what! DO NOT LOOK BACK!”

Aleska felt Hawke shove her towards the staircase, the sound of crackling flames caught her ears, dancing within the palm of his hands, each step she took; the fighting grew fainter and fainter; she could no longer even hear the demons hiss, her heart thudded within her chest as the entrance grew closer and closer; surrounded by a white and blinding light, Aleska found herself on the stone flooring at Adamant. The demons which remained stopped, watching her rise to her feet. With a whisper, Aleska’s fist clenched, the whites of her knuckles shown and every demon seemed to be dragged back into the rift by an invisible force, clawing at the floor as they tried to cling to the living world, even their shrieks bounced off the walls; it mattered little to her.

A sharp crackle echoed through the fortress and then everything fell silent, Cullen pushed through the stunned soldiers; blood running down his face. Aleska looked around her, each and everyone of the people on the terrace wounded in some fashion, some clenching shoulders; others screaming over the bodies of their fallen comrades.

“You son of a bitch!” Aleska walked towards Erimond.

The fear which danced within his eyes faded as his body collided with the ground, his jaw stinging from the full weight of her fist colliding with his face. Clenching his jaw, he looked up at her with disbelief. He prepared for another swing.

“Inquisitor,” Cullen’s hand grasped her wrist, pulling her back. “This is not the time, nor the place for such… action.”

“You saw what he did,” Aleska’s hand gripped the hilt of her blade, “I can offer him something quick and merciful—which is more than he deserves.”

“And he shall have it,” Cullen leaned in, his voice dropped to a whisper. “What kind of image are you projecting onto the men who survived, watched their comrades die by your command, by showing them that their leader cannot keep her temper under control when they need it the most.”

Aleska’s eyes met Cullen’s, deep down she knew he was right, her eyes met that of the soldiers who survived; they were scared, hurting. Her grip upon the dagger loosened, Cullen stepped back and walked alongside her.

“Take him to the holding cells in the forward camp,” Aleska commanded, “I want him at Skyhold and in a cell by the time I return; make sure Sophia is okay… thank you.”

“By your order,” Cullen lowered his head. “We’ll speak more later.”
“Oh,” Aleska smiled. “You can count on that.”

***

“There was just something different about her.”

Cullen’s fingers scratched his stubble, his wound itching. Sophia’s hand slapped his away, cleaning the dried blood from his skin. The men had long since gone to bed, thanking the Maker and Andraste for delivering them safely from the battle.

“Different how? And stop fidgeting, you’ll break the stitches” Sophia dabbed her finger in the ointment, applying it carefully to the wound. His breastplate and gambeson had absorbed most of the damage, but the demon’s claws had still raked a deep gouge across his chest and abdomen. Whether he liked it or not, the Commander would be in the hands of the healers – in other words, hers – for the next few days. “You know what she had gone through in the Fade? From what Bull told me… it was less than pleasant—she is just stressed Cullen.”

“No,” Cullen shook his head, gritting his teeth slightly at the sting of the ointment. “I’ve seen her handle stress before; but, had I not stopped her, she would have torn him apart with her bare hands.”

“Some might say that was more mercy than he deserves…” Sophia muttered, pressing a fresh linen poultice gently in place and taking a roll of bandages from the Apprentice hovering nearby; before dismissing her with a wave of her hand. She paused, waiting for a few moments after the door closed before continuing in a lower voice. “About Aleska; I had some… enquiries… made, discreet ones, when I learned of Anselm’s interest in her. How much do you know about her father?”

“Only that he’s the Keeper of her Clan” Cullen said, easing himself up so she could apply the bandages. “Not much else.”

“They call him the Dragon,” Sophia continued. “Not just became his name means it in Elvhen… I had Solas confirm the translation. He has a reputation to be feared among humans, and if you believe the stories, he is not a man to be trifled with… even my father would be wise to err on the side of caution with him.”

“I don’t understand—” Cullen gritted his teeth as Sophia tightened the bandages to keep the poultice in place

“I’m getting to that,” Sophia inhaled deeply. Raffali’s report had been unusually evasive in places; as though he were privy to a secret he was unable or unwilling to share. “Something happened when she was a child, the records are vague, but I think it’s reasonable to suspect it’s connected to the death of her mother; something is eating her up inside and, until we find out what, she is capable of one of two things—she could either lead us into salvation or utterly destroy us.”

She secured the last of the bandages and helped Cullen to lie back down; adjusting the pillows until she was satisfied he was comfortable.

“Have you been making ‘discreet enquiries’ about me, as well?” He asked, with a vaguely suspicious look.

“I don’t have to…” Sophia laughed gently, bending over to kiss his forehead. “You’re a terrible liar; which is why I know you and Aleska cooked up that whole story to get me to stay here!”

“I am just relieved you are safe,” Cullen’s hand cupped her cheek, his thumb stroking her soft skin.
Maker! She was so beautiful. “Forgive me; I know it is foolish, but I was worried for you.”

“I wasn’t the one charging into battle against an army of demons,” Sophia kissed him again, this time on his lips; her fingers carding through his hair and messing it into the nest of curls she preferred.

“I am all right,” Cullen smiled up at her. “All the demons of the Fade wouldn’t keep me from you.”

“Of that,” Sophia reached up, placing her forehead against his. “I am very certain.”

Aleska’s hand grabbed the bottle of wine, pressing the neck to her lips and allowing the contents to flow down her throat. A blanket lay across her lap, her pillows propped. Anselm rested beside her, the tips of his fingers tapping against one another; the same fear overtook them both. The demon had gotten into their heads and they both knew it.

His arm around her shoulders, pulling her closer; grief and nagging guilt over Hawke’s loss twisting inside both of them. The cry Carver made when he realised his brother was gone still echoed in her thoughts.

How can I break this to Varric? Isabela… he spoke of her often. Aleska raised the bottle to her lips again, finishing the contents. Throwing the bottle against the wall, shards of glass falling to the floor clinking as they hit the solid stone flooring.

Anselm breathed softly, his arms around her tightly and a gentle kiss placed to her head. Tears stained his shirt as he ran a hand through her hair to soothe her. A shuddered breath followed, the fabric clenched and crumpled between her fists. The lump in her throat all but choked her, cheeks wet and warm, until no more tears came.

“What did it say to you?” Aleska lifted her head. “The demon... you have the same looks I do; what did it say to you?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Anselm forced a smile, his own green eyes glassed, his hands trembling. It told Aleska all she needed to know.

“It matters to me,” Aleska sat up right, her hands running along her cheeks, wiping the moisture away.

Anselm drew a deep breath and released it in a slow exhale, his hand enveloped hers, his thumb ran along her knuckles. His heart thudding, knowing Aleska would be able to detect the rapid alteration in the pace of his heart. His fingers curled around a strand of her hair, twisting it in circles.

“I just—it was nothing I couldn’t handle,” Anselm’s voice dropped to a whisper, the mischief replaced with fear. The dry whispers still crackling in his thoughts.

What makes you think you’re good enough for her… A spoilt, lecherous, useless boy? she’ll leave you; just like they did... even your mother didn’t love you enough to stay... did she? A whimpering brat, clinging to her skirts? It’s your fault she preferred the Cholera...

“That demon got inside your head,” Aleska’s hand against his cheek. “We can’t allow it to get inside our heads. What did it tell you?”

“Nothing—” Anselm said, his gaze unable to meet hers.
Aleska listened to the sound of his heart, the thumping within his chest intensified with each passing moment; a singular bead of sweat dripped down his forehead and across his cheek. The demon had gotten within his head, messed with it from the moment the entered the Fade. Aleska took her hands within his, her legs firmly planted on either side of him.

“Perhaps this will loosen that tongue of yours,” Aleska’s voice no more than a whisper, the tip of her finger against his lower lip.

His hands against her cheeks, thumb stroking her soft skin, tucking loose strands of hair behind her ears, his hands travelled lower, resting on her waist; pulling her closer to him. Her chest pressed up against his, his hands gripping her thighs, his fingers caressing her skin. Lips pressed fiercely against one another, his hands ran through her hair, clenching the strands between his fingers. Within a moment, Aleska found herself on her back, gazing up at Anselm on top of her; their breath heavier than when they both fought in the battle.

“You can tell me anything,” Aleska’s fingers trailed along his jawline. “What did that demon tell you.”

“I just—” Anselm exhaled, his hand ran along her abdomen and moving up to the back of her neck. “I just don’t know if I can be the man you need.”

“I don’t need you,” Aleska shook her head, “now before you say anything worthy of one of Varric’s clichés, know that I want you; that means more to me than needing you. Just remember that and we can weather any storm… together.”

“I don’t know how you do it,” Anselm smiled, the tips of his fingers trailing along her forehead. “When ever I think I cannot love you more, you find a way.”

“And now we have cliché,” a laugh escaped her parted lips.

Anselm fell beside her, his hand resting behind his head, kicking off his boots. Aleska fumbled within her pocket, a small piece of paper between her fingers. The paper unfolded, a small line of text shone through the dimly lit room.

“There is another thing,” Aleska handed him the note. “I have one final mission for you, I need you to go to Emprise du Lion and assist in the capture of Suledin Keep. You’re the only one I can trust with this, Anselm… I know it feels like things keep getting in our way, but after this… we start making our own future.”

“I will do as you command,” Anselm crumpled the note in his pocket. “Just promise me something…”

“What?” Aleska sniffed, not wanting to cry in front of him any longer.

“When I return,” Anselm leaned in, a gentle kiss pressed to her lips. “I will have you all to myself, for a whole week. No War Council, no attacking fortresses, just you and me—no interruptions; from anyone.”

“Deal. I promise, the first person to even come near the door, you can throw them off the highest point in Skyhold.”

“One last thing,” Anselm chuckled. “I want that in writing.”

***
A few days later…

The messages littered her desk, some even fell to the floor, none were the messages which she would have wanted. Days had gone by, it felt as if weeks slipped past her notice and still no letter; not a single word from Emprise du Lion about the situation, her stomach turned to knots. Fearing the worst, for it had been the only thing she’d grown accustomed to. Stop it! Aleska scolded, He has faced worse odds and lived, hands upon the edge of her desk, the ornate design dug into her palms, leaving the faintest pink lines in its wake.

The coffee within the mug had long since cooled, a small layer of white froth formed upon the brown liquid and Aleska hated cold coffee. Eyes flickered to the servant, preforming her tasks diligently, humming a quiet little song to herself. Aleska faintly recognized the tune, she’d heard Anselm whistle it through the castle halls from time to time.

“With that be all?” The servant lowered herself, “I can draw you a bath if you’d like, Your Worship.”

“No,” Aleska smiled, “thank you, Jaime; unless you can heat up a cold cup of coffee, you may go about your day.”

Jaime laughed softly, taking the porcelain mug between her fingers, her hand glowed orange and steam rose from the rim of the mug. “All you had to do was ask, my lady.”

Aleska nodded, placing the rim to her lips, the coffee had been the right temperature for once. She placed the letters upon her desk, even more seemed unopened, seals remained intact, but never the seal she wanted.

“Master Tethras wants to know if he can see you, my lady,” Jaime announced. “Would you like to see him?”

“Uhm,” Aleska exhaled, knowing Varric’s persistence would not relent. “Sure, send him in and then go get something to eat; I’m sure you haven’t even had breakfast yet.”

The door swung open, within his hand rested a deck of cards, his fingers shuffling the desk. I am not in the mood for a game of Wicked Grace, Aleska drew a breath, filing the papers upon her desk in a single collection. To be honest, she was glad of his interruption; it meant she was forgiven. Varric had shut himself up in his room for days on receiving the news of Hawke’s loss; and for days after that he’d been unable to meet her eyes or exchange more than a few words. Carver had warned her to expect this, and that he knew Hawke well enough not to lay the blame on her; but it did little to assuage her feeling that if she’d said or done something different, then Hawke would still be with him.

“So,” Varric settled in a chair, the cards falling into his hands. “You up for a game or two?”

“I really shouldn’t,” Aleska forced a laugh. “I mean, I have so much paper work to catch up on—”

Varric nodded, watching her intently as she pretended to busy herself with the papers on her desk. “You’re not as good a bullshitter as you think you are, Sapphire. Since Charmer left, you have been utterly miserable; one game ought to take your mind off it for a few hours.”

Aleska looked up for a moment, she had not slept properly since Anselm left, even though he had promised to let her know as soon as he arrived within the Emprise, he has been preoccupied, fighting a demon isn’t the easiest thing in the world. Aleska assumed, sniffing slightly as the knots twisted themselves within her abdomen; the pang of longing resurfaced for the fourth time that
day.

Finishing the contents of the coffee mug, the ceramic rim touched the wooden table; *a little distraction wouldn’t be the worst thing*, Aleska cleared her throat. “Fine, one game… that is all.”

Aleska walked alongside Varric, the soldiers they passed seemed grateful to catch a break among the battle and the preparations to travel. They were smiling, happy. Removing her jacket, Aleska handed it to a servant passing, the servant returned it to her quarters without delay. Her eyes glanced downward, Varric’s smug grin told her he’d have something up his sleeves.

Stepping over the threshold of the room, Bull had begun the match with Jonas and Dorian sitting beside him, the platters of food and mugs of ale flowed freely. Aleska took a seat, knowing her absentee brother would either be asleep or setting his sights on a new target to bed. *The man will never quit, will he?* Aleska sat before Bull, running her fingers beneath her eyes to try fight the sleep.

“You know,” Bull began. “It has been a while since we had a moment to breath.”

“I suppose,” Aleska shuffled her cards, a cracker between her fingers, she slid it off the platter, bringing it to her lips. “Shall we get the game going?”

Cigar smoke filled the room, the white puffs hung in the air like clouds around the card platers, the embers lit up at the end of Bull’s cigar; moving up and down between his lips. Even Jonas had one resting between his lips, a large drag inhaled into his lungs; his cheeks puffed out and Jonas expelled the smoke in little rings; sending the whole room into fits of laughter.

“Don’t bloody laugh,” Jonas coughed, unable to keep the chuckle from his throat. “Making me bloody cough you are.”

Aleska spotted Dorian, a small glimmer within his eyes sparked as Jonas laughed, slapping his knee. Her acute gaze even caught the small tremble in Dorian’s hand as he slicked his hair back. He thought no one would notice, but he didn’t bank on Aleska picking it up. His eyes met hers and the way he averted his gaze at her questioning look told her all she needed to know.

“You know,” Bull began again, blowing out a cloud of smoke. “Emprise du Lion is a pitstop to Skyhold, as Inquisitor, you could say it is your duty to ensure all went according to plan.”

“The detour wouldn’t be impossible,” Varric added, “I’m sure Princess can keep Curly occupied long enough so that he wouldn’t know you’re gone.”

The tip of Aleska’s tongue trailed along her lower lip, her teeth grazed across the pink skin. Heart beating within her chest, the hair upon the back of her neck prickled, her mouth dried; the blood pumping through her veins felt no better than icy water. Her mouth opened, but sound refused to come out, only a breath escaped her parted lips.

Aleska rested her elbow upon the table, her index finger running along her lower lip, even Jonas looked at her; his soulful green eyes telling her all she needed to know; the only thing she wanted to hear at that point. *Go.*

The next few moments happened in a flash, Aleska found herself perched atop Vesenya with Bull and Varric leading their horses beside her, she’d given instructions to Knight-Captain Rylen, even as her voice spoke the words; her tone shook, be it anticipation or terror, she knew there would be no turning back.

“Lasa em’an dara,” Aleska whispered in Vesenya’s ear.
Aleska glanced over her shoulder, seeing Sophia standing on the steps of the main keep; her reddish-brown hair tied back into an elegant braid. Even in the dim light she could see her fingering the jewelled Sword of Mercy pendant at her throat; whispering something incoherent – a prayer for her safe journey perhaps, or something else? The two women exchanged a nod and Aleska thought she saw Sophia smile quietly.

Galloping through the gates of Griffon Wing keep, Aleska raced off with Bull and Varric close behind her, watching the sun rise ahead of them. This sun rise had more meaning to her than most; the dawn of an adventure she’d been putting off for too long.

“I should have told you this before Sapphire,” Varric caught up with her, both horses slowed down as their riders approached a babbling brook. “I didn’t know if you’d kick me or hug me.”

“What is it Varric?” Aleska patted Vesenya’s neck.

“Remember that deal you had with Charmer in Haven?” Varric offered her the flask.

“What about it?”

Varric cleared his throat. “I saw him in the Herald, it was late; he wasn’t aware I was even there. A young woman came up to him, offering him her attention—”

“Is there a point to this?” Aleska’s hands tightened along the reins. “If so, kindly make it.”

“What I mean to say is,” Varric looked over his shoulder, ensuring they were alone. “He kept to your little arrangement; far longer than most men should—I am not defending the guy, he has a past and we all know it.”

“He did what?” Aleska breathed, doing the math in her head. “Which means he’s been celibate for…seven…no eight—”

“Try a year.” Varric chuckled. “He could probably crush a marble with his fist by now…”
Chapter Summary

A blizzard in the mountains about Sahrnia, a haven in the snow and a blazing log fire...

The brandy here in Sahrnia was cheap swill, fit only for lighting fires and sterilising wounds, but the local wine was worse; thin and sour, as if the soil was tainted long before the Red Templars left their mark. Perhaps it was some curse of the Elves who once ruled here, to ensure their Orlesian conquerors would never truly profit from their victory.

Anselm swallowed down the contents of the glass with a faint hiss of disgust. The third was never as bad as the first two and he toyed speculatively with the cork, considering a fourth. It was still early in the day, although that had never been a thing to stop him, and the alcohol dulled the persistent whispers in the back of his head. Whether it was Nightmare’s taunting, Imshael’s lascivious insinuations, or the enduring anger and guilt at leaving Hawke to die, something in him had felt wrong ever since Adamant.

_I was physically in the Fade; that must change a man…_

If you believed the Chantry, the last time that humans entered the Fade it brought the Blight, and doom on all the world. The notion that any of those ancient fables might have a grain of truth disconcerted him and he decided to pour another glassful.

_This is the only spirit I want inside me…_

At least whatever wore the face and voice of Divine Justinia had been right about one thing; whether you believed what happened in the Temple was the Maker’s will or an accident, it changed nothing. They still had an enemy to fight and Corypheus was real enough; the handiwork of his agents visible everywhere in this remote province. He drained his glass in a single gulp, the stuff was almost tolerable if you didn’t let it linger on the palate, and put the bottle firmly back in the cabinet for later. He was just drunk enough to be able to deal with the rest of the day relatively undistracted. He laughed quietly, sitting down at the desk and picking up the portfolio of papers that Baron Desjardins had marked for his personal attention.

_I’m turning into Giudice Laurentis…_ he thought, recalling the tales of the judge who never considered a case while sober. Still chuckling, wondering if he should start wearing the grotesque wig and oversize spectacles that were the judge’s trademark in popular comedy, Anselm sorted quickly through the documents. Most of them were letters that merely required his signature, either requisitioning supplies or politely turning down dinner invitations. The local minor gentry were worse snobs than Mme Vivienne. They might sniff at requests from a provincial baron like Edouard Desjardins, but the signature of the Count of Ostwick’s nephew had them tripping over their silver-buckled shoes to gain attention and approval.

He dipped his pen in the inkwell and dashed his name across the foot of each expression of regret that his duties for the Inquisition forced him to decline the pleasure of… blah… blah… blah. He’d be getting a reputation for being dedicated and respectable at this rate… that would really set the
tongues wagging back home! He placed them to one side and picked up the report Edouard had carefully positioned at the end, raising an eyebrow as he scanned the first few lines. This was a sweet little treat after a morning of tedium!

He sat back, lighting a cigar from the candle on the desk, and read the whole thing carefully before grabbing his top-coat and going in search of Charter. He found the Lead Scout down at the stables, arguing with some Orlesian horse-trader who seemed insulted by the notion of having to deal with an Elf – until the scowling presence of Monseigneur d’Ostouique had him scuttling off with innumerable cringing apologies.

“Arsehole…” Anselm muttered as the man vanished, before turning to Charter. “Three Dragons? I don’t want to doubt the report but… isn’t that unheard of?”

Dragons were fiercely territorial; years of listening to Jonas ramble about his second favourite obsession had taught him that much. If a dragonling managed to survive long enough in the nest to take wing, then it inevitably left to find a territory of its own. They didn’t form packs or family groups the way some species of wyvern did… unless this was a new aspect of dragon behaviour never noted before.

“That’s what I thought at first… or they’d been chewing too many of the local mushrooms…” Charter admitted. “It could be the same beast, and they’re just getting confused over the details; no-one likes to stick around when they see a dragon on the wing… unless they’re insane – or the Iron Bull…”

“Same difference…” Anselm chuckled. “But, either way, this is bad news… I ought to go over there and check for myself; it would be worth sending a message to Griffon Wing Keep as well, there’s an Orlesian chap there – some sort of dragon expert, if there is such a thing – he’d want to know about this.”

“You sure about going over yourself?” Charter asked, knowing from the eager expression on Anselm’s face he was already decided. “I could lead a scouting party if you’d rather—"

Anselm shook his head, giving Charter a sly grin.

“Aleska would expect me to investigate this personally…” he said. “And it does give me a reason to respectfully decline that dinner with the Antiquarian Society. If they expect me to listen to yet another lecture about restoring that damned bridge, I’ll likely tell them to shove it up Alphonse’s Passage!”

Charter laughed heartily.

“I’ll see about getting an escort arranged for first light tomorrow.” She promised. “And, if you have time this afternoon, there are some new recruits that need a little combat training…”

Anselm gave her a look of pure, evil, glee.

“Tracking dragons and scaring the merda out of a bunch of wet-nosed Orleansians? Charter, have I ever told you that you’re my second favourite Elf in the Inquisition?”

###

“I’m glad someone’s enjoying himself…” Dorian grumbled, pulling his cloak tighter while clouds of snow billowed up as Cuddles joyously burrowed into a drift in search of his ball.

“Don’t get any snow in Ostwick…” Jonas chuckled. “And it’s better than bloody sand getting
everywhere. I were chafed raw half the time…”

Dorian rolled his eyes.

“O felix Vicorienta! And Varric did suggest you try using an extra sock…”

Jonas gave an amused snort as Cuddles emerged from the drift, clutching his ball between his teeth, and trotted back over to them.

“Bloody daft idea… weren’t me feet that were chafing!” He looked down at the Mabari. “And no… I ain’t gonna throw it again, you almost bloody lost it last time!”

Cuddles responded with a pathetic whine, pawing at his master’s boot. With a sigh, Jonas reached down and took the ball, throwing it down the road with all his strength as Cuddles raced after it.

“At least he threw in the direction we’re meant to be heading this time…” Dorian murmured to Aleska as she nudged Vesenya forward with her knees. “With luck we might not freeze to death before we reach Sahnia.”

“Don’t worry, Sparkler; we’ll get you somewhere nice and warm before anything important drops off…” Varric muttered as they started moving again.

Despite Dorian’s litany of complaints, the cold was nowhere near as bad as it had been but Aleska was glad of the bickering between him and Varric. It distracted her from the anxieties stirring in her as they drew nearer. The last time she’d come to Sahnia it was as Samson’s prisoner; she kept reminding herself that now she was returning as victor, but the memory of those days still chilled her and the victory they’d won at Adamant had come with a heavy price.

We have the Wardens with us now… It was the one thought that made their losses worthwhile; together with the Free Mages, and the existing Inquisition forces, it made a formidable alliance – one to be taken seriously even by the warring Orlesian royals. Skyhold had received envoys from Grand Duke Gaspard, eager to gain the Inquisition’s support in his fight to replace Empress Celene. It made this trip back to Sahnia more than just a diversion. Anselm had done an excellent job there, heading the Inquisition campaign and winning the support of the local nobility, but having him at her side was now a necessity as much as a desire.

The thought of seeing him again, after nearly a month apart, tightened the knots in her stomach even further. His letters had been ardent, intense with longing, but she couldn’t shake the fear of how much things might have changed during their separation. He’d made light of how every man with a title and an unmarried daughter had been dogging his heels since the Inquisition restored order, but that couldn’t stop her worrying it was only a matter of time until the right bride was offered to him… just like Nightmare warned.

Silly little elf-child… pining for her prince. Hiding your ears won’t make them accept you; no matter how well you play their Game.

She urged Vesenya into a gallop, praying the speed and the rushing air would drive the demon’s mocking words from her head. She reined her horse in as the road crested the hill, taking in the view of the town in the valley below, and the Keep beyond as the others caught up. Repairs were all ready well under way in the town; much of the rubble had been cleared and there was fresh timberwork to be seen. The Inquisition’s banner hung from the spire of the Chantry, carefully positioned between the Chantry’s Sunburst and the Lion of Orlais.

“Clever… Telling them we’re here as partners, not conquerors” Bull said with an approving laugh
as he drew level with Aleska. He gave her a sidelong glance. “You ok, Boss? This place doesn’t exactly hold good memories…”

She wasn’t sure if he was referring to her capture, the ruins of the old Dalish Kingdom to be seen everywhere, or both. Her eyes wandered through the area, ensuring they weren’t being followed, be it the cold or her own anxieties; the hair upon the back of her neck prickled. Her glance turned to Bull, noting she had left his question unanswered.

“I’ll be fine,” She said, assuring herself as much as him. “I’ll ride ahead to the Keep. You check on progress in the town and join me up there later.”

“Will do, Boss!” Bull replied, tipping her a casual salute as she galloped down the road. Varric turned to him with a knowing look.

“Ten royals says there’s a ‘do not disturb’ sign on the door for the next week!”

Bull threw back his head with a roaring laugh.

“Please! Even I’m not stupid enough to take that bet!”

###

“Let’s try this again! And remember; watch me, not the blades…”

*Give an Orlesian a sword and he thinks he’s a damn Chevalier.*

This one seemed more concerned with peacockiness in front of his comrades, wielding his sabre as if it were an épée. It would be a real pleasure to send him sprawling in the mud, perhaps with a cut or two as a reminder. Most of the new recruits were the sons of local merchants or minor landowners, eager to win some martial glory and a little prestige. Few of them would be unfortunate enough to face an opponent of Anselm’s calibre, but a couple of hard lessons would do them no harm.

Señor Dominguez had taught him well. The wiry old Antivan had been a master of the dual-blade, and not shy of spilling a little noble blood if he deemed his pupil insufficiently serious or lacking in attention. It was Dominguez who taught him to use the Main Gauche as more than a mere parrying-tool, and to use his left hand as fluidly as his right; that skill alone was worth however much it cost his uncle to tempt the retired duellist from his villa by the Rialto. Anselm had never been so impolite as to enquire whether his tutor had, in truth, been a Talon of the Crows – as rumour suggested – but it would not surprise him. Assassination was a perpetual threat for any member of a ruling house, his own grandfather had been cut down on the steps of Ostwick’s Cathedral as the family attended High Mass; there was a practical sense in learning the very skills that might be turned against you at any point.

*If he wants to dance… let’s dance…*

Anselm skipped lightly out of his opponent’s reach, spinning round and swatting him hard across the backside with the flat of his rapier; making him yelp and the other soldiers laugh. He could see the man was starting to lose his temper, embarrassed at being made a fool in front of his friends; this should be amusing.

Something in Anselm’s peripheral vision caught his attention; a slender, dark-haired figure, watching from the steps of the main tower. It couldn’t be her, surely? That damn cheap brandy must be rotting his brain.

The moment of distraction was enough for the infuriated young Orlesian to try and seize the
advantage. Anselm was still alert enough to turn out of the way in time, feeling the rush of the blade past his cheek and glancing off his shoulder. It hurt like hell, but the man had overextended, and Anselm caught the sword with the hilt of the main-gauche; sending it spinning into the dirt as he smacked his opponent across the face with the pommel of his sword. The other man staggered back, blood running from his broken nose. Anselm kicked him hard in the stomach; sending him onto his back, coughing and retching. The other recruits gasped in shock. That was not a move to be found in the Code du Chevalier…

“This isn’t a damn tournament; you bleuets sur-ripe!” Anselm yelled, annoyed at letting himself be caught by surprise. “No Venatori is going to extend a hand and say ‘well-fought, Messere!’ when he has you on your back. Remember that, and you might just survive your first battle.”

He strode over to the edge of the ring and grabbed a towel; wiping the sweat from his face as one of the training-sergeants, a bull-necked Fereldan, took over the rest of the session. His shoulder was likely just bruised, but he ought to get a cold compress on it as soon as possible. He looked back over to the steps but there was no-one to be seen. It must have been his imagination. Anselm put the towel down with a sigh; if he missed her so badly it was causing hallucinations, maybe it was time to cut down on the drinking a little. If he’d let that happen in a real fight.

“What is it?” He growled at the approaching messenger. “If it’s about that bloody Antiquarian Society—"

“Baron Desjardins wishes to speak with you, Messere. He says it’s an urgent matter.”

If Edouard said it was urgent, then it probably was. Anselm sluiced some water over his face and grabbed his gloves.

He didn’t wait for an answer to his knock before opening the door, knowing that the Baron was awaiting him.

“What’s the matt—" He stopped dead in his tracks, unable to believe the sight of Aleska standing there; still in her riding clothes with her hair hanging loose in thick, heavy curls.

“Anselm,” Aleska breathed, even now, as he stood before her; she felt as if this was a dream, a cruel figment of her imagination desiring to torment her.

He was over there in two strides, grabbing her in his arms and lifting her up with a whoop of delight; which at once turned into a cry of pain as a spasm shot through his injured shoulder. Aleska’s hands rested upon his shoulders, concern mirrored in her eyes.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have—" she said with an apologetic look. “That’s my fault, perhaps I could have made a formal announcement instead, but I wanted you all to myself for a few moments.”

“So, it was you,” Anselm ran his fingers through her hair, the strands running along his fingers, affirmation that this was all real. “I thought I was seeing things.”

Aleska reached up and took his face in her hands. His beard was trimmed close and it suited him, showing off the firm lines of his jaw and chin, her finger travelled along his neck and back up again; her hand behind the back of his neck, her fingers now caressing his reddish-brown hair.

“I wanted to surprise you; but I should have waited until you were finished.” Aleska let out a small laugh. “I was tempted to sneak downstairs, but I think that would have distracted you more. Still, I am sorry I snuck up on you.”

Anselm smiled softly at her; his arm snaked around her waist. “That’s not important; you’re here,
that’s all that matters to me.”

He kissed her, deep and slow, until his shoulder spasmed again and he winced, their lips parted, a silent need festered deep within them, Aleska drew in a deep breath; despite the trainees being unable to hold a candle to Anselm’s techniques, the element of surprise can turn the tide of any fight.

“Sit down and take your shirt off.” Aleska instructed him, walking over to the medicine chest. “It’s only fair I see to that for you.”

Anselm gave her a sly grin, watching her closely as she fiddled in the Baron’s cabinet, his gaze lowered, taking in her full appearance.

“Less than five minutes together and you’re already ordering me to strip? I like where this is going, My Lady…”

“Just your shirt!” Aleska laughed. “I doubt the Baron would thank us for misusing his study, and I haven’t even had time for a bath.”

“I could probably arrange for that to be rectified.” Anselm suggested, carefully pulling his shirt over his head.

“I’m sure you could.” She said, taking out a jar of Elfroot balm and some clean cloths. “But let’s get you seen to first.”

Anselm sat back with a sigh of relief as her fingers began to gently work the cool, numbing, ointment into the bruised muscle of his shoulder. Aleska massaged the ointment as gently into his shoulder as she could, her fingers tingled at the sensation of his bare skin beneath hers, for a moment her teeth grazed her lower lip—lost in a trance.

“I have missed you.” He said quietly, closing his eyes. “I never imagined being apart would hurt like this.”

“I’ve missed you too.” Aleska admitted, letting her fingers stray down the solid curve of his bicep to caress his forearm. “Every day has been agony; but we couldn’t have achieved what we have here without you. Thank you.”

“Hearing that makes it all worthwhile.” Anselm opened his eyes and looked up at her; letting out a long, slow breath. “And I have a surprise for you as well; in fact, you couldn’t have timed your arrival better if it had been planned!”

“Oh really?” Aleska looked at him questioningly as she smeared a little more ointment onto her fingers. “Now you have me intrigued, which doesn’t happen very often.”

Anselm’s smile deepened.

“We’ve got dragons. Three of them.”

###

It was a spectacular and unique sight, that could never be denied; three High Dragons nesting in the ruined amphitheatres atop the far bank of the river. There was nothing in the known lore to explain this, but the sense of wonder didn’t diminish the danger this posed. They would begin hunting for food before long, and the nearest source was Sahnia and the surrounding farms. Magnificent though they might be but, if they weren’t dealt with, the threat to an already
beleaguered province was unacceptable.

“We’ll need to take them one at a time, we can’t afford to overwhelm ourselves.” Aleska said, hunkering down beside Anselm behind the cover of a broken wall. “And hope the others don’t decide to join in.”

“That’s a big gamble.” He warned. “They’re already sharing territory, what if they decide to cooperate in other ways?”

Aleska shrugged; he was right, but they had no real alternatives. As far as she recalled, dragons had always remained solitary creatures, even in breeding some males left the nest to find a different female to mate with and High Dragons weren’t something one should mess around with.

“We just have to take that risk, what other alternative is there? They could destroy what is left of the town if they felt threatened enough by it.”

Luckily, the ruins provided plenty of cover. It would be a challenge, but a worthwhile one. Cassandra and Cullen would have conniptions, but they were far away, while there would be no stopping Bull and Jonas once they heard about this.

Anselm gave her a sidelong look. It was clear to him that she wanted this, and so did he. It was a fight worthy of both of them; perhaps one they needed to help wash away the sour taste of Adamant.

“Speaking of risks; we ought to head back before the storm hits.” He glanced over at the heavy, dark, clouds rolling over the mountaintops; the first few flakes of snow already drifting down through the air, lazy heralds of what was to come.

With the bridge gone, it had taken them much of the morning and early afternoon to get across the river to the opposite ridge. Even if the weather held it would be dark well before they reached the keep but, by the time they’d worked their way down through the halls and stairways, the snow was falling heavily and the other side lost to sight in the gathering murk.

Aleska shook her head, knowing the journey back would prove far more dangerous than finding shelter. “It’s madness trying to cross in this. We’ll need to make camp and wait it out.”

Anselm grimaced. The idea of bivouacking down in a blizzard was unappealing to say the least; there was another option, though, and he blessed Charter’s foresight.

“There’s an old watchtower further along.” He told her. “The scouts left supplies there in case of emergencies. Assuming the wolves haven’t taken it over, it’s dry and there’ll be firewood. A storm like this could last all night.”

“Let’s get moving then…” Aleska said, shouldering her pack. “At least we don’t have to worry about the dragons while it’s like this.”

###

The watchtower was only a mile or so away, but the slog through the blizzard felt like hours and it was already night by the time they drew close. Aleska was barely able to make out more than a gradually darkening shape amidst the veil of snow. The howling wind stung her face, and the layers of fur and leather barely resisted the deepening chill.

The door was badly jammed, and it took both of them to push it open and stumble into the cold, dark interior. They heaved the door closed behind them and Anselm slotted the bar into place;
keeping them secure from all but the most determined predator, although she found it hard to imagine how anything could be desperate enough to be hunting on a night like this.

“I’ll get a flame going...” Anselm muttered, teeth chattering as he set his pack down and hunted for his tinderbox. “At least then we can see what we’re doing.”

Aleska’s eyes were quicker to adjust to the darkness and she could roughly make out the outlines of a bed, a couple of chests and a stack of logs. The upper floors of the tower had been boarded off, making this a relatively weatherproof haven. She could feel herself shivering and rubbed her arms vigorously as Anselm struck flint on steel, trying to coax a spark to take hold.

A faint glow illuminated his features as he blew gently on the charcloth, until the flame was sufficient to light a single candle. The flickering light was no source of heat but, to Aleska’s imagination at least, it made the little room seem less of an icebox. Anselm set the candle down in a sheltered corner and came over to her, taking her hand.

“You’re freezing” His own hands were just as cold but that seemed to be no concern to him. “Let’s see what resources we have”

Both chests held blankets, thick furs for weather as harsh as this; while a closet beside the fireplace contained basic provisions, a cask of ale and a supply of candles, enough to last a good week or so. With the snow outside there was no need to worry about water either. Aleska shrugged off her wet cloak and wrapped one of the blankets around her shoulders before starting to lay the makings of a fire in the hearth.

“I can do that.” Anselm protested. Aleska shook her head, as much as her feet ached from trekking through the snow, she knew he would feel worse, training recruits had been no easy task.

“You’re as soaked as I am. Get yourself dried off and empty out that pack. If I know you, there’s at least one bottle of decent wine in there.”

Anselm chuckled quietly as he walked over to the chests and pulled out the rest of the blankets.

“I am that predictable, it’s true; but a gentleman is prepared for every eventuality.”

“Every eventuality?” Aleska asked, with a hint of scepticism as she took the candle down and – careful not to extinguish the flame – lit the pile of straw beneath the kindling.

“Of course,” Anselm said, reaching into the bottom of his pack and bringing out a slightly battered pastel-blue box. “It would never do to be caught unprepared.”

“Where did you get those?” Aleska exclaimed, seeing the familiar confectioner’s mark. “They’re my favourites!”

Anselm shrugged with the faintest hint of embarrassment.

“I… erm… bought a couple of boxes in Velun, on the march to the Approach. I thought they would be a nice surprise at the victory celebrations… except.” He looked down at the box of candied cakes in his hands and his voice faltered slightly. “Except there didn’t seem to be much cause for celebration.”

Aleska got up and walked over to him, taking his face in her hands and rubbing his cheeks gently to warm them up.

“Anselm, you’re not still blaming yourself?”
He let out a heavy sigh.

“I can’t stop feeling I let you down… that I let everyone down…”

Aleska took the box from his hands and kissed him, letting her lips linger on his.

“Do you think I’d be here with you if I thought that was true?” She traced the line of his jaw softly with her fingertips. “I made those choices, and I’m the only one who has to live with the burden of them…”

He rested his forehead against hers, wrapping his arms about her waist, pulling her body against his; enjoying the feel of her within his arms once more.

“Can’t you let me share that burden with, even a little?”

“Not this one,” She said with quiet regret. “But what I can share, I will.”

He drew her closer and kissed her with deep, longing, hunger; hands straying up her back to tangle in her hair. One thumb traced lightly along the side of her neck, near to her collarbone, and she let out a shuddering gasp. Anselm drew his head back; giving her a sly, yearning, look.

“Have I found my Lady’s weakness?” He asked mischievously. “What happens when I do this?”

He bent his mouth to her neck, lips and tongue teasing as he kissed round to the hollow of her throat; the soft hairs of his beard sending tiny, yet almost unbearable, shivers running through her.

“Anselm--” She clung onto his shoulders as her knees threatened to give way. “Wait… please?”

He stopped kissing her neck and looked at her anxiously.

“What’s wrong? Do you want me to stop?”

Aleska shook her head urgently, that was the last thing she wanted… the shivers alone that radiated through her body had been enough to make her beg for more, the way his tongue ran along her neck was enough to turn her stomach into knots twice over, a hand raised to her lips, a subtle warmth crept along her cheeks.

“Creators, no! It’s just—” She hesitated; this was the last obstacle she needed to cross, but still… “I’m afraid this is going to sound foolish.”

“Cuore del mio Cuore,” he murmured; his breath warm on her skin. “I could never think you foolish.”

Aleska rested his head against his chest. It would be easier to say if she wasn’t looking at him.

“You’ve been with so many… experienced… women,” Even as the words left her lips she cursed inwardly. She sounded like some blushing maid in a bad romance. “I-I’m afraid I won’t know how to… how to satisfy you.”

She feared he might laugh, but he didn’t. Instead he raised her face to his and kissed her gently, the kiss built up in the slow hunger which threatened to envelop them both.

“Let me worry about pleasing you… if such is My Lady’s will.” He brushed his lips along her cheek as he began to slowly undo the lacing of her waistcoat. “This night is yours…”

Aleska leaned her head back with a low, delicate breathe escaping her parted lips as he kissed back
down along her throat; drawing her waistcoat away from her shoulders until it fell to the ground in a crumpled heap.

“Your skin is still cold,” he murmured, leading her towards the bed. “Let’s get you under the blankets and I’ll see to the fire,”

“Is that a euphemism?” Aleska laughed, tugging playfully at the buttons of his tunic.

“Of course,” he chuckled, his lips claiming hers once more. “But we don’t want to freeze in the process.”

Anselm placed a few more logs in the hearth, nodding with quiet satisfaction as the flames quickly took hold. The room was already warming up nicely and he turned to look at Aleska, nestled comfortably under the blankets and watching him impatiently. He couldn’t help smirking just a little, now it was his turn to be a tease.

He stood up and slowly unbuttoned his tunic; carefully folding it and laying it down beside the fire, before unlacing his shirt and easing it over his head. He stood there for a moment, silhouetted against the firelight, and stretched with deliberate casualness; one hand sliding down over the ridged muscle of his stomach to pull, ever so gently, on the lacing of his breaches. He stopped, his thumbs hooked in the waistband and looked over at Aleska – as if only just remembering she was there—shaking his head with a wicked smile before sitting back down and unfastening his boots.

Barefoot, with his breaches tantalisingly half-laced, Anselm knelt beside the bed; kissing her again before wordlessly unlacing her boots, gently drawing them off and running his fingers lightly along the smooth skin of her calf.

“Does this please you?” He asked softly, gazing at her with eager anticipation. Aleska took his hand and drew it up to her mouth; kissing the skin on the inside of his wrist, feeling his pulse against her lips.

“It pleases me greatly” She released a slow breath. "You please me greatly.”

Anselm growled softly in response, a sound that made Aleska think of a wolf in heat. He lay on the bed beside her, rolling her onto her back as his hands moved up her thighs and over her hips; easing up her chest, his lips tracing the curves of the Vallaslin on her stomach with soft slow kisses.

She let out a gentle moan, her fingers clutching at his hair as his lips journeyed slowly up her body until they finally met hers again in a hunger which consumed them both; mirroring the blizzard still raging outside this firelit sanctuary. She let her hands roam free across him; savouring the smooth, supple, muscles of his back and shoulders, her nails traced along his bare skin - feeling him suddenly shudder and groan as her exploring fingers reached the small of his back.

“I’m not the only one with a weak spot, it seems.” She purred, daring to let her fingers move further down, his head buried within her neck, her teeth grazing over her bare skin.

“Oh… Oh Maker… don’t!” Anselm gasped urgently, the sheets clenched within his fingers, his knuckles turned white. “Not unless you want me to—”"

“Unless I want you to what?” Aleska asked with a look of mock innocence., gazing up into his green eyes; the glimmer returned.

“You are wicked.” Anselm murmured huskily, taking her hand, and easing it away. “And absolutely perfect.”
His mouth began it’s slow, meandering journey back down her body as he unlaced her breaches; easing them down past her knees until she was completely naked. Aleska felt her apprehension mounting, a whirlpool of fear and desire in her stomach as Anselm’s tongue traced a slow, curving path around her navel and further down… always teasing… always exploring…

She gave a deep, groaning, cry as she felt his tongue between her thighs—a slow flickering at first, like the flame of a candle in a soft breeze; then circling around in lazy spirals, moving ever deeper while his skilful hands found other ways to make her tremble with desire. The whirlpool in the pit of her stomach spun faster and tighter as she ran her fingers through his hair; begging him not to stop in a tangle of Elven and Marcher as his eager mouth responded to her own urgent desire. A long, tremble coursed through her, then another, as he clutched at her hips…

“I want you, right now,” she begged breathlessly.

Tugging at his head and shoulders until she’d pulled his mouth back to hers, realizing her own taste upon his lips. Anselm raised himself back onto his knees, sliding his breeches down his thighs, and Aleska felt her apprehension return at the sight of his erection; long and thick, curving up to his navel.

Anselm bent his head and kissed her tenderly, reaching for a small flask beside the bed. He poured some oil into her cupped palm and she caught the scent of olives as he guided her hand between his legs; closing his eyes and biting his lip as her fingers closed around him, inhaling sharply as her thumb grazed the tip. He opened his eyes and looked down at her, moving a few stray hairs away from her face.

“Tell me if it hurts, or if you want me to stop,” he whispered as he raised her hips slightly, moving a folded blanket underneath her “I mean it.”

“I promise I will,” Aleska closed her eyes, the thudding of her heart grew louder, his gentle encouragement and touches helped relax her body.

He moved forward a little, allowing her to keep hold of him all the while and she caught her breath as he brushed against her; a soft, yet constant, nudging—encouraging her to relax as he kept his eyes fixed on her, alert for any sign of discomfort. A sharp exhale escaped her parted lips as he entered her, moving her hips slightly in response.

Anselm paused for a moment, looking for any signs of discomfort, but none presented themselves. Aleska looked up at him, smiling softly as her hand ran along his chest, down towards his naval and up along his back, letting out a soft breath every few seconds; the sensation both felt foreign and pleasurable—a soft nod of assurance allowed Anselm to know she was fine.

There was no pain, just as Maela had assured her, but she had no words for the trembles she was feeling – only the certainty that she wanted this… wanted him in this moment. She took her hand away, sliding her oil-slick fingers up Anselm’s stomach, allowing him to move freely. He smiled at her and took her hand, kissing her palm lovingly as he eased himself deeper; his movements slow at first, allowing her to adjust to the sensation of him within her, her body arched into his. A hand moved behind her, supporting her back and holding her close.

“Does this please you… Ma Vhenan?” he asked; soft, rich, tone of his voice and the sound of the Elven from his lips made her shudder again. She caught her bottom lip between her teeth and nodded, her lips trailing along his firm bicep.

“Lasa ar’an alas’nira aron fen’en…” She whispered against his skin. “Let us dance as the wolves do.”
“The wolves will envy us tonight.” Anselm murmured, bending his lips to hers for a kiss that would last till dawn.
Fall On Me

Chapter by x_bellaczarina_x

Chapter Summary

A three day blizzard trapped Anselm and Aleska in the cabin, giving them some much needed alone time, reality reminded them of their duty and Anselm lived up to a promise he'd made to Aleska in the Western Approach.

Chapter Notes

I sincerely apologize for the delay in the chapters, unfortunately I had a lot on my plate these past few weeks and was unable to update on time. So here is Chapter 32 - Fall On Me - with Chapter 33 to be uploaded later. We want to thank everyone for their continued support, kudos, subscriptions, comments and bookmarks, your input means the world to us. We'd love to hear more from our readers, so drop comments.

For three days the blizzard swarmed over Emprise, not even the Dragons stirred from their nesting grounds to brave a hunt. Snow packed higher than normal covered the ground; to some it may have been a hinderance but, to Anselm, the snow had its uses.

Fires lit in the small cabin had warmed the atmosphere to the point where they joked about opening a window to get a cool breeze flowing through. Anselm trailed his fingers absentmindedly through the water in the tub, ensuring the temperature was just right Aleska lay fast asleep in the bed, covered in the furs; her armour still in the same place he’d left it three days prior. Despite the blankets over her, he could visualise every inch of her skin, from the nape of her neck to the curve of her waist.

His hand dipped lower into the water, ensuring the rune stone heated it to the perfect temperature, it was the first time he’d worn breeches since the blizzard; an odd feeling of having the material constricting him once more. Wandering over to the bed, his hand pulled the covers back, exposing her back to him. With a delicate hand, his fingers traced along the Vallaslin running down her spine, stirring her from her sleep.

“Five more minutes,” Aleska groaned, rolling onto her stomach, the pillow hugged to her cheek.

“As much as I would love that” Anselm bent lower, his lips pressed to her shoulder. “We have to get back, the Baron would send out a search party, and you know it.”

Aleska released a deep sigh, moving the stray hairs from her face, she had to prepare herself for the remarks everyone would be dying to make. Her vision adjusted to the light, the memories of the last few days flashing past her, the remembrance of his touch on her skin still made her tremble. The realization hit, she had not eaten anything proper since leaving the keep, her stomach grumbled as a reminder of that.
“How do you feel?” The tip of Anselm’s fingers traced along her cheek, running down her jawline.

“I feel fine,” Aleska sat up, bringing the covers up to her chest.

“I mean—”

“I know exactly what you mean,” Aleska laughed, a hand placed against his cheek. “I feel wonderful. Shall we have that bath, or should we wait a little bit?”

Anselm let out a hearty chuckle, his lips brushed against hers. “If we stay here any longer, My Lady, then I fear the Inquisition will lack its Inquisitor.”

“I won’t exactly say no to that idea,” Aleska smiled.

“You’re playing with fire.”

“And I like it.”

Aleska pushed the covers off herself, the shyness long faded about being naked before him, her hand placed within his as he led her to the bathtub. Small vials of scented oil rested upon the rim and the candles melted to the edge gave a faint relaxing aura. Anselm moved behind her, running a brush through the knotted ends of her hair as gently as he could; smoothing every strand and teasing out her curls to lie thickly at the back of her neck before working them into an elegant bun. His hands ran along her shoulders, the warmth of his skin against hers confirming this was no dream.

With Anselm’s hand to guide her, Aleska climbed into the tub and lay back; enjoying the sense of relaxation and calm the warm, perfumed, water induced. Anselm positioned himself behind her, sitting on the small stool, his hands running along her shoulders once more, massaging the tension he felt knotted deep within her muscles. Aleska lay her head against the rim of her tub, sinking lower, almost submerging her body. The mixture of heat and Anselm’s massage relaxed her, she couldn’t recall the last occasion she felt this at ease.

The sound of a cap unscrewing caught her attention, a small vial rested between Anselm’s forefinger and thumb, he waved it beneath his nose, satisfied with the contents within. The bottle topped and a small droplet fell into the waters, already Aleska could smell the sweet essence of rose oil, another drop followed.

“Relax,” Anselm’s voice a mere whisper, his fingers running along her bare shoulder.

“If I relax anymore,” Aleska’s tone intended to tease, “then I shall end up falling asleep; that is just how good this feels.”

“Would that be such a dreadful thing?” Anselm smiled down at her, his hands trailing down her arms and back up the same path.

Aleska closed her eyes, a deep exhale left her lips as he massaged the oil into her bare skin with strong, gentle fingers, allowing the sweet perfume to fill her senses; part of her wanted this moment to last forever, but this was not to be. Eyes fluttered open, her sight adjusted to the dimness of the cabin, even the candles beside the bath flickered to the end of their days. The blizzard’s howling had longs ceased. At one point the wind threatened to rip the boards from the windows; now, it only rustled the branches of the trees.

_We’ve been gone for three days_, Aleska reminded herself, knowing what awaited upon her return. The Baron undoubtedly had a stack of requisitions for the Keep. The ancient fortress needed urgent
repairs before the next storm toppled the whole thing; while the soldiers would require previsions and blankets for such harsh weather, it seemed more of a punishment than a post to be stationed within the Emprise du Lion.

“I know that look,” Anselm’s voice dropped, even he could not mask the disappointment ringing through his velvety voice.

“Look on the bright side,” Aleska ran the wash cloth along her skin, scrubbing the bits of dirt and sweat that had gathered from their blissful nights together. “When we get back to Skyhold, we’ll have a whole week to ourselves.”

“What if we get disrupted?” The questioning doubt in Anselm’s green eyes was reflected in the tone of his voice. “It took a blizzard and three Dragons for us to get three days to ourselves.”

“The first person who tries,” Aleska cupped his cheek. “Will become Dragon bait.”

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The grooms took their horses once they were through the gates, allowing Aleska and Anselm a quiet saunter through the Keep. The thick fur coat around her shoulders kept most of the harsher winds at bay, allowing her body to regenerate the warmth it needed. Aleska watched the eyes of the soldiers upon her, each one turning to their companions and whispering something barely audible for her to hear. It would be better than having nothing to talk about, Aleska calmed her rapid beating heart. Her boots crunching on the snow beneath her feet as the stairs leading to the Keep drew closer.

Each step seemed more daunting than the last, the flakes of snow glided down from the heavens and came to rest around them, Aleska’s glance shifted to Anselm, the same look mirrored in his eyes—they both wanted to get back on those horses and vanish to their little piece of paradise. The large doors creaked open, revealing the courtyard of the Keep. There had been no turning back now. Cullen would lose his temper if I don’t see to the requisition requests. Aleska reminded herself, turning Anselm.

“Why don’t you have a game of cards with Varric?” Aleska stepped closer. “Perhaps invite Jonas and Bull, I will be a good few hours with the Baron… and seeing to other things.”

“Our little getaway had to end some time,” Anselm released a slow breath, tucking a stray hair behind her ear. “Shall I see you later? Even for an hour?”

A nod told Anselm all he wanted to know, his arm snaked around her waist and pulled her closer, the warmth of her body against his both delighted and excited him. His forehead pressed against hers, a smile touched on their lips, her arms around his neck, his body pressed against hers in a heated embrace. Anselm’s hands ran through the lose strands of her hair, inhaling the sweet scent of her perfume.

“I’ll miss you,” Anselm whispered, his grip tightened around her body.

“As I will you, but at least it won’t be forever,” Aleska smiled, placing a kiss upon his cheek.

Anselm’s grip loosened, the realization dawned that the longer he kept her from the duties which beckoned her, the less time he would have with her come the evening; her hand brushed along his arm as she left for her duties, a silent reassurance that she would rather spend the time with him than cooped up in some dusty old library which smelt of weathered tomes and vinegar.

A hand plopped down on his shoulder; the weight almost caused his knees to buckle from beneath
him. His gaze met that of Bull and a small nod towards the Tavern told him all he needed to know, that Varric was in the mood to be reminded why he should never play cards with Anselm Trevelyan.

The small room thick with cigar smoke struck a semblance of home to Anselm, Varric rested within the chair; a pungent Rivaini cigar clenched between his teeth and the cards gliding effortlessly between his hands as he shuffled and mixed them. A vacant seat waited for him, as if this had been a carefully orchestrated ploy to allow him to forget her for a few hours.

“So, shall we play Trumps or Diamondback?” Varric’s gaze caught each of his eager companions, flicking each card to land before the player. “We got some catching up to do, Charmer.”

“I’ve only been gone for three days Varric—” Anselm suspected the questions would come, though Bull and Jonas had more diplomacy than Varric when it came to interesting information.

Anselm picked up each card, analysing the strategy of the room; the alcohol to loosen his tongue, the salted crackers and nuts to fill his belly till exhaustion took over. Varric intended to kill two birds with one stone, but Anselm was no novice to this game.

Cuddles tale thumped against the floor as Jonas threw him a salty cracker, catching it in his mouth before even the smallest of crumbs hit the ground. Licking his lips with a quiet satisfaction, he started whimpering for another tasty morsel off Jonas’ heaped platter.

“Cuddles, you ain’t some starvin’ pup, I fed you before Ansie came!” Jonas protested, offering his Mabari another cracker.

“Like owner, like pup.” Anselm teased, placing his bet within the centre of the pile.

“What’s tha’ suppose to mean?” Jonas picked up his cards, stuffing two crackers into his mouth and spraying the table with crumbs.

“I think you know Joe,” Anselm laughed, almost forgetting her absence from his side. “We both know you could pack away an entire banquet and still ask what was for desert before the servants cleared the tables.”

“Could we just resume playing?” Bull interjected; his large hands held the small cards as if some jest bought at an Orlesian market. “Unless we want to keep talking about hungry bellies.”

“No,” Anselm rearranged his cards. “I would much rather see Varric lose his shirt again, what size do you wear?”

“We’ll see Charmer,” Varric chuckled. “And if I recall, I wasn’t the only one who lost my shirt recently—although your experience must have been far more enjoyable.”

“I can’t seem to recall what you mean,” Anselm kept the tone of his voice low, not wanting to give Varric anything to latch onto.

“You’re trapped in the snow,” Bull added, “with the Inquisitor, and you’re expecting us to believe nothing happened? Either she was that good, or something else happened—”

“Come on, Charmer,” Varric attempted one last time. “You’ve been loose tongued about every whore you’ve bedded from Redcliffe to Vyrantium!”

Only Bull, with his Ben-Hassrath training, observed the tiny changes in Anselm’s expression as he continued to sort his cards; the slight narrowing of his eyes and tightening of the muscles around
his mouth and chin. When he spoke, there was a hint of steel beneath his words.

“Before this manner of conversation continues, with all your customary embellishments; should I warn Aleska you compared her to a courtesan? I imagine her response would be… interesting…”

Varric’s silence told Anselm all he needed to know, the mere thought of Aleska hearing what his comparison entailed would not end in the way he would have liked; even though Varric nor the others would admit, her subtle threats and calm manner in which she delivered them had struck fear in most of the Inquisition; no one could peg if it was the polite smile or the eloquent manner to which it had been delivered. All anyone knew is that Sophia had been an excellent tutor.

Game, set, match.

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The fire in the Baron’s study crackled, the cold winds of winter beat against the glass windows, knocking various small tree branches into the panes, tick, tick, tick; the branches tapped against the window capturing Aleska’s attention each time. A mug rested within her gloved hand, the Baron had been pacing before the fire place for more than an hour now, retelling the same requisition in a thousand diverse ways. Aleska wondered if this had been a ploy to test her fragile tolerance for having things repeated, or if he had been unaware that he had been doing it.

“Yes, but—” Aleska hoped to steer the conversation into a new light, allowing a breath of fresh air to breed new topics.

“Oh, and we’ll need stone for the outer walls, I am afraid it won’t hold another blizzard back, Lady Josephine could see to that yes? Did you know I worked closely with her father?”

Aleska nodded, placing the now empty mug beside her. “You had mentioned that.” A smile touched her lips, forcing the politeness seemed to hurt her teeth more than the grinding which had been needed earlier. Three times already! The things Aleska longed to say but couldn’t, not for the sake of saving face, but for the endless lectures Josephine had always felt the need to give her.

Part of her wondered if this was a deliberate strategy on Baron Desjardin’s part; playing the dull, rambling, old man until she agreed to his requests out of sheer desperation to escape. If so, it was working.

“Baron,” Aleska rose from her seat. “If I may, I will undoubtedly forget the requisitions by the time I reach Skyhold, I have a few other stops to make in our smaller camps, so to prevent any confusion between your requisitions and theirs, perhaps writing it down would help? I’d hate to leave Suledin Keep defenceless; and we wouldn’t want you to end up with druffalo hides instead of locations for stone quarries, now would we?”

“No,” the Baron perched himself behind his desk, preparing the stacks of paper. “I shall have these done by the time you leave for Skyhold, Lady Inquisitor.”

“I have a better idea,” Aleska leaned against the desk. “Josephine hasn’t heard from a family friend in quite some time. A raven would ensure your requisitions are put before anyone else’s; I am sure Josephine would even see to it personally.”

“What an excellent idea,” the Baron nodded. “Thank you for your time Inquisitor.”

Pander to his pompous Orlesian arrogance, Aleska thought, that could have saved me three cups of tea and a stiff jaw if I’d done it sooner. She closed the door behind her, the harsh winds brushed along her cheek as the sun slowly set over the horizon. Nights had always been the coldest in the
Emprise, luckily for her, she had someone to share a bed with and keep her warm. *Many of our soldiers have to brave this harsh weather with little reward, perhaps I need to talk to Cullen about some subtle comforts to make it more tolerable.*

A hand extended for hers, a scout had offered his aid down the slippery steps, she was grateful that even one person had been willing to stop what they were doing. The scout lowered his head as she thanked him, glad he could be of service to the Inquisitor herself. *Perhaps my father had indeed been wrong, his hatred stemmed from one incident, but if we judge the many by the actions of the few; what does that say about us?* Aleska placed her hands against the frozen bannister. Observing elves, dwarves and humans working harmoniously together.

*Perhaps this is what Thedas needs, to forget the divides between cultures or races,* but even Aleska knew that was an idealised vision to have, enough hatred burned between elves and humans to fuel another thousand wars, between Mages and Templars, peace was an ideal many strived to accomplish, but none lasted longer than a few years. Even all the honourable deeds that Olivia and Hawke had done to bring peace, someone had turned it around and into yet another power struggle.

History remembers its hero’s how it believes fit, her legacy had only begun, how history would remember her would be a tale that she may never live long enough to hear. An elf to lead Thedas into victory against an ancient darkspawn who threatened the very foundations of the ground they all stood upon, some believed this had been the Maker toying with their faith, to have a heretic called the Inquisitor instead of one who was truly devout. *Does even Cullen feel it? Or Sophia? They are the most devout of all my councillors, yet I call them my closest friends. They never questioned my beliefs, or I theirs… but is that enough?*

“You’re deep in thought,” Dorian leaned beside her. “It’s starting to show.”

“How so?” Aleska laughed, watching the training grounds carefully.

“For a woman of your age, it seems you have already gotten a wrinkle or two.”

Aleska touched her forehead, her fingers running along the cool skin and feeling no creases, her fingers touched her cheeks, pushing the skin up slightly as to feel if age had truly begun its cruel markings upon her. The look Dorian had explained it all, even behind the moustache, she could tell he had been joking.

“Very funny,” Aleska nudged him, the sharp tug of a hair being removed caught her attention. “Ow! What was that for?”

“Apologies,” Dorian held the small strand between his fingers, examining the silver hue to it. “A grey hair began to show, I assumed you wouldn’t want it yes?”

Aleska’s hands ran through her hair, if the greyness began to show already, it meant the stress of the anchor had weighed heavily upon her body. She couldn’t remember the last rift it closed, Solas had warned her of the potential dangers of not keeping the magic sated by closing rifts, he described the anchor as a hungry infant wanting its mothers breast, leave it too long and it could become restless. Almost the perfect analogy in Aleska’s opinion, it kept her up at night, caused her pain and grief, except without the joy that motherhood had to offer.

“I suppose so,” Aleska rubbed the side of her head, the hopes to ease the pinching nerves. “Just a little warning next time would have been appreciated.”

“Trust me,” Dorian leaned beside her, “had I warned you, it would have hurt far worse, often the element of surprise is the best with these things. As least that is what I find at any rate.”
“Not all things,” Aleska smiled to herself, “sometimes being prepared for something yields far more pleasant results.”

“I have the suspicion we aren’t talking about the same thing,” Dorian observed her. “Is there something you wish to tell me? Some naughty little detail?”

“Why don’t I leave you to figure it out?” Aleska laughed.

“Yes, but I would much prefer you tell me, given our friendship and all that—”

“Some things, Dorian, are worth leaving to the imagination.”

“That good, was he?”

“Better.”

***

The card game ran longer into the night than Anselm would have wanted, when the clock tower tolled, the shock jolted into his system, it had been a while since the messenger disrupted their evening with news that the Inquisitor had retired to her chambers, a sum of money had exchanged hands earlier that evening for the information. Anselm gathered his winnings, with Jonas and Cuddles trailing behind him.

“Ansie,” Jonas caught up to him within a single step. “Listen, just—”

Jonas hesitated; he’d been practicing Sophia’s advice to ‘think twice, speak once’ so he could be sure of making sense but, right now, it was a challenge to find any words for what he wanted to say. Anselm could tell his cousin was struggling for what to say and gave him an encouraging smile.

“Just say it, Joe; I can guess what this is about, and I’m not going to take offence.”

“Tell me this ain’t one of your bloody games,” Jonas blurted out. “I ain’t that thick, I know you and ‘Leska were… well… what you been doing the last three day; promise me you ain’t gonna mess with her, not like…”

He stopped, biting his bottom lip nervously. Everyone had been nice to him after what happened with Kay, but it still made him feel like the biggest idiot in the world.

Anselm sighed and put a reassuring had on Jonas’ shoulder

“This isn’t some game…” he promised. “Perhaps it began like one because I didn’t want my ego or my pride getting bruised by her, but I have never cared for another woman the way I care for her. You have to trust that I would never intentionally harm her… you know, that right?”

“Yeah,” Jonas rubbed his hand anxiously over his close-cropped scalp. “Jus… she called me her leth… lethal—”

The pronunciation baffled Jonas. When Aleska said it, every syllable glided off her tongue with an effortlessness he couldn’t hope to have. He hoped Anselm understood what he meant, he’d always been better at Elven then even Sophia who studied with and befriended elves.

“Lethallin?” Anselm possessed the same effortlessness as Aleska.

“Yeah, don’t bloody know what it means, but it sounded sweet.”
“Loosely translated, it means she thinks of you as family. If my Elven is correct.”

Anselm saw Jonas face light up, his smile broadening as he bid Anselm a good night, repeating the word to himself as he wandered down the hallway and to his quarters with Cuddles soon following. He noticed a candle light dimly flicker in Aleska’s room, unsure if she was awake or not. His own fears of what happened whilst she was left here resurfaced again, his mind ran through a thousand possibilities as he pressed his ear to the door and heard nothing but the soft winds howling in the night.

A light knock received no answer, his hand pressed to the brass knob of the door, curving around it as he turned it, the small click granting him entry into her chambers. The candle light came from her desk, where what was a thousand papers had been neatly sorted into small piles, not even a fire crackled in the hearth and her bed lay unmade.

“You should be asleep,” Anselm closed the door behind him, striding over to the fireplace and placing the logs within; striking his flint.

“I couldn’t sleep,” Aleska looked up from her papers, “you know Dorian found a grey hair this afternoon, I am too young to have grey hairs!”

“I would say it is more the stress of what you’ve been through which brought it on,” Anselm came up behind her, his hand placed to her shoulders. “If it makes you feel better, my cousin Hermine went completely silver haired before he turned twenty. He claims it’s because of swamp fever. Personally, I think it was due to his wife finding out he preferred her brother. Although, frankly, anyone who spent five minutes in Madeleine de Coursay’s company would prefer Reynaud.”

“Is every noble family riddled with scandal?” Aleska laughed, leaning back as Anselm’s fingers kneaded the tired muscles in her neck. He chuckled quietly

“Every. Single. One! And the ones who seem the most respectable are hiding more skeletons than a paranoid Mortalitasi!” Anselm bent down and kissed the top of her head. “Now let’s get you to bed, I’ll be happier knowing you’re getting a proper night’s sleep.”

“Well we may have a bit of an impasse—” Aleska rose from her desk, tucking in the chair behind her and turning to him with a teasing smile.

“Oh really?” Anselm’s mischievous glimmer rekindled. “What would that be, My Lady?”

“I’ll be happier with you sleeping beside me,” Aleska stood only a breath away from him. “Given my history in this place isn’t all pleasant, I’ll feel safer with you at my side.”

“If that is what you desire,” Anselm smiled down at her. “Then you need have only asked me.”

Aleska unlaced his waist coat, sliding it away from his shoulders and throwing onto the vanity across from her. She slipped her boots off and removed her own coat before pulling back the heavy fur covers and climbing into the bed. Anselm chucked his boots carelessly into a corner and joined her there, his arms around her waist as he pulled her close into a firm embrace. She yawned softly as sleep closed in on her, taking his hand in hers and lacing their fingers together.

“Good night,” she murmured through another yawn; closing her eyes as the rhythm of his breathing and heartbeat became her new lullaby.

In his arms, she knew she was safe—knew she was home.
The walls of Skyhold approached upon the horizon, Aleska halted Vesenia for a moment, allowing her horse to graze upon the fresh grass emerging from the melting snow. Spring was almost upon them, campaigning season, and she knew that the moment she climbed off her horse she would be thrown into the deep end once more; Josephine’s letters stressed the urgency of preventing the assassination of Empress Celene and bringing an end to the civil war, but her advisers were – as always – divided as to the best approach.

Anselm’s hand covered hers, giving it a reassuring squeeze. It reminded her that the longer she delayed the inevitable, the less time she would have to unwind and relax that evening; a hot bath and an early night were something she desperately craved. Aleska nudged at Vesenia’s sides, urging her to keep moving forward, a neigh of protest told Aleska she wasn’t finished eating her meal.

“Come on girl,” Aleska patted Vesenia’s neck. “There are probably some fresh apples and rolled oats in the barn for you. I know how much you like them.”

Vesenya seemed to approve of that option, as she picked up her pace until she trotted through the gates of Skyhold into the midst of the waiting throng. Aleska climbed off her horse, her feet touching solid ground for the first time in hours, as the stablehands took charge of the horses. Already messengers swarmed her like bees upon a fresh blossom, schedules from each adviser piled on top of the others; she feared being buried beneath the paperwork and it hadn’t even reached noon.

“We’ll spend some time later,” Anselm reassured her. “I think I need a hot bath; the scent of travelling doesn’t suit me well enough.”

He gave a speculative sniff at his armpit, grimacing comically.

“Go and enjoy your relaxation,” Aleska laughed, handing the paper to one of the messengers with instructions to leave it upon her desk. “I need to begin the stack of paper work on my desk, so it is going to be a long night indeed.”

“Our little get away had to end some time,” Anselm placed a tender kiss against her forehead. “Come find me later, I may have one last surprise for you.”

Before Aleska could respond, Anselm was off, the look of concentration upon his face told her that he had been plotting something and he would have needed her out of the way to fulfil his ploy. Aleska knew she’d have to begin the meetings sooner rather than later, or else she could kiss the idea of a good night’s rest goodbye—and she’d just begun to enjoy sleep.

“You’re back!” Sophia caught Aleska off guard, her slender arms around Aleska’s shoulders and pulling her into a tight embrace. “We’d thought you’d be gone another week or so.”

“No,” Aleska fixed her coat, “Emprise is beautiful, but I am not built for that kind of cold, how is Cullen doing? With his wounds?”

Sophia nodded, walking beside Aleska, the two women linking arms as they strolled.

“Cullen is well, and his wounds are healing nicely.” She gave a faintly exasperated sigh. “Although they would heal faster if he would stop to rest now and again.”

Aleska laughed, she didn’t envy Sophia the task of having to deal with a convalescent Commander. Cullen had the tendency to treat any affliction as a personal affront, and to meet it face on with sword and shield.
“You’d have a better chance of having Solas and Sera collaborate on a thesis of Elven Culture than have that happen.”

Sophia giggled at the outlandish image that created.

“I threatened him with Cassandra if he didn’t behave and that worked for long enough. At least I didn’t have to resort to hiding his boots…”

The pair of them walked side by side up the stairs and into the Great Hall; Aleksa listening to Sophia’s tales of the comings and goings of Skyhold whilst she was away. It confirmed to Aleska that the Inquisition would withstand the Inquisitor being gone a while; that was comforting, she assumed it wouldn’t be the last time duty would call her away for extended periods of time.

“We can finish our conversation later,” Aleska smiled softly as they reached the door leading to Josephine’s office and the Council Chamber. “There is something I want your… advice on, perhaps the only one I can trust with this.”

“Is it Anselm related?” Sophia asked in an arch little sing song voice that told Aleska she was eager for a little more information than Aleska was willing to give right now. Aleska responded with a sly wink.

“Perhaps, you’ll just need to wait and see.”

***

The meetings ran longer than Aleska had expected, existing the War Room just before the clock struck midnight, Aleska knew she would have to wait until the earlier hours of the morning before she would be able to properly relax. Walking up those endless steps were the last straw of her tolerance; she would rather face a blizzard once more than have to deal with that climb.

She finally reached the top of the stairs, noticing her door slightly ajar and a dim flicker within, her heart thudded loudly within her chest as the tips of her fingers rested against the wooden door, pushing it open to reveal an entirely candle lit room. In the far corner Anselm had lit the last of the candles within the brazier, blowing out the wick and setting it upon her desk.

The door closed behind her, eyes taking in the entire scene before her, upon her Orlesian silk covers, what seemed to be a thousand rose petals rested upon the cream coloured fabric, even up to the pillow, a selection of fine Orlesian chocolates lay upon a silver ornate platter beside a bottle of expensive wine. Aleska had been at a loss for words at the various other treats which decorated each surface of her quarters.

“When I made my promise within the Western Approach,” Anselm walked up to her, the robe around his body loosened. “I made you a promise of romance, unfortunately I could not arrange a unicorn in time… on account of their non-existence.”

A hand outstretched for hers, a smile played upon both their lips as her hand placed within his, he pulled her closer into a tight embrace. One hand resting against the small of her back, gliding upwards and his fingers artfully unlaced her waistcoat.

“How long did this take you?” Aleska breathed, the tingle of his soft touch trailing down her spine forced her heart to thud heavily within her chest. “I don’t even want to imagine the cost—”

A finger placed against her lips, a silent command for her to stop talking. “Let me worry about all of that, I am a man of my word, at least I would like to think so. Whilst blizzards can be romantic in their own right; I doubt that was the image you thought of when you told me what you wanted.”
Aleska’s mouth ran dry, her glance flickered to the various oils resting against the nightstand, the steam from a hot bath caught her attention. Anselm intended to woo her in ways she had not expected. Wandering towards the bedside table, her fingers touched one of the richly decorated chocolate eclairs. A bite taken out of the chocolate revealed a hardened caramel centre, one of her favourites.

“You really shouldn’t have gone to all this trouble,” Aleska said, pushing the delectable chocolate to the side of her cheek, savouring the last few bites.

“I wanted to,” Anselm placed his hands behind his back. “Does it meet with the vision you had?”

“No,” Aleska inhaled the sweet oiled which burned in a small pot in the corner of the room, watching Anselm’s jaw clench at the thought of her disappointment. “It is better, so much better.”

“You had me worried for a moment,” Anselm strode towards her, admiring his own handiwork.

“I’m allowed to tease,” Aleska’s arm placed along the back of his shoulders, pulling him closer. “So, a whole week with the Inquisitor all to yourself; what ever shall we do to pass the time?”

“Oh,” Anselm’s lips traced along her jawline. “I can think of a few things to pass the time.”
Chapter Summary

The arrival of Count Boniface of Ostwick, for an ‘informal’ visit on the route to Halamshiral, tests Aleska's diplomatic skills and her authority as Inquisitor. Anselm seizes the opportunity to assert his independence from his father's control and receives an unexpected gift.

“I knew this couldn’t last—” Anselm sighed, reaching over to take another fig from the basket beside the bed. Aleska sat at her desk, a silk dressing gown draped loosely around her shoulders, reading the letter that had arrived from Highever that morning. “Can’t we arrange for a landslide to block the road or something? I think there’s a couple of spare trebuchets we could borrow.”

Aleska laughed quietly, it was a tempting thought. Even if it was not to be, the could hardly complain about the week they spent together. Only exiting the room to allow the servants to change the sheets, even then they weren’t touched by the troubles of the Inquisition. Until this morning, when a messenger disturbed their breakfast to deliver the news.

“I doubt something as simple as a rockfall would deter your uncle.” Aleska pushed the papers to one side, her fingers trailing atop the rim of her coffee mug.

Anselm snorted in dry amusement. “He’d probably glare at it until the rocks cleared themselves out of sheer awkward embarrassment; he got this way of looking at you that just makes you feel… disappointed… about yourself.”

It was Aleska’s turn to sigh, as she put the letter down on her desk and poured herself a fresh cup of coffee. The request was innocent enough; the Count’s secretary expressing his master’s desire to call at Skyhold in order to pay his respects to the Lady Inquisitor and greet his children before continuing his journey to Halamshiral.

More than innocent, it was reasonable; Count Boniface and his entourage were already on the way from Denerim, having been guests at King Alistair’s birthday celebrations, and Skyhold only a short detour. She looked over at Anselm, sprawled enticingly across the bed, as he bit with deliberate slowness into the candied fruit.

“The more I hear about him, the more he reminds me of my father…and that isn’t the most comforting thought.” Aleska took a sip of her coffee. “You probably ought to get dressed, we don’t need anyone coming in to ensure we’re up—"

“Why?” Anselm asked with mock-pout. “He isn’t here yet, is he?”

“No,” Aleska admitted, relief filled her tone. “But the Council is going to want to discuss this and I shouldn’t be late again, Cullen will sulk all day and I don’t know if I could bare that face.”

“Spoilsport!” Anselm threw the half-eaten fig gently at her and she caught it easily in her hands. “The bed’s getting cold, and there isn’t going to be a page coughing and shuffling anxiously..."
outside the door for at least another half-hour…”

“You’re a shameless distraction—” Aleska said softly, getting up and walking over to the bed. “I’m beginning to wonder if this was such a good idea.”

“It was a wonderful idea…” Anselm murmured, taking her hand and pulling her down towards him. “Let them bicker in peace, then you can walk in and tell them what you’re going to do.”

“I wish it was that easy, this is once I am done listening to Josephine’s diplomacy, Cullen’s militaristic stand point and Leliana’s subterfuge. Then the arguments come and finally I tell them what we’re going to do—it is amazing we came this far.” Aleska inhaled, shuddering slightly as he kissed along the line of her neck.

“It’s what usually happens… I’m just saving you from the boring bit.” He glanced up at her with a sly smile. “If you like, we can practise looking suitably penitent while we’re getting dressed!”

“You’ve never once looked penitent in your life, I imagine.” She laughed, running her fingers through his hair.

“True… but it’ll be fun trying.”

###

“Does he have to come here?” Cullen growled, tapping his thumb on the hilt of his sword. “We could arrange a meeting at Caer Bronach; or—"

“Out of the question!” Josephine said firmly. “The Inquisitor travelling to the Count would create an impression of subservience. Whatever his real intention, his arrival shows the world that he regards the Inquisitor as a near-equal; in public, at least.”

“So, what are his real intent? I doubt it is to discuss the goings on of the Summer Bazaar at tea.” Cullen’s question interrupted by Aleska’s arrival, Anselm sauntering in behind her. “Inquisitor, we were just… uh—"

“I apologise for the delay,” Aleska said, trying to sound sincere. “There were some… matters… I had to attend to.”

“I’m sure there were!” The Commander said, glaring at Anselm who appeared blithely oblivious. “We were just discussing the motivation for this visit. Perhaps Lord Anselm might have some insight.”

Anselm shrugged dismissively, Aleska glanced between Cullen and Anselm, their animosities towards one another had never truly died down, the civility would only last so long between both men; Anselm’s unwillingness to take these matters seriously would only spark an argument between Cullen and Anselm.

“The last time I spoke to my uncle, he was packing me off to Haven to take up a commission with the Inquisition; I’m not exactly privy to his current plans.” He glanced across at Cullen with a faint grin. “Just think; in different circumstances, you might have been my commanding officer!”

Cullen’s stony expression betrayed little of his thoughts about that scenario. Aleska covered her mouth, an attempt to muffle a laugh, the thought almost too enticing; but the end result would end in Cullen offering his resignation.

“Perhaps you’ll be less amused when you hear that your father will also be arriving.” Cullen said,
gaining some slight satisfaction from Anselm’s obvious discomfort at the news.

“My father?” Anselm exclaimed, his heart thudding and ice ran through his veins instead of blood. “Why?”

Aleska placed a hand on his arm to quiet him, noticing the pale colour taking over his cheeks, she hadn’t seen him so shaken; so unsure of what to say next, Aleska looked at him, a silent reassurance to take a breath before speaking again.

“Who exactly can we expect in the Count’s entourage?” Aleska asked Leliana, who pulled a sheet of paper out of her portfolio.

“Count Boniface is accompanied by the Countess Catarina, the Baron Giulio and Signor Helvetio Raffali; his personal secretary and private ambassador.”

“His spymaster, in other words—” Aleska muttered and Leliana nodded.

“One of the most formidable and experienced in Southern Thedas; but I doubt Count Boniface is here looking for intelligence on the Inquisition, I imagine he already had access to plenty! If you were to ask my opinion, I would say the Count is here mainly to observe. He’s a cautious and deliberate man; I believe he wants to see if the facts of the Inquisition, and it’s Inquisitor, match up to the rumours.”

Aleska took a deep breath and let it out slowly. The throbbing within her head intensified as the anchor crackled to life, a side effect when she becomes otherwise discontent. She closed her eyes, to try and force the throbbing to stop. It only worsened it.

“So, he’s here for a show; let’s make sure we give him a good one. It’s not the first time we’ve entertained nobility.” Aleska commanded, placing a new pin carefully within the carved wooden map, forcing it down so that more than half embedded in the thick wood.

“Nobility, yes; but the Count of Ostwick is royalty in all but title, and his influence spreads far beyond the Free Marches.” Josephine said, with a hint of warning. “He could do the Inquisition a great deal of good, or very serious damage, with a few words to the right persons.”

“I think I can trust you to make sure this ‘informal’ visit goes according to protocol.” Aleska said, looking forward to the meeting less and less with every new bit of information. “What else do I need to know?”

Aleska noticed the glance that passed between Josephine and Leliana before Josephine spoke again.

“The Count is also accompanied by a young Antivan noblewoman; Doña Nicoletta d’Aranjo. Her father, Prince Eusapio, is an ally of the Count and a prominent member of the Council of Princes. Count Boniface has been sponsoring her presentation at the Courts of Denerim and Halamshiral as a courtesy.” Josephine hesitated, adjusting her notes and putting them down on the table. “Doña Nicoletta is still unmarried; in fact, she has rejected three suitors in the past year – causing no small scandal. It is likely the Count is endeavouring to facilitate more than just her presentation.”

Anselm threw his head back with a deep groan of dismay.

“This again! At least I’ve got some bloody warning.”

Aleska felt the muscles around her mouth tightening, her stomach twisted into knots at the thought of some beautiful noblewoman here to vie for his attention and affection. No, Anselm is not like...
that, he didn’t ask for this… it is not his fault. Aleska reassured herself, confident Anselm wouldn’t just abandon her for the sake of his family’s wills. “Then we should be sure the Count’s visit is not un-necessarily prolonged.” She said with careful clarity. “I would hate to delay the lady’s chance of finding a suitable Marquis. If that is all, I need to take Vesnya for her morning ride.”

She could hear Anselm behind her as she left the Council Chamber and strode towards The Great Hall.

“He could bring every princess from here to Minrathous and it wouldn’t change a damned thing!” he panted, as he caught up with her. She turned to face him, taking his hand and her other cupped his cheek.

“I know, and something like this was always going to happen. I just didn’t expect it so soon.” She looked up at him and he could see the anxiety in her eyes. “I need a little time alone, to clear my head. Do you mind?”

He shook his head, raising her fingers to his lips and kissing them.

“Of course not; but at least have a scout riding at a distance. I don’t like the idea of you being out there unescorted.”

“I’m not going to make that mistake again….” She assured him, then gave him a mischievous smile. “You know you almost sounded like Cullen?”

Anselm chuckled throatily. “But far less scowly; and I suppose it’s the one thing he and I can agree on.”

He kissed her and stood watching as she headed down the corridor to the Great Hall. Once she was out of sight he slumped down onto a bench, head in hands, thoughts racing and the constriction in his chest threatening to choke him. Once he felt he could breathe again he got to his feet, running his fingers through his hair. There was no point sitting and brooding when there were sure to be fresh recruits needing terrorised in the sparring ring. At least it would give him a distraction.

###

Royalty has a very different interpretation of ‘informal’—Aleska thought, as the Count’s party made its entry into the Lower Bailey. A full troop of Hussars accompanied them; thirty riding ahead while another twenty formed the rear-guard. They put on a splendid show, she had to admit, hooves striking the cobbles in cadence as they drew up in two ranks, allowing the carriages to pass between them.

The Count was tall with streaks of red still visible in his thick, grey, hair. According to Leliana he was well into his sixties but could easily pass for ten or fifteen years younger, and he carried himself with the confident air of someone used to being obeyed. He was still an extremely handsome man, and Aleska could well imagine he might well have rivalled Anselm when he was young. The Countess Catarina, her face pale against the thick sable collar of her cloak, looked to be a little younger than her husband and the resemblance to Sophia was unmistakeable.

She watched as the Count and Countess of Ostwick greeted their children, while Josephine valiantly tried to complete the formal welcome with Cuddles racing around barking joyfully.

“Oh Your Worship…” Josephine said, dodging round the frolicking dog. “May I present His Excellency Don Bonifacio the Eighth; Sovereign Count of Ostwick, Patriarch of House Trevelyan, Duke of…”
“I think we can skip the full titulary, Lady Josephine…” Count Boniface laughed, as a red-faced Jonas tried to wrestle Cuddles back into line. “It’s less than an hour till lunchtime.”

“Benvenuto, Eccellenza, spero che le strade siano andate bene. Siamo onorati di avere te, tua moglie e tuo fratello nelle nostre sale e al nostro tavolo.” Aleska stated, coming forward, lowering herself into a curtsy. The full formalities could wait until later, once everyone had been shown to their chambers and had a chance to rest. “I trust everything will be to your satisfaction…”

“Le strade erano eccellenti, i tuoi ingegneri devono essere congratulati.” The Count replied with a smile, unsurprised at Aleska’s fluent command of Marcher. He turned to indicate the others in his party. “May I present my brother, Baron Giulio di Tresaquae; and Doña Nicoletta d’Aranjo of Antiva.”

Anselm’s father had the sour look of a man used to carrying resentment, and his smile of acknowledgment was cold and formal. Doña Nicoletta, on the other hand, had an easy grace about her which only added to her undeniable beauty.

“This place is delightful, My Lady Inquisitor!” She exclaimed, gasping at the sights of Skyhold. “Like something out of legend. How could a fortress this size be lost for so long?”

“The Frostback Mountains are a big place, with only a few permanent routes, I would watch your step, my lady; upon my second week here I almost mistook the armoury for the kitchen.” Aleska said with careful pleasantness. “I’m happy you like it and hope you’ll enjoy your visit.”

“That would have been an unfortunate mistake,” Nicoletta smiled. “Did you find the kitchen eventually?”

“I did,” Aleska nodded, “Once I’d endured one of Lord Dorian’s famed lectures on how his idea to put sign boards around Skyhold was a stroke of brilliance.”

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Baron Giulio make a small but impatient gesture to his brother. Aleska glanced behind her, noting Anselm shuffle from one foot to the other. His eyes fixated upon the horizon, neither looking at her or Nicoletta.

“Perhaps, if Your Worship is agreeable, my nephew might act as Doña Nicoletta’s escort?” The Count asked, smiling slightly. “After being stuck on the road with a collection of dusty old relics, she might enjoy the company of someone born in the same century as her?”

Aleska took a deep breath, the knots twisted in her stomach, but she dared not show her discontent. If she refused, it would come across as jealousy and possessiveness. There would only be one option in this arrangement, not even a forced smile could be enough,

“Of course; whatever will make your stay hear as pleasant as possible. We wouldn’t want you to make the same mistake I did, finding a kitchen is a far easier task then wandering down into the valley unescorted.” She gestured for the Count to accompany her to the Keep. “Once you’ve had a chance to rest, lunch will be served in the Great Hall. After that, we’ll see what comes.”

Now let’s see how far they’re willing to take this game…

###

“I know I shouldn’t be angry with him; it’s not like he’s doing anything wrong! Creators! It sounds so stupid but—” Aleska’s fingers ran through her hair, clenching the strands between her fingers.”

Aleska ran her hand over her face, groaning in dismay. She’d anticipated this being difficult, but
not the surge of furious resentment at seeing Anselm walking alongside Doña Nicoletta; talking and laughing as he showed her the renovations to the Keep and the Great Hall. He was just being courteous, she kept reminding herself, but seeing that easy charm directed towards another woman stung bitterly.

It didn’t help that Doña Nicoletta d’Aranjo was intelligent and genuinely pleasant, as well as beautiful; even if she did seem as uncomfortable with the situation as Anselm. Perhaps, like Mme. Delilah, she’d not been given a complete picture of the relationships at play within the Inquisition.

*I over-reacted then… hurt him badly; hurt both of us… I am not jealous; I cannot be jealous. Anselm is being a good host, that is all to the arrangement.*

She slumped down in the chair across from Dorian. A goblet of wine shoved within her hands and filled till the red liquid was about ready to fall over the sides and stain her hands. Taking a long sip, the wine calmed her nerves as the taste of spicy cinnamon wrapped around delicate notes of apple and pear.

“Tell me I’m not becoming so jealous I can’t stand the idea of him even talking to another woman,” Aleska scoffed, the rim of the goblet touched the wooden table, the contents spilling against the table.

Dorian shook his head with a sigh, handing her another glass of the dry Tevinter sherry he’d been introducing her to, it would be a change from the wine—less expensive.

“Have another drink; it’ll make you feel better, if not; you can sleep it off at the very least.”

“That’s your answer to everything, drinking and sleeping. On this occasion, my friend, I am inclined to agree with you,” she said, taking the glass and holding it in her hands.

“Because I find it usually is,” he sat back with a sad smile. “It hurts, doesn’t it? Realising how precarious your situation truly is; that any moment you could be set aside, consigned to the murky Void, when the right woman comes along or the family places just the right amount of pressure.”

Aleska saw the expression in his eyes and put a hand on his arm; what he said struck at the heart of how she felt but this was more than sympathy, there was a pain of understanding in his voice that she hadn’t expected. The sensation swept through her that he no longer had been referring to her nor her situation.

“Dorian, is everything alright?”

Dorian shook his head and knocked back his drink.

“No, but it’s a long story. I have my own share of… difficulties… where family expectations are concerned, so I can empathise with your situation.” He gave a small, bitter smile. “I ran across Jonas hiding in the library earlier – because he thought it was the one place no-one would look for him… Poor thing. You can see he’s terrified of his father, and I don’t blame him. Count Boniface could out-stare a High Dragon.”

Aleska laughed sharply, despite the over embellishment of Dorian’s statement; she feared the Count could very well gaze down a High Dragon and force the poor beast into submission.

“Perhaps I should take him with me next time Bull and I go out hunting. Test out your little theory.”

“Maker, no! He’d only strike some deal with it…” Dorian chuckled “The Trevelyans are bad
enough without having dragons as their allies.

Aleska looked down at her glass. Dorian’s wit was making her smile a little – it usually did – but it couldn’t shake the cold, gnawing, anxiety in her guts. She could never truly be part of Anselm’s world, just as he would never be fully accepted by hers; this was just another reminder of the challenges they faced.

“Am I being a fool to think I could ever have a future with a human?”

Dorian refilled his glass, thinking for a moment, his finger running through the bristles of his moustache, smoothing any stray hairs.

“If this were one of Seeker Cassandra’s abysmal romances, I’d be saying that ‘none of this matters when you’re in love’. But we’re both intelligent enough to know that it matters very much. The question is…” He took a sip of sherry, turning to look out of the window. “Does it matter more than being with someone you care about?”

Aleska looked in the direction Dorian was gazing. She could see Jonas down in the garden, apparently having a tug of war with Cuddles; who appeared unwilling to relinquish the cloak he’d decided to use as a blanket. She glanced back at Dorian, noting his faintly wistful expression, and a light went on in her head.

“You’re always very kind to Jonas.” She said, taking his hand. “Thank you. Kayden hurt him a lot more than he’ll admit; I think he needs someone who’s willing to be patient…”

Dorian looked at her in surprise then gave a quiet sigh.

“Is it that obvious?”

Aleska shook her head, knowing she had been more observant than everyone else around her.

“Not really, but I tend to notice these things.” She looked back down at the courtyard, where Jonas had managed to get one corner of his cloak free from Cuddles, only to have him immediately grab another one. She laughed quietly. “We’re all having to adjust to circumstances we never expected in our lives. It isn’t easy.”

“Speaking of things that aren’t easy; isn’t it almost time to start getting dressed for dinner?”

Dorian grimaced.

“Is it bad that I’d rather be fighting a horde of Venatori than dining with Anselm’s family?”

“Of course not.” Dorian said with a dry smile, taking her empty glass and setting it down beside the decanter. “At least the Venatori don’t look at you disdainfully if you use the wrong knife.”

###

Dinner was served in the Free-Marcher fashion as a gesture to their guests; more than a dozen small, highly varied courses – rather than the three or four large dishes preferred by Fereldan custom. Aleska realised she preferred this style of eating, it was a far more relaxed and enjoyable way of dining; one that satisfied without making the diners feel weighed down, and conducive to conversation. The evening would be well advanced into night before coffee and cognac was served.

“It’s fortunate the Orlesians didn’t know about this place fifty years ago.” Count Boniface
observed, as the servants laid out dishes of boiled eggs, stuffed with finely minced spiced ham, on a bed of creamed potatoes. It was one of Aleska’s favourites and she tried hard not to look as if her mouth was watering. “Maric would never have dislodged them if they had a base like this, so near the border and the North Road.”

“I understand Your Excellency played no small part in that victory.” Aleska said with a smile, picking up her fork. The complexities of formal cutlery were so much easier once you grasped the basic principle of ‘work from the outside in’. The Count was a delightful conversationalist; his air of calm, assured, authority lightened by his undeniable charm. At moments if felt more as if she were a guest at his table rather than the other way around. He also seemed surprisingly well-informed about Dalish traditions and customs – whether that was an interest of his own, or the doing of Signor Raffali.

According to Leliana’s report, all the elderly Elf had done since his arrival was sun himself in a sheltered corner of the Cloister Garden and play a game or two of chess with Mother Giselle; it still left Aleksa with the uncomfortable feeling he was aware of most – if not all – of the doings within the walls of Skyhold.

“A single mercenary company hardly made much difference; although I did have my adventures” He sighed pensively, unfolding a fresh napkin and smoothing it across his lap. “It’s the nature of young men to want to make a name for themselves; on the battlefield, and in the bedroom. And it’s the nature of old men to be susceptible to flattery; especially from a beautiful young woman.”

He gave her an almost imperceptible wink and Aleska found it difficult not to laugh. It was easy to see that Anselm was not the only charmer in the Trevelyan family.

“I’m not sure the Lady Aleska wishes to hear the details of all your Fereldan conquests, my dear.” Countess Catarina said, dabbing at her lips, although Aleska could hear the amusement in her voice.

“I’m sure Your Excellency was always a perfect gentleman.” Aleska smiled, as she refilled his glass. “I don’t mind any stories His Excellency has, they are far more realistic than Varric’s over embellished tales.”

“Wait till you get to know him better.” Sophia interjected, with a mischievous expression.

“See what I have to put up with,” The Count huffed with an exaggerated frown. “Even from my own daughter.”

It wasn’t the ordeal Aleska had feared. She could even tolerate Anselm continuing to act as Dona Nicoletta’s escort; the odd longing, anxious glances in her direction made that pill less bitter – even though Baron Giulio radiated an air of smug satisfaction.

He doesn’t know his son at all… she realised; just as she noticed how the Count’s sharp, bright eyes were paying detailed attention to everything happening at table – even as he related anecdotes about the Fereldan rebellion with wit and gusto. Despite the briskly flowing conversation and the general air of goodwill, she couldn’t help feeling that every one of her words, gestures and expressions was being weighed and tested, and a familiar cold twisting took hold of her guts.

They fear you because you have power and they don’t know what you’re going to do with it… The sickly voice of her nightmares whispered… Stop trying to pretend they’ll ever accept you as anything more than a means to an end.

“Aleska,” Sophia placed a gentle hand across her wrist. “You’re eating more than usual, are you all
right?"

“I feel fine,” Aleska accepted another helping of steamed potatoes from Jonas. “Solas says it could be the anchor causing it, lately; it just never seems to end.”

Aleska picked up the whispers coming from the Count’s travelling party, even Anselm looked up in concern. Why can a woman not eat like a man at times? Surely such a thing is not unheard of. Aleska pushed the last few potatoes around her plate, clearing her throat and picking up her wine goblet.

Forcing the voices back into silence she turned to Jonas, trying to draw him into the conversation. For once, he seemed to have lost his appetite and sat picking at his plate, looking like a child expecting to be rebuked for some real or imagined fault. She saw the Count give her an odd look, somewhere between curiosity and gratitude, and he turned the conversation to some amusing mishap at King Alistair’s birthday party.

With dinner concluded, Aleska took the opportunity to excuse herself for a few minutes as the musicians set up and the guests mingled in the Great Hall. She stood on her balcony, breathing deep and slow, enjoying the chill of the night air on her face. She hadn’t realised how stiflingly hot the dining hall could be when it was full. It was no surprise to hear familiar footsteps behind her.

“Your neglecting your companion, My Lord, that’s hardly gentlemanly.”

“I introduced her to Rylen…” He murmured, slipping his arms about her waist and kissing the back of her neck. “Fortunately, she finds his accent as enticing as everyone else. I doubt she’ll notice my absence. At least it means we can have a few minutes.”

“Anselm,” Aleska began, but he touched the tip of his finger to her lips, his warm breath caressed her cheek.

“I know what you’re going to say. I’ve seen it in your eyes all evening and we’ve had this conversation before. That isn’t my life, it’s just what I was born into. My life is the one I’ve made here, with you, and I’m not going to give any of that up. If my uncle wants to accept me, he has to accept you as well.”

Aleska leaned back against him with a sigh.

“What about your father? We’ve already had a hint of what he’s capable of, and I think he’s determined to see you and Dona Nicoletta married.”

Anselm rested his cheek against the top of her head. She nuzzled into his hold, grateful to feel those powerful arms around her, how his embrace seemed to make all her troubles melt away.

“I’ll think of something…” He said, with a slight hint of uncertainty. “Nicoletta certainly isn’t interested in marriage; her ambitions seem more academic than domestic.”

Aleska closed her eyes, pondering the situation, then felt herself smiling as a sudden realisation crept over her. She took Anselm’s hand and led him over to her desk.

“Something you said a few days ago, when you were teasing Cullen… again, got me thinking and I had Leliana take a look in her records.” She took out a large, folded, sheet of vellum and handed it to Anselm who took it with a perplexed look.

“What’s this?”
“Your commission as a Knight-Lieutenant of the Inquisition; all drawn up and awaiting Divine Justinia’s signature and seal. ‘Knight-Lieutenant Trevelyan’ has a certain ring to it, don’t you think?”

Anselm’s look of bewilderment deepened.

“You’re going to confirm this?”

Aleska nodded, opening more drawers in her desk and rummaging through their contents. She silently cursed her untidiness, the moment when she needed to find one thing of importance, the contents of her desk prohibited it.

“Once I find the sealing wax, yes. According to Leliana, during times of conflict, serving officers cannot be contracted into marriage without the consent of their commander. It’s an obvious strategy so I wanted to avoid it, but I think I can trust Leliana to fudge the dates in her records.”

“Hold on…” Anselm raised a cautionary hand. “Won’t this mean I’ll be under Cullen? That’s not a position I’m overly keen on.”

Aleska laughed, feeling increasingly proud of her ingenuity. Damn that insidious little voice to the void; she could play their Game as well as anyone born to it!

“Don’t worry, I had a few amendments made. Given that your primary function is that of a lead scout, you’ll be answerable directly to me. I’ll be the only one giving you orders.”

Anselm looked at her in astonishment for a moment, before a wicked grin crept across his face.

“No!”

His father turned with an angry frown.

“What do you mean? You are in no position to refuse this!”

“I will not marry Doña Nicoletta and you cannot force me. I have the right to refuse a marriage; as a serving officer of the Inquisition, my duty.”

“Your duty is to obey your father, not scandalise half of Thedas with this ludicrous pursuit of the Inquisitor! You’re worse than Sophia, shaming herself with some peasant-born Templar—or Jonas making a public fool of himself with that woman’s brother—Maker only knows why your uncle
hasn’t had that half-witted lout dragged back home by his ear!” The Baron dismissed the servants with an impatient flick of his hand. “Andraste’s Pyre! If you want an Elven mistress, I’m sure the whores of the Grand Concourse would oblige with a touch more discretion.”

“Aleska isn’t my mistress.” Anselm’s voice was rising, and he took a deep breath—feeling the pounding in his chest and head “I love her!”

“Love…?” his father scoffed “As if a degenerate brothel-crawler like you would know anything about that.”

“I’m learning, Father…” Anselm spoke coldly, the muscles of his jaw clenching with the effort to hold onto his temper “No thanks to your shining example.”

The Baron’s back-handed blow sent him staggering back a pace, briefly stunned. A trail of warmth glided down his chin, staining his collar with a red droplet upon the white velvet.

“How dare you!” Baron Giulio snarled, his face a vicious mask. “You’re not too old for a flogging!”

Anselm straightened himself, blood trickling down his cheek where his father’s signet ring had gashed it. He adjusted his collar and took a step forward. The Baron flinched, and for a moment Anselm thought he saw fear in his eyes.

“Kindly inform Don Eusapio that I am unable to marry owing to my present duties in the service of the Inquisition. I will do Doña Nicoletta the courtesy of the news in person.”

“I did you not give you permission to leave!” Baron Giulio barked, regaining his composure. “This conversation is not over…”

Anselm’s hand paused on the door handle and he turned to his father with a cold, hard, expression

“I don’t care about your permission, Messere, in case you hadn’t noticed; and I have duties to attend to.”

The door slammed closed behind him.

Aleska found him in his favourite corner on the battlements; hard see from any of the towers but with a clear view down the valley. He sat, eyes closed, with his back against the wall, dried blood still clinging to his face

“You should get that seen to.” she said, sitting down beside him. “It could scar.”

He laughed derisively, not opening his eyes.

“I might keep it; a token of the first genuine physical contact I’ve had with him. At least when he used to order the grooms to beat me, I knew I’d got his attention. Nobles have servants for everything you see… even punishing disappointing sons.”

“Anselm…” she placed a hand on his arm and he shook his head with a smile

“I’ll be alright. I spoke to Nicoletta, she’s as relieved to be free of this as I am… and Uncle Boniface came to see me…”

Aleska felt her chest tighten

“What did he say?”
Anselm opened his eyes and turned to look at her.

“He said I’d made an ‘intriguing’ decision and he would be interested to see if it was the wise one. I’m guessing from that he’s not intending to have an assassin sent after me anytime soon.” He slipped his arm around her waist, kissing the top of her head “I promised you, didn’t I? Even if the whole world were against you, I would be at your side.”

Aleska sat beside him for a while, resting her head against his shoulder. She’d never seen Anselm this disconsolate before, or fully realised how cold and empty life in his father’s house had been. Sophia had dropped hints but hearing it from his own lips made the anger surge up in her. She got to her feet; determined to make sure the Baron knew he could not go unchallenged.

“There’s something I need to see to; are you going to be alright?”

Anselm nodded, kissing her hand.

“I’ll be fine.” He promised. “No need to worry about me.”

“I will always worry about you,” Aleska added. “The day I stop worrying about you, is the day I stop caring—pray that day won’t come.”

###

She found the Baron in the Rotunda, in conversation with Count Boniface. There was no need to consult with the Advisers; Aleska knew exactly what she needed to do.

“Excuse me, Your Excellency; there is something I need to say to your brother!” The Count gave the faintest nod and she turned to Baron Giulio with ice in her voice. “I can't prevent you from beating your son, despite how contemptible I find it; but the next time you raise a hand to one of my officers, under my roof, there will be severe consequences. Am I understood?”

“How dare…!” The Baron spluttered, but Count Boniface silenced him with a gesture. Aleska swore she saw the Baron foam at the mouth with the Counts gesture calling for his silence.

“I apologise for my brother’s conduct, Your Worship. I give you my assurance it will not be repeated.” He gave the Baron a cold, deliberate look. “Should he forget himself again, I will accede to your judgement in the matter.”

“Thank you, Your Excellency.” Aleska gave him a slight bow. “I regret having to trouble you with this. If you will excuse me. Good day to you both.”

As she left the Rotunda, Giulio turned to his brother; face red with anger.

“How dare you let them get away with this! You are encouraging him to defy me. Encouraging him to continue with that elven harlot! She thinks she could speak that way to me!”

“I am encouraging him to act like a man, something you have singularly failed to do at every turn.” Count Boniface walked away from Baron Giulio to make a closer inspection of the frescoes. “And I suggest you remember that we are guests of the Lady Inquisitor and amend your behaviour accordingly.”

“Act like a man?” Giulio scoffed. “By cavorting with that… that woman? You can’t control your own children, Boniface; don’t presume to lecture me about my son!”

“These are times of change…” Count Boniface said, tilting his head slightly to better observe the
shifting colours. Messere Solas was a true master of his art, a pity he couldn’t be persuaded to undertake a private commission. “We have yet to see if these changes raise our dynasty to new heights or plunge us into the Abyss. Speak to me like that again, and you will have more than the Inquisitor to worry about. Leave me!”

The Baron opened his mouth to object, but he recognised the undercurrents in his brother’s voice and departed with a grunt of distaste. Count Boniface continued his contemplation of the artwork as he heard the tapping of Signor Raffali’s cane on the flagstones.

“Some of the symbolism is obtuse…” Raffali observed, as he joined his master. “…but I gather it represents the Inquisitor’s journey. I thought this style of art lost, centuries ago.”

The Count nodded quietly.

“Many lost and hidden things are creeping into the light of day. This is a curious Age, old friend.” The Count turned to Raffali with a dry smile. “She is no-one’s puppet, that much is certain; but whether she can deal the Game at it’s very heart is another matter.”

“I think Halamshiral will answer a great many questions, Ecceleanza…” Raffali said. “Our friends report that the forces of the Empress and the Grand Duke have been encountering problems in the field, due to a certain third party – the Grand Duke in particular. It seems Gaspard is more willing to consider talks, and the Empress is eager to know when you will be arriving.”

“I shouldn’t keep Celene waiting.” Count Boniface agreed. “She must be itching for the latest gossip from Denerim, and I have all the answers I wanted from Skyhold.”

Raffali gave the Count a deep bow.

“I shall see the necessary preparations are made; and inform the Lady Inquisitor of our departure.”

###

“Farewell blessings from my uncle?” Anselm asked, with a heavy dose of sarcasm, unsurprised at finding Signor Raffali waiting in his chambers. “Or is someone going to knock me on the head and stuff me into a travelling chest?”

Signor Rafalli laughed quietly.

“You’ve been reading too many Antivan romances, Don Anselmo; rest assured, I’m not here on behalf of either your uncle or your father.” Rafalli set a flat case, covered in faded black velvet, on the table. The outline of a coat of arms could still be faintly discerned, although most of the gold leaf had long since worn away. “I believe the time is right for me to keep the promise I made to your Lady Mother.”

Anselm felt his throat go dry.

“My… my mother?”

Raffali nodded, with an expression of deep sadness.

“When Donna Elizaveta knew she was dying, she sent for me. She wished me to keep this safe for you. She believed, rightly, that she could not trust Don Giulio with such a treasure.” He opened the case. A necklace of sixteen flawless rubies, in settings of rose-diamonds and emeralds, glittered in the candlelight. Anselm stared at it, unable to find words. It was his mother’s wedding necklace, an heirloom of Hasmal’s old Ducal house; passed to his mother from her maternal grandmother,
the last reigning Duchess.

“You… you told my father this was returned to Nevarra…”

Raffali shrugged, allowing Anselm to ponder the gravity of this gift.

“Had I not, he would simply have accused a servant of stealing it. A necessary fiction, I think you’ll agree. Your mother was very weak, but she made me promise I would give this to you when I thought you old enough. She said it was for the woman you loved.”

“For… my… my wife?” Anselm stammered, still trying to grasp what was going on.

Raffali shook his head.

“For the woman you loved. Although I have no doubt, she hoped they would be one and the same.” He closed the case gently and walked over to Anselm, taking his hand. The frightened, lonely, boy he’d watched grow into a wild and uncontrollable youth was turning into a man who might just be capable of realising his grandfather’s dreams of empire. “It was hard for her to speak, but her one regret was leaving you alone. I believe she would be very proud of what you are becoming.”
The Witching Hour

Chapter Summary

The Witching Hour approaches, the death of a saviour. Aleska takes comfort in Cullen's friendship once again, Sophia takes it upon herself to assess Aleska’s condition and Anselm has questions he won't like the answers to which leads to a confession neither of them expected.

The messenger came, his fist pounding against Aleska’s door, stirring her from an all too pleasant sleep. Eyes wide open, her pupils dilating allowing for her to adjust to the darkness of the room. A hand trailed along her abdomen; his moans alerted her that he had not fully woke up. *This had better be important*, Aleska thought, Anselm’s arm lazily slumped over his head as the pounding grew louder.

“If that isn’t someone dying,” Anselm groaned, one hand scrubbing his face. “I am doing to throw someone off the balcony.”

“Let me handle this,” Aleska yawned, her fingers smoothing the knotted ends of her hair.

One arm slipped through the sleeve of her dressing gown, the other half trailed behind her and her feet slipped through her night slippers. Warm and comfortable, just as Sophia promised they would be. *I need to thank her for the gift*, Aleska pondered, knowing that Sophia was a woman who had always been unable to resist a good bargain. The ribbons tightened along her waist, pulling the two pieces of material together; concealing her night shirt.

The door opened, revealing a messenger, beads of sweat ran down his forehead, his breath quick and rapid. *A run up those stairs would do that to anyone*, Aleska waited for the messenger to catch what little breath he could. *Remind me to tell Cullen it could be a new form of punishment for insubordination*, Aleska inwardly mocked—even she was not that cruel.

“I—I—” A wheezed breath left the soldiers mouth. “Your Worship—”

Anselm came up behind her, a glass of water rested within his palm, a hand extended to the soldier who graciously accepted the glass from Anselm, finishing its contents within a single sip. The glass all but fell from his grasp before Anselm took it back.

“Thank you, my Lord.” The soldier lowered his head. “It is Antoine, Your Worship.”

“What about him?” Aleska leaned against the door, crossing her arms. “I am not scheduled to see him until this morning.”

“He might not make it—” the soldier lowered his gaze. “Arcanist Dagna said he requests your presence, my Lady. To be there when last rites are delivered.”

Aleska nodded, a slow exhale escaped her slightly parted lips, her eyes stung as if a thousand tiny needles shoved into her eye sockets. Anselm sat on the bed; his arms crossed, Aleska knew he couldn’t say or refuse the man who saved her his last chance to atone for what he had done in this
life, so he could live in eternal bliss at the Makers side in the next, the soldier relayed the last of 
the request before allowing her to put on something decent and meet the Chantry Sisters and 
Brother to deliver the Last Rites.

“You don’t need to come with me,” Aleska slid the robe off her arms and the nightshirt followed. 
Her body bathed in the moon light only tantalized Anselm more. “Get some more sleep, I’ll be 
back before you know it.”

“It’s all right,” Anselm grumbled, rubbing the back of his neck. “The man did save your life, I just __”

A yawn prevented him from finishing his statement, slumping back in the comfortable mattress. 
His eyelids drooping to the point where he refused to open them again. Aleska shook her head, the 
belt around her waist tightened, allowing her dagger to remain in place. She realized rousing him 
from his sleep would be a chore. Braiding her hair in a simple plait, she tied it neatly to the side of 
her, allowing the ebony curls to fall along her shoulder. A shake of the head forced a smile upon 
her lips as she placed the covers over him.

“I’ll be back before you know it,” Aleska whispered in his ear, a gentle kiss against his cheek.

“No,” Anselm groaned, “just give me five minutes… five minutes.”

His voice trailed off in a deep snore, a small drool patch formed at the base of his chin and onto the 
pillows beneath his cheeks. Aleska drew in a slow breath, he is a monster if woken up before the 
morning sun is up. Tip toeing out of the room, Aleska closed the door behind her, ensuring that the 
sounds would not rouse him from his much-needed sleep.

It was going to be a long day for her—and not even coffee would help her get through it.

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The trail to Antoine’s private quarters had been a long one, she stopped by Cullen’s office, grateful 
he had been awake. From the one corner of Cullen’s office, Aleska noticed the tower illuminated 
by the wall braziers embedded firmly within the wall, the Chantry sisters reciting a prayer for the 
departed. A mug of coffee rested before her, judging from the dark circles beneath his eyes; he had 
not slept either.

“Thank you,” her voice barely a whisper, her hands enveloped the mug, the heat from the coffee 
singed her hands; but it was pleasant on this cold evening.

“Why are you awake?” Cullen perched himself behind his desk. “You aren’t normally about this 
early. Do we need to be concerned?”

“When aren’t you concerned,” Aleska laughed softly, careful not to rouse any of the solders 
catching a small nap below them. “It is just silly that’s all.”

Aleska took a long sip from the mug within her hand, the sweet contents flowed down her throat 
like a river down a mountainside. The subtle tinges of honey danced along her tongue; the taste 
pleasant in the early hours of the morning. Steam rose from the rim of the mug, Aleska seemed lost 
in her own thoughts, the night of Antoine aiding her seemed a vague memory, the remembrance 
sent an all too familiar tremble along her spine.

“Hmm?” Aleska’s attention caught Cullen calling her name. “I’m sorry, I just… was thinking 
about something.”
“All right,” Cullen linked his fingers together, resting them against his desk. “May I ask what is on your mind?”

“You may,” Aleska rose from her seat. “Chances are I won’t tell you.”

“You needn’t hide anything from me,” Cullen’s chair scraped against the cobblestone flooring of his neat office. “Remember what you told me? You should do the same, I will be here should you require someone to talk to—”

Cullen’s statement halted by Aleska’s finger against his lips, he cleared his throat as her hand rested to against her side. A gentle shake of her head reasserted what she said earlier. “You are very sweet to offer Cullen, and I appreciate it, but some things don’t need to be repeated or said.”

“What happened out there?” Cullen folded his arms, “you hadn’t told anyone what happened when you were his captive.”

“Because nothing happened,” Aleska flicked the page across, trying to distract herself from the questions. “He was a decent enough host, no one ever laid a hand on me—”

“Does not mean no one could have come close,” Cullen urged.

“Now you’re sounding like Anselm,” Aleska scoffed. “I proved to Samson, I proved to the world that I am not about to just give up and quit because I was held captive for a few weeks. I returned with barely a scratch on my person, that should be enough for everyone. Why does everyone assume the worst, is it because I am a woman? Or because I am an elf?”

“Forgive me,” Cullen released a slow breath. “I didn’t mean to imply—”

“Just trust me when I said I am fine,” Aleska lowered her gaze. “I didn’t mean to lose my temper, least of all with you; I am just exhausted of people asking me if I am all right, I know you, Sophia, Jonas and Anselm do it out of concern—but if someone asks me one more time, I might not be able to put a smile on my face and pretend I am fine.”

“We are here should you need us,” Cullen took a step forward. “You cannot carry the weight of the world upon your shoulders alone. Allow us to be of some aid to you.”

Aleska shook her head, the anchor crackled beneath her glove, the muscles within her jaw stiffened as the crackling grew louder. Her teeth rubbed against one another and her eyes shut tight. The sensation caused a sharp inhale of the cool mountain air; she could not tell how much more she would endure. Her knees threatened to bring her down to the ground, shrieking in agony. Beads of sweat gathered upon her forehead, she feared her teeth would crack from the pressure of her clenching them.

“Don’t—” Aleska exhaled, the crackling subsided the pain left her body as readily as it came again. “They go away quickly, but when they present themselves. It almost feels as if someone is ripping my hand off; in the most excruciatingly conceivable way they can think of.”

“Your Worship,” The Chantry sister lowered her head. “He is ready to receive you.”

“Thank you, Sister.” Aleska forced a smile, her grip around her wrist loosened. “Duty calls and get some sleep; you look as if you’ve been awake since this all began. Not a good look for you.”

“A good look?” Cullen chuckled. “I hardly concern myself with such things.”

“So, it doesn’t give you a bit of an ego boost?” Aleska prodded, taking a berry off the platter
resting upon his desk.

“I don’t—”

“So, you never hear the whispers?” The berry traced along Aleska’s lower lip. “How your broodiness makes some of the female recruits giggle?”

“I cannot say I have cared much for gossip,” Cullen folded his arms. “They do not giggle at me, do they?”

“I don’t know,” Aleska’s shoulders raised. “The brooding Commander is quite a sexy stance and if I were you… I would use it to your advantage with Sophia. As far as I have heard, she cannot resist it at times—”

“I would never presume—” Cullen’s words caught within his throat. “Does it truly work?”

Aleska winked, popping the berry in her mouth. “Let me put it like this, had Anselm not been as broody as he had been; I wouldn’t have even bothered giving him a second glance. You have a powerful tool, Commander; use it wisely.”

***

The room filled with incense smoke that dangled low along the patrons within the room, Dagna rested beside Aleska as the healers poured a thick purple liquid down Antoine’s throat, to ease the pain of his passing. A weakened hand beckoned her closer, too frail to lift his head properly, the only thing lively had been the Red Lyrium forcing itself out of his skin.

“Inquisitor,” a raspy cough left his lungs, “please… I must ask your forgiveness one last time.”

“You have nothing to apologize for,” Aleska fought the tears stinging at her eyes. “I just wished I could have been there in time to stop this.”

Antoine coughed, blood splattered along Aleska’s collar, the Chantry Sister wiped the residue off his lips; the red dots staining the white material of the handkerchief. His hand took Aleska’s, his skin cold to the touch against her warm palm; a squeeze against her hand told her how the Red Lyrium drained every inch of his life force. His face hollowed out as if some ghoul were lying in his place, holding her hand.

“Please, I couldn’t care for my sister,” Antoine began. “Don’t allow her or her child to become victims of my own stupidity; I know I have no right to ask this of you, but please help her.”

Aleska nodded. “I will do my best,” her hand received a gentle squeeze in thanks, a smile formed as best as his strength would allow in these times.

“Burn my body,” Antoine stated, “destroy the Lyrium, if it infects anyone else—the Inquisition will fall.”

“Infects?” Aleska watched Antoine rest in his pillows. “What do you mean infects?”

No answer came from him, the last breath left his parted lips, his eyes glassed over. Then nothing, no sign of life present in the bed other than her own. Even his hand loosened his grip around hers; the murmuring of the Chantry Sisters caught her attention as they were delivering the prayers to allow the Maker to receive him despite his sins against the natural world. Aleska stood, the bed squeaked from her weight relieves upon the springs. A thin sheet brought up to cover his face, someone had closed his eyes and another sheet over the mirror carefully placed so none of the
glass was visible.

I read about that, an old Rivaini trick to ensure the spirits never enter the mirrors and it can enter its eternal rest. Aleska stepped back, allowing the Chantry Sisters to perform their rights. Aleska’s hands rested upon the battlements, her breathing heavy, the tears stained the battlements beneath her hands. A hand covered her mouth, muffling a sob that had been suppressed for so long. A shuddered breath escaped, only mist flowed out of her mouth as her warm breath connected with the frigid air.

A firm hand on her shoulder, judging by the weight she knew who it was, turning around; her eyes met that Trevelyan green that she had come to know. Jonas’ one arm around her shoulder, pulling her into a tight hug. Her body against his firm chest was not the most comfortable thing she’d experienced. Her tears stained his shirt, he did not seem to care much for it. His beefy hand ran along her back, an attempt to soothe her.

“You okay?” Jonas questioned, looking down at her.

“Yeah,” Aleska stepped back, her hand trailed along her cheek taking the moisture with it. “I need to probably go wake Anselm up, knowing him; he could sleep the day away.”

“Need Cuddles?” Jonas pointed over his shoulder, Cuddles snoring happily in the morning sunshine. “Ain’t no one could wake Ansie up like Cuddles.”

“True, but I have something else in mind.”

“Wha’?” Jonas folded his arms across his massive chest, a brow raised.

“That’s for me to know, and for you to…”

***

Not a single drop spilt, Aleska smiled to herself; the flight of stairs all but exhausted her and she’d been fit. She dreaded to think the Baron had to walk up those stairs. The man would have a blood clot before he reached the fourth flight… I should suggest it to Anselm. A hand rested on the brass door knot, twisting it slowly, hearing the satisfying click of the door unlocking, she swung the door open slowly, careful that it didn’t bang into the wall behind it.

Right where I left him, Aleska placed the mug beside her bed, with Anselm sprawled across her bed; his shirt lying in a crumpled pile beside his night stand. His breathes followed to a deep snore, her hands trailed along his spine; it did little to rouse him from his deepened sleep. He really is out. Aleska placed her hands on the bed, blowing softly against his cheek and laughing as his hand swatted against the invisible air. Aleska muffled a laugh, watching him turn onto his back.

Her teeth captured her lower lip, her eyes glancing at every inch of his abdomen, trailing up to those powerful arms which held her so tight that night. One leg peeked from the covers, resting above them all. The memory surged before her of his leg against hers, feeling every inch of his body pressed against hers. Positioning herself above him, she ensured that if he made any movement she would not have been thrown to the ground. Her hands running along his broad chest, across his firm pectoral muscles.

“Wake up sleepy head,” Aleska said, her tone a soft melody. “Come on, I let you sleep in…”

Aleska’s hands applied pressure, massaging his chest, a soft groan of contentment left him; his hands trailing along her thigh as if his body remembered the feeling of her bare skin beneath his. His eyes remained closed and his hair stayed a mess. Aleska huffed, as she lowered herself, the tip
of her nose barely against his, her warm breath caressing his cheek.

“Come on Anselm,” Aleska urged, her hands running down his arms and along his sides. “Don’t make me use my feminine charms.”

With a swift movement, Aleska found herself on her back, Anselm’s head buried within the crook of her neck, his lips pressed to her bare skin as his hands unlaced her waist coat and pulled the collar of her shirt across her shoulder. Allowing him full access to her chest, his tongue trailed against her sensitive spot; a soft moan escaped as she lifted her head back, her hands trailing along his powerful arms.

“You know how long I waited for that?” Anselm whispered against her skin, inhaling her sweet scent, his hand trailing along her thigh; positioning it around his waist. “You said you’d be back as soon as you were able, that usually means a couple of hours, not almost five.”

“I am sorry,” Aleska groaned, her fingers trailing along his spine. “I didn’t plan it, but the Chantry Sisters wanted to deliver the Last Rites. I didn’t expect it to take so long.”

Anselm looked down at her, his hips moving against hers, a swift inhale told Anselm all he needed to know. “I will forgive you,” Anselm’s lips pressed against her cheeks, trailing along her jawline. “If you agree to bath with me. I want to steal you away for even an hour before you are thrown into a thousand different directions.”

“Well, if that was all it took,” Aleska’s tone intended to tease, her hand wandering down his naval, bumping along the toned muscles, travelling further down until his back arched, a growl followed.

“You’re playing with fire,” Anselm whispered, his fingers unbuttoning her waistcoat, separating the two leather pieces until only the undershirt remained.

His hand trailed up her slender stomach, around her collar and resting behind her neck, lifting her head up to meet his, their lips barely inches apart, his sweet breath smelling of summer wine and fresh strawberries. Anselm rested on his knees, lifting her up into his arms, her legs rested on either side of his hips, looking down at him; her fingers running through his reddish-brown hair; his fingers removed the hair tie; untangling the plait she formed this morning.

“I always loved your hair,” Anselm whispered, running his fingers through each curl, allowing it to rest along her shoulders. “It always framed such a beautiful face.”

“Anselm—” Aleska whispered, fluffing the ends of her hair. “When you first laid eyes on me, my hair was a mess, I had leaves and grass and Creators only knows what else in it.”

“That hardly mattered to me,” Anselm laughed, his fingers running through her hair, pushing her fringe back and exposing her forehead. “If you remember correctly, I smelt worse than one of those latrines you made me dig.”

“Now,” Aleska’s fingers placed against his lips. “I didn’t make you do anything, you did it of your own free will—to win a bet we made when I was angry at you.”

Aleska placed a tender kiss against his forehead, his nose buried within her neck once more; his tongue running along her skin sending a tremble along her spine. His arm across her waist pulling her closer against him, she could feel every inch of him against her.

“I need to ask you something,” Aleska released a slow breath.

“Ask me what ever you like.” Anselm continued to kiss along her bare shoulder.
“Varric told me you’ve been celibate for almost a year,” Aleska’s hands rested upon his shoulders. “I counted back six months since we made the arrangement; it was just after the fall of Haven when Skyhold was in shambles.”

A deep sigh escaped Anselm’s lips, he glanced up at her, placing a tender kiss against her lips. “As I told you before, I have never used my money or status to take a woman against her will, nor would I hold you to something you didn’t feel comfortable in fulfilling. It forced me to re-examine my past, I am not proud of the man I was, I don’t even have a right to call myself a man. Now, I hope to be worthy of you.”

“There is one other thing,” Aleska lay back in the pillows. “I know a man has certain… needs, if they weren’t being fulfilled by a woman; how were they being fulfilled?”

Anselm kissed along her abdomen, his head resting against her hip as his finger trailed the Vallaslin upon her stomach, a small chuckle resounded through her ears, her heartbeat growing louder and louder with each passing moment; his delicate touch forcing her body to tremble at his touch.

“Well, there are other ways,” Anselm looked up at her, his eyes gleaming with mischief. “You know, Mother Cortenzia always said that it would weaken my eye sight, but I feel not only has my grip tightened, but my eyesight might even rival yours.”

“That actually works…?”

“Not as effective as other methods, but it gets the job done.” Anselm climbed on top of her. “Now let’s have that bath?”

“I agree” Aleska laughed softly. “Perhaps I could make it up to you, my poor Fox had to wait for so long and I feel compelled to make up for lost time.” Her fingers travelled lower, pressing at the base of his spine.

“Oh, Sweet Maker!” Anselm growled, pressing his lips against hers in a deep kiss. “Let’s get started.”

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A handkerchief lay scattered against Aleska’s desk, a woman before her, her deep wails reached Aleska’s ears and pierced into her tender heart. Pushing the handkerchief towards her, she accepted it with a mumbled thank you, upon Aleska’s bed, a baby stirred; the child no older than six months waved her hands in the air.

“I—I don’t know what we will do now,” Francesca cried again, biting her nails down to their beds until only blood appeared from the skin. “I will have to give my baby up; it would be a cruel fate to let her starve because of my own stupid mistakes.”

“I am not sure what you mean,” Aleska’s hand touched against the coffee pot, offering her some more of the contents within. “Your baby seems perfectly healthy; she is a beautiful little girl; you’re doing a wonderful job.”

“You don’t understand,” Francesca looked back, frightened to wake up her sleeping child. “Her father… my parents would never accept me back… not now, with my brother gone.”

“You parents?” Aleska narrowed her eyes. “The way Antoine made it sound, it was as if it was just the two of you; he never mentioned any parents.”
There was a quietness that flowed between the two women, Aleska rose from her desk to ensure the baby wouldn’t roll off. She remembered Dario rolling off a cot in his sleep one night, it shocked both Aleska and Kayden, but the shock turned to relief when he woke up smiling at them both; how she missed her nephew. Aleska rearranged the pillows to ensure that they would prevent her falling, sleeping soundly, her gentle cooing warmed Aleska’s heart. A gentle touch against her cheek made the child smile in her sleep. It took only a moment for Aleska to realize why Francesca wouldn’t be accepted back.

“She is elf blooded,” Aleska examined the child’s features, to a human it would be almost oblivious, but to an elf; it would be as clear as day. “Is that why—”

“How did you know?” Francesca moved to sit beside her child, her small finger wrapped around her mothers’ fingers.

“To a human, it would be quite a feat to recognize,” Aleska smiled down. “To an elf, we can detect our own people, even if they are half-blooded. What did you call her?”

“Maerde,” Francesca smiled down at her daughter.

“I promised your brother I would look after both of you,” Aleska placed a hand across Francesca’s wrist. “So it is within my power and right to offer you employment, your brother made mention of several skills you possess and you are more than qualified to pick the position you want; you will receive a steady income and your daughter will be under our protection… from anyone who would harm her.”

“Your Worship,” Francesca was not able to hold her joy. “There are no words to thank you, so perhaps—if you will allow—my eternal servitude would suffice? There are no words to express how much that would help us.”

“I know what it is like,” Aleska looked down at Maerde, “to have your back pressed against a wall, with no hope of it becoming easier. Josephine has already drawn up the contract of your employ, so all that is left now is to pick a place would you like to put your skills to appropriate use, and you can begin tomorrow. Once you have been assigned your quarters and have eaten, I am sure you must be hungry.”

“I think I have the perfect one in mind,” Francesca wiped her tears away. “I would like to be one of your ladies.”

“My ladies?” Aleska raised a brow. “I don’t know what you mean?”

“An attendant? Or handmaiden?” Francesca looked up. “Surely you have heard of them.”

“I have,” Aleska forced a laugh. “Being Dalish, we never had such things, everyone just helped everyone. If that is truly the position you wish; I won’t say no, but only do what you are willing to do, nothing more and nothing left. You may stay up here as long as you like, I have some details I need to attend to.”

Aleska left the room as quietly as she could, careful not to wake Maerde, a smile crossed her lips as memories of Dario being that small flashed before her eyes, how he smelt faintly of fresh forest grass after a long rain, how he cooed every time he saw her, reaching out for her. Until he got too heavy to pick up, then he loved to stomp his little feet in protest. Aleska reached the base of the steps, opening the door to the Great Hall, only to be greeted by various musical instruments being placed before her throne, Josephine being the usual task master.
A quick side step kept Aleska out of Josephine’s view, watching Sophia and Cullen at the breakfast table deep in a conversation. Walking up to them, Aleska greeted the pair with a soft smile. Her hand hovered over an apple upon the platter, only to remove it as the memory of the last time surged, since then she was unable to look at apples the same way again.

“How did you sleep?” Sophia offered her a piece of her cinnamon apple, noticing her hesitance.

“I didn’t,” Aleska accepted the gesture. “Well not for long anyway, I was woken up this morning.”

“Right,” Sophia nodded, filling an empty mug with one of her speciality teas and offering it to Aleska. “I am sorry about that, he seemed like such a sweet boy, to suffer such a horrible fate.”

Aleska nodded, placing a teaspoon of honey in the porcelain mug, stirring the liquid within the tea, a small clink against Sophia’s mug told both women they hadn’t spent as much time together, Aleska sat beside Sophia, accepting the plate she had offered her. A fresh poached egg rested in a small ceramic cup against the plate, bacon decorated the lower half of the cup and three slices of toast against that. Aleska finished the plate within the blink of an eye, wiping the oil off her lips.

A fresh bowl of oatmeal had been pushed towards her, drizzled with fresh honey and cinnamon, Aleska dipped her spoon in the warm porridge. The spoon scraped against the ceramic before Sophia even finished her cup of tea. Aleska glanced up, using her tongue to ensure no residue had been left in her teeth.

“Hungry, aren’t we?” Sophia jested, offering her the plate of fruit she neatly cut up, drizzling some sweet syrup over the top.

“I don’t know what is going on, my back is aching, other things are happening which I think would make Cullen choke on his coffee if I dared mention them. I think it is those damn stairs, walking up almost eight flights of them has me heaving.”

“Aleska, when was your last cycle?” Sophia dropped her voice to a whisper, watching Aleska shrug and push a third plate away from her.

“I don’t know,” Aleska wiped the edge of her mouth. “But Solas said the anchor messes with my physiology and it could be an unwelcomed side effect, I haven’t been keeping track. Now if you will both excuse me; I must go put in a requisition. Commander, prepare the chess board, we haven’t had a match in a while, and I feel I am becoming too rusty.”

Aleska left Cullen and Sophia to finish what was left of their breakfast, Cullen’s eyes never left his report as Sophia poured herself another cup of tea, he shifted his gaze upwards for a moment, noticing the look upon her face.

“I know that look,” Cullen placed his reports down, “what is troubling you?”

“Nothing is troubling me,” Sophia took a sip of her tea. “But I am concerned for her, increased appetite, tiredness, aching back… other things. I know that those two have been quite… active but being safe was never at the top of Anselm’s list.”

“I am sure it was not,” Cullen jested, taking a sip of the coffee. “What are you suggesting?”

“Nothing,” Sophia shook her head. “The anchor could be the cause of it; of course, there’s always the chance—”

“Chance of what?”
“She might be pregnant.”

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The Requisition officer gazed at Aleska, the paper resting between his fingers, the request before him as clear as day. Still the baffling look he gave her wondered if she was joking or being serious. Handing the paper to his assistant, the assistant began to measure out the planks of wood required. The officer rested against his table, unable to find the correct words to phrase this.

“Yes, Your Worship,” he began, not wanting to offend her. “Surely the carpenters in Val Royeaux would have seen to this with the efficiency required. We make weapons, armours, tents… this is unorthodox.”

“Of course I could have contracted anyone from the Waking Sea to Ostwick for this request, but I would prefer it to remain within the Inquisition if at all possible, the enquiries alone would be too taxing on us in such a fragile state of our authority.”

“Enquiries?” The Officer scrubbed his hand along his face, conceiting defeat. “We shall have it ready by this afternoon, Your Worship.”

“Thank you,” Aleska smiled. “That is all I ask, and if you can keep your opinions among yourselves please, I would appreciate it. No one needs to know.”

A lowered head told her that her request would have been seen to, walking into the sunshine, Aleska rested against the wall, her hand across her stomach as a sensation of nausea overtook her. A hand placed across her mouth as one of the nurses from the infirmary brought her a bucked and helped her to a bench in the shade.

“Yes, thank you,” Aleska pushed the bucket away. “Just not feeling well. I think I need to lie down.”

The nurse nodded, beckoning a colleague closer who carried a small packet of ginger root. The packet placed in Aleska’s hands, with careful instructions on how to brew it so that the symptoms would ease themselves. Shoving the packet in her pocket, Aleska ensured it wouldn’t fall out. The training grounds filled with the new recruits and Anselm barking orders in all his splendour. Aleska winked at him as she walked past, making her way up the stairs and towards the Great Hall.

Soft chiming music soon flowed towards her, a beat she hadn’t heard of before, walking closer towards the music, Aleska noticed Josephine had the orchestra strumming various songs from a list—that Aleska only assumed—she received from the composer on the Winter Palace. She came to rest beside Sophia and Cullen, who stopped to watch the musicians play. Aleska found her hips swaying to the beat, the fast pace and rhythmic tones told her the song had been from Nevarra or Rivain.

A hand pulled her into his grasp, his arm now firmly around her waist as the gleam with in his green eyes flowed with mischief. “Now follow my lead, My Lady.”

Aleska laughed as Anselm spun her around, before dipping her low enough that her head almost touched the carpets. His hand trailed up her waist and rested behind her neck before he lifted her up again, spinning her around in his arms, the only reason she had not landed flat on her back had been because he would not allow it. Those powerful arms used as he held her and balanced his weight and hers with an effortless rhythm which could only be achieved through years of training with a
dance master.

“That was,” Aleska caught her breath. “Where did you learn how to dance? Wait… stupid question.”

“I waited all day to do that,” Anselm laughed, taking her hands in his. “I should probably let the Old Man have fun with his recruits now. I oddly feel like taking a nap.”

“I might join you,” Aleska yawned, “I didn’t sleep at all last night, felt too nauseated.”

“Anselm,” Sophia touched his arm. “Might I have a word with you? Aleska can go on, he will be with you in a moment.”

“All right,” Aleska yawned. “Cullen, we’ll need to reschedule, I just need to lie down.”

“Not to worry,” Cullen smiled softly for once. “I understand how exhausted you must be feeling.”

Aleska raised a brow, on any other day she would have called the Commander out on sassing her, but on this day, she hardly was unable to manage the strength to climb up all those steps. Walking towards the doorway, Aleska took in a deep breath to muster the strength to climb each one of those steps. I need to move; I could offer Cullen my quarters and take someone else’s. I am sure he would love the open space, not the stairs.

Aleska reached the top of the steps, unable to breathe properly, her chest felt heavy and her heart thudded within her ribs. Josephine caught her half way and told her they would be leaving tonight for Halamshrial as the Empress has extended her invitation for them to stay at the Winter Palace, Josephine would not hesitate at such an opportunity. Aleska noticed her skipping down the steps, shaking her head wondering where her ambassador found the energy to do that.

The empty room told her that Francesca had already been assigned new quarters and had settled in for a night’s rest. Aleska flopped down on the bed, hugging the pillow against her body, enjoying a few moments of peace and quiet, the matrass compressed soon enough as another body joined her. A pillow collided with her face, gentle enough to not hurt her, but firm enough to be able to wake her up.

“You promised,” Anselm folded his arms. “No more secrets and this secret is a big one.”

“What are you talking about?” Aleska groaned, sitting up.

“You’re sleeping more than usual, eating more than usual, your back is aching. Maker… I should have been more careful.”

Aleska rubbed her eyes, the sleep which manifested within them had long wiped away. The sun had set, and she was unclear how long she had been asleep for, Aleska looked at Anselm; caught between a moment of joy and a moment of annoyance. What in the Void is he on about? Aleska picked up her pillow, retaliating with smacking his arm in the similar playful manor which he had done to her.

“Now we’re even,” Aleska stated, leaning back against the pillows that he skilfully placed behind her back. “Care to tell me what that was about?”

“I heard about the requisition you placed,” Anselm sighed. “The baby crib, I think I would have a right to know about your… condition.”

“What are you on about?” Aleska narrowed her eyes. “Between Sophia shoving platters of food in
my face and you now—wait, you think I am pregnant?”

“Sophia told me; the requisitions officer was caught mumbling to himself as his workmen delivered the crib this afternoon.”

“You’re thick!” Aleska huffed. “I am not pregnant, the crib was for Antoine’s sister; she has a six-month-old baby who needs one, I have been eating more because the anchor can either take away my appetite or give me one. As for my bleeding… I have not bled for a year, what kind of conception lasts that long? Elves are magical… but not that magical. Why are you so annoyed? Do you even want kids?”

“I don’t know… maybe one day, I’ve been thinking about it—would it be so bad to have a child one day? The thought of you, with my child, made me happy; happier than I have been in Maker knows when.”

Thwack, thwack, thwack, the pillow collided with his arm and he retaliated, Aleska ended up on her back, with Anselm holding her hands above her head, pressing his lips firmly against hers. His eyes peering into hers, she smiled up at him.

“I never thought about the future after this, I didn’t think I had one; but if I were to have anyone’s babies… I would want to have yours.”

Anselm kissed along her jawline, they wouldn’t have been needed downstairs for a few more hours and both of them intended to make the most of it—in what ever way they saw fit.
The Hunter and the Hunted

Chapter by Lannister418

Chapter Summary

Aleska and her party arrive at the Winter Palace to hunt the assassins threatening the life of Empress Celene; but the politics playing out in the ballroom may prove to be more significant than anything happening behind the scenes. As she hunts for clues away from the prying eyes of the court, Aleska encounters a new player; one who is not yet ready to reveal all her cards...

“It’s all about the eyes, darling; they have to glitter, to captivate, to fascinate…” Vivienne put down the make-up brush and took Aleska’s chin delicately in her hand, turning her face to left and right so she could judge the effect. “See what it looks like with the mask.”

Aleska picked up the mask she’d chosen for the evening, a delicate tracery of stiffened black lace set with tiny rubies, holding it to her face. Against the dark material, and the rich viridian green of the mascara, her kohl-rimmed eyes shimmered in the candlelight.

“It’s beautiful.” She said. “But isn’t it a bit… strong?”

Vivienne laughed.

“My dear, most of the court will be wearing more layers of paint than the Grand Cathedral. They’re half expecting you to turn up barefoot, dressed in hides and feathers; you can afford a few touches of boldness.”

Aleska glanced over to the gown she’d chosen for the ball, carefully laid out on the bed until her hair and make-up were completed.

“I’m not being too bold, am I?”

It wasn’t the style, though that was daring enough—sleek and low cut, hugging her figure but without the full skirts or tight bodicing currently fashionable at the Imperial court, and the skirt discreetly slit to just above her knee; enough to give her the freedom of movement she needed, should anything more than dancing be required tonight—it was the colour; a rich, deep, scarlet—the shade sometimes referred to as ‘Trevelyan Red’.

She’d chosen it deliberately, as a compliment to Anselm and a defiant gesture towards the gossips; but, as they prepared to depart for the Winter Palace, that treacherous little voice inside her whispered that it was—perhaps—too defiant.

“Just bold enough—” Vivienne assured her. “We don’t want to risk out-dressing royalty, do we?”

“I’ve always thought of that as more of a guideline than a rule…”

Both women turned as Sophia swept into the room and Aleska caught her breath in delighted surprise. She’d seen her friend in formal dress before, during receptions at Skyhold, but nothing like this; full skirts of Vyrantium samite, embroidered with roses and seed-pearls, looped back to
show petticoats heavy with gold embroidery.

The rose design crept up and around the bodice; cut as low as Aleska’s gown, leaving her shoulders and arms completely bare. A matching tricorn hat perched jauntily on top of her elaborately curled hair; one heavy lock artfully arranged to fall across her shoulder and breast.

“You’re royalty, you can afford to think that, I on the other hand—”’’ Aleska laughed, getting up and taking Sophia’s hands, admiring her dress. “You do realise Cullen is going to choke when he sees you?”

Sophia gave her a wicked little smile.

“I certainly hope so; it’ll be a pleasant change from his constant grumbling about the ball.” She stepped back, tilting her head to get a better look at Aleska’s hair. “That’s beautiful. Is that a Dalish fashion?”

“I think seeing you dressed like this, might just pull him out of that grumpy mood he’s been in all week.” Aleska laughed, fixing a loose strand which brushed against her face. It was her favourite style for festivals back home with the clan; a series of loose braids pulling her hair up and back to tumble freely down her back, emphasising the curves of her neck and shoulders. “Some City Elves dress their hair like this; but it’s more of a Dalish style. I needed something to remind myself, and them, of who and what I am; not that they’re likely to forget it.”

“It’s perfect; you need to show me how to do it.” Sophia said, reaching into the velvet pouch she had with her. “I thought you might like to borrow this for the evening?”

She held out a silver hairpin, the handle set with diamonds in the shape of a bird in flight. With its outstretched wings it looked like a falcon, or a hawk. Aleska hesitated for a moment, then made up her mind. The hawk was a symbol of Andruil, goddess of the hunt; regardless of whether Sophia knew this, it was a good omen.

“Thank you—”’’ she said; fixing it in her hair and turning to the mirror, admiring the way the diamonds stood out against her black curls. “I’ll take good care of it.”

“Bloody Hell, Josie… stop fussing!” Jonas huffed. “I been to a ball before; ain’t like I’m gonna be standing there, wiping me nose on me sleeve and scratching me bollocks in front of the Empress!”

“Well just… remember that every eye is going to be on the Inquisition members; and try not to eat everything at once.” Josephine said, nervously adjusting his sash before hurrying off to the next task on her list.

“She ain’t normally this bad…” Jonas muttered to Anselm as he poured them both a shot of brandy. “What’s got into her?”

Anselm chuckled quietly, for the last hour alone, Josephine had run about between the quarters resembling a chicken without a head. Faffing about the smallest detail; he admitted to it getting on his last nerve, that was when the alcohol came out.

“I caught a look at the guest list. It appears that Lady Josephine isn’t the only Montiliyet attending the ball. Do you remember Yvette?”

Jonas frowned in thought for a moment, then a look of horror slowly crept across his face.
“Ain’t she the one who wanted me to pose in the… you know… *the altogether*?”

Anselm nodded, still chuckling.

“The very one! Although I don’t imagine she’ll have her sketchbook tonight, so you should be safe.”

“We might as well be in the… altogether—” Cullen muttered; tugging irritably at the hem of his waistcoat, as if he could somehow lengthen it by several inches. “This is… not what I was expecting.”

Anselm shrugged, winking at Dorian as he refilled their glasses.

“As I recall, Josephine asked you for your thoughts on dress uniforms and you just muttered something about ‘steel being good enough’. You can’t blame her for asking advice of the more sartorially literate!”

He took a sip of his brandy, clearly enjoying the Commander’s discomfort. Cullen simply glared.

“I should have guessed you’d have some responsibility for… for this!” He gestured at the cutaway coat and tight-fitting buckskin breeches he was wearing. “I look like some kind of…”

“Pampered pipsqueak?” Anselm suggested with a sly smile, earning another hard stare.

“Well I think we all look perfectly splendid…” Dorian said, smirking a little as he toyed with the fringe of his coat and cast an appraising glance over the company. “And no-one could accuse the Inquisition of not being well equipped to handle the evening.”

He clinked glasses with Anselm as the Commander tugged even more sharply at his waistcoat.

“I’m glad you all find this so amusing…” He growled. “…but we’re here to stop the assassination of the Empress.”

“Which we will, my dear Commander—” Vivienne interjected as she descended the stairs with Sophia at her side. “But we’ll not win the favour of the court if we appear as unlettered bumpkins.”

“What do you think?” Sophia asked, turning gracefully to show off the flare of her skirts. “Not too ‘provincial’, I hope?”

Anselm laughed, stepping forward and kissing her hand with a formal bow.

“These ruffled Orlesian prigs are about to get a lesson in style they’ll never forget… now matter how hard they try!”

Cullen felt Jonas’ elbow jab him in the ribs.

“Say somethin’, yah bloody idiot!” He muttered. “Don’t just stand there with your mouth open, like yer catchin’ flies!”

Cullen cleared his throat nervously.

“Lady Sophia; I must admit you are looking… very… very nice this evening.”

“Why, thank you Commander Cullen!” Sophia smiled with a dainty curtsey, snapping her fan open with a flick of her wrist. “You look rather dashing as well. Josephine’s right, we should get you out of that armour more often.”
Behind the curtain at the top of the stairs, Aleska bit down on her knuckle to stop herself laughing out loud as the Commander turned almost the same shade of crimson as her gown. Once she’d composed herself, she stepped out onto the landing, striking a regal and commanding pose before descending. She saw Anselm setting down his glass with a look of awe on his face and slowly approaching. As she reached the foot of the stairs, he dropped to one knee and extended his arm.

“My Lady Inquisitor; will you do me the honour of permitting me to escort you to your carriage?”

She took his outstretched hand and gestured for him to rise, even though she’d expected his reaction to be somewhat over the top, the thought of his courtesy made her blush. Even Bull stepped forward, his jaw hung open.

“Boss, you look—”

The compliments Aleska dreaded came from each of them, she desperately wanted to hide her face within Anselm’s chest until the blushing subsided. A small groan left her lips as she’d realized she hadn’t answered Anselm’s question.

“Perhaps… if you would do me the courtesy of pouring me a drink first? I fear I am going to need it.”

“As My Lady commands…” He raised her hand to his lips, and they lingered there for a moment before he leaned in and whispered in her ear. “You look more beautiful that I’d ever imagined, although I cannot promise you that gown will survive the evening intact…”

“Why, Ser Anselm!” She murmured back with false surprise. “I thought you a perfect gentleman!”

He gave her a discreet wink; kissing her hand again.

“Only when you desire me to be such… My Lady…”

He’d foregone dress uniform in favour of an outfit of his own devising, Aleska noted; a high-collared swallowtail coat of russet-brown brocade trimmed with gold lace, over a waistcoat of cream and gold. A bright scarlet sash about his waist added a vibrant burst of colour and drew her eyes downward to his tight-fitting white buckskin breeches.

Doubtless that was the intended effect… Aleska thought with a smile. According to rumour, young dandies would often dampen their breeches slightly before putting them on – so they would shrink to fit as they dried.

“I see you’ve decided to make your own mark on the evening.” She said, as he handed her a glass of wine. “As your Inquisitor, I should probably disapprove…”

“I did warn you I have a tendency to be insubordinate.” He reminded her with a quiet smirk, “but I also thought the jest might amuse.”

He produced the eerily life-like fox-mask he’d chosen and held it up to his face. His bright green eyes glittered through the eye-holes and Aleska could have sworn she saw the ears twitch.

“The fox pursues the hunters… clever.” She said, taking the ribbons, and tying it in place. “I wonder if they’ll get the joke as well?”

“If not, I’m sure they’ll get the point.” He replied, with a wicked smile.

“I’d be happier if we had weapons to hand.” Cullen muttered, half to himself. He could have coped
without armour if he had his sword by his side; lacking both, it felt like he may as well be wandering around in his drawers.

“Only the Imperial Guard are permitted to bear weapons in the Winter Palace.” Leliana reminded him as she entered the salon, a message in her hand. “Not even the Grand Duke will be wearing a sword tonight. Don’t worry, I’ve arranged for your weapons to be on hand; should they be needed.”

She walked over to Aleksa, handing her the message.

“A word in private, Inquisitor?”

As Aleska and Leliana withdrew to an antechamber, Anselm strolled over to where Cullen stood; still adjusting his coat and muttering irritably to himself.

“While we have the time, Old Man, there’s something I’d like to discuss with you before you; in private, if you don’t mind?”

“I doubt it makes any difference whether I mind or not.” Cullen growled as he followed Anselm out onto the terrace. “If this is one of your stupid games, I should warn you I’m not in the mood…”

Anselm leaned on the balustrade; looking out of the gardens and inhaling the heavy aroma of cherry-blossom permeating the air. It was a sultry evening, typical of spring in this part of Orlais, and a faint haze hung over the mountains surrounding the city. He lit a cigar and turned to face Cullen who stood, arms folded, scowling at him.

“I’m sure you practise that damn look in the mirror,” he laughed, blowing out a mouthful of smoke.

“It just comes naturally to me whenever I have to deal with you.” Cullen snapped back. “If you have something to say, I would prefer you just came out with it!”

Anselm took a long draw on his cigar; the red glow of the tip causing his mask to look even more unsettlingly realistic.

“Something my father said, during our heart-to-heart at Skyhold, has been sticking in my mind. I thought perhaps you might be able to clear it up for me?”

He noted the slight shift in the Commander’s position, and the tensing of the muscles along his jaw.

“I’m not exactly privy to your father’s innermost thoughts.” Cullen said carefully, sensing the direction the conversation was heading. “Nor do I have the ability to read minds.”

Anselm took another draw on his cigar, savouring the sharp tang of the smoke in his mouth as much as he savoured the Commander’s growing discomfort.

“That would be a useful skill.” He admitted, nodding quietly for a moment. “Pa made his usual pithy observations regarding his attitude to me and the rest of the family; but it was what he said about Sophia that really made me want to smack him. Something about her ‘shaming herself with a peasant-born Templar.’ His words… not mine…”

He paused, observing the way Cullen’s fists clenched a little tighter, before continuing.

“At first I thought he was referring to Ser Guenther…” He tapped the ash off his cigar and looked
Cullen directly in the eyes. “But he was talking about you, wasn’t he?”

Cullen took a step forward, his scowl deepening into an angry glare.

“There is nothing… shameful… between me and Lady Sophia; and if you are suggesting…”

Anselm held up his hand, shaking his head with.

“I’m suggesting nothing. Sophia’s an intelligent, mature, woman who knows her own mind; and I don’t intend to give some clichéd speech about ‘if you hurt her, I’ll kill you…””

“Thank you for sparing me that embarrassment…” Cullen muttered, then took another step forward; fixing Anselm with a steady look. “I may not be some glib-tongued dandy, but my feelings for Lady Sophia are genuine; and they are reciprocated. If you intend to make trouble over that or turn this into some new joke at my expense; I recommend you think very carefully about it first.”

Anselm drew on his cigar again and exhaled slowly.

“Sophia seems happy; I suppose I can tolerate you for that reason.” This admission gained a disdainful grunt from Cullen and Anselm laughed quietly. “She likes sugared almonds; the ones from *Patisserie Hubert* are her favourites…”

Cullen gave him a surprised look.

“I… Thank you…”

Anselm chuckled, grinding out the glowing stub on the balustrade.

“I’m doing this for her, Old Man; and we probably ought to get back before they think I’ve knocked you on the head and buried you under the hydrangeas!”

###

Aleksa gazed out of the window at the lamps hanging from the trees as their carriages rolled slowly along the avenue leading to the gates of the Winter Palace. Here, in the High Quarter where the nobles of Orlais had their villas, there was no sign this had once been an Elven City; the place where her ancestors sought to reclaim the lost glories of Arlathan and—for too brief a time—succeeded. Now she was charged with trying to save the descendants of the very people who had tried to destroy her own.

This was a twisted jest worthy of the Dread Wolf himself. Aleksa rested her chin on her hand, pondering the news Leliana had brought before they left; wondering whether this mysterious apostate at the Empress’ side would prove an ally, or another in their list of enemies. According to the spymistress the woman was ruthless, cunning and a powerful mage with an agenda of her own, skilled in ancient and forbidden magics.

*Forbidden by the Chantry, perhaps…* Aleksa thought, sensing a hint of personal bitterness in Leliana’s catalogue of the dangers this Morrigan might present. Whatever Celene’s new ‘occult adviser’ intended, she was yet another unknown factor in the maze of intrigue they were riding into. She was so deep in thought that it barely registered when Anselm took her hand and gave it a gentle squeeze.

“This is a foolish question, I know, but… how are you feeling?”
Aleska leaned back against the seat cushions with a heavy sigh and turned to look at him. It was a foolish question, true, but better than any expression of sympathy. No human, no matter how well disposed, could ever fully grasp what the Elves had lost here.

“Do you know what *Halam Shiral* really means?” She asked, using the old pronunciation her father taught her.

“I was told it means ‘Journey’s End.’” He replied, dubiously, his thumb softly running along her knuckles.

“That’s only the modern meaning.” She told him. “Originally it was more like ‘A Place to Find Rest’ or even ‘A Place of Peace’. The tales say Andraste promised it to Shartan to be forever home for the Elves. That promise was honoured for barely four hundred years.”

Anselm gave a cynical snort of laughter.

“I’ve noticed men rarely let a Prophet get in the way of profits. From what I can remember of my history lessons, which isn’t much, it sounds like the Orlesians shat themselves when they realised, they were losing and so the Divine pulled out the big stick.”

“That’s one way of putting it.” Aleska said, with a dry smile. “And now I have to pull them out of a mess of their own making. If it wasn’t for Corypheus, I’d happily watch the Winter Palace burn with every single Valmont inside.”

Anselm raised her fingers to her lips with a wicked grin.

“Once Corypheus is dealt with I’ll lock the doors myself and hand you the torch. We’d be doing everyone a favour.”

Aleska laughed and drew him in for a kiss, slow at first, the slit in her dress helped in allowing her legs free movement, with a single movement, she straddled him; closing the curtains of the carriage, allowing them a small moment to themselves.

“Don’t let Josephine hear you say that! If she gets wound up any tighter, I’m afraid she’ll snap.”

Aleska’s finger trailed across his lower lip, smiling down at him.

“She’s only happy when she has something to worry about…” He sighed deeply and kissed her again. “Maker, you look so beautiful tonight…”

Aleska ran the palm of her hand over the skirt of her gown, feeling a sudden sharp apprehension rising up within her. Moving back into her original position beside him, glancing through the crack within the curtain.

“Your uncle… he’s not going to take offence at this is he? I could do without any more enemies here tonight…”

Anselm stroked her cheek with a reassuring smile.

“By the end of the night they’ll be toasting us as the saviours of the Empire… or… the halls of the Winter Palace will be awash with royal blood. Either way, I doubt the colour of your dress is going to worry him that much.”

Aleska laughed, giving him a playful nudge.
“You’ve got a very strange way of setting my mind at ease…”

“I do what I must…” Anselm chuckled. They both felt the carriage give a slight lurch and begin to slow down as it passed through the gates of the palace forecourt and he took a deep breath. “Well! Here we are… for better or worse.”

###

The butt of the herald’s staff knocked three times against the parquet floor.

“Announcing His Highness, the Grand Duke Gaspard; Duc de Chalons and Grand Chevalier of the Empire. Accompanying him, Her Worship the Lady Inquisitor Valeska Ravenna of the Clan Lavellan; Vanquisher of the Rebel Mages…”

*Orlesians love their titles*… Aleska thought, smiling inwardly as her own list of honorifics lasted several seconds longer than the Grand Duke’s. Empress Celene was clearly intent on sending a signal to her rebel cousin. She could feel the eyes on her without bothering to look, sensing the intense whispering behind masks and fans. No Elf, and certainly none of the wild Dalish, had ever entered the Grand Ballroom as anything other than a servant before; let alone been formally presented to the Orlesian monarch.

Keeping her gaze fixed on the distant figure of the Empress, regal and solitary in the gallery at the far end of the ballroom, she descended the steps beside the Grand Duke; matching her pace with his and resting her hand gently on his arm. Behind her, she heard the herald striking the floor again.

“Announcing the Most Noble Donna Sophia Mafalda Castrovita Trevelyan di Travaliani of Ostwick; Knight Enchanter of the Order of the Sword of Mercy, formerly Senior Enchanter of the Ostwick Circle of Magi. Accompanying her, Ser Cullen Stanton Rutherford of Honnleath; Commander of the Inquisition, formerly Acting Knight-Commander of the Templar Order in Kirkwall…”

Aleska bit back a laugh as she drew closer to the Empress.

*Stanton? He hid that one well…*

The buzz of whispering beneath the music intensified slightly as Anselm was announced with Vivienne on his arm. From the corner of her eye, Aleska noticed a few fans fluttering more vigorously. The reputation of ‘the Noble Don Anselmo Guillaime Montecaballo Trevelyan di Tresaquae of Ostwick; Knight-Lieutenant of the Inquisition…’ obviously proceeded him. No doubt some of the noble ladies of the court would be more than happy to join his list of conquests; yet another challenge to the composure that Josephine kept emphasising she had to maintain.

Aleska took a deep breath, concentrating on executing a perfect curtsey as she was presented to the Empress Celene.

“My Lady Inquisitor; it is such a pleasure to finally meet you, we have heard so much of your endeavours…” The Empress’ voice was pleasant and well-modulated, but there was no mistaking the quiet authority it carried. Her eyes were bright and astute behind the ornately jewelled mask and she carried herself with an air of calm confidence. “We trust you find everything here to your liking?”

“I have no words to properly express the graciousness of your Majesty’s welcome.” Aleska replied with equal poise. “I hope the Inquisition’s endeavours continue to find favour in your eyes.”
The Empress responded with the faintest of smiles.

“Your hunt for the murderers of Our beloved Divine Justinia could find nothing but favour with Us…” The Empress’ eyes flickered briefly to the gallery on her right. “Your gown is quite lovely; a complement to Our other guest of honour, perhaps?”

Aleska gave a courteous bow of her head to Count Boniface, resplendent in scarlet and gold, standing beside the Countess Catarina and his brother. The Count and Countess acknowledged her greeting with graceful nods, while the Baron’s sour grimace might have been an attempt at a forced smile.

“His Excellency of Ostwick knows the esteem in which I hold his house, and my respect for his accomplishments as a statesman.”

“A respect We share…” Empress Celene replied, favouring Aleska with another smile. “We shall talk more later, My Lady Inquisitor; in the meantime, please enjoy the ball.”

“You handled yourself well.” Gaspard murmured in her ear as they left the floor. “Carry on like that, and you’ll have the whole court eating out of your hand.”

“I appreciate Your Grace’s confidence in me…” Aleska replied pleasantly; it was high praise from a man known to consider her people little better than animals.

This is the essence of the Game, I suppose. ‘Playing nice’ with the people you’d gladly see bleeding at your feet.

“You’re the sensation of the hour; I trust you can use that to both our advantages tonight.” He gave her a formal bow. “If you will excuse me, Lady Aleska, I have some business to attend to. I will be on the South Balcony later if you need to speak to me.”

Aleska let out a slow breath as the Grand Duke walked away, her heart pounding. She’d crossed the first hurdle but there was still a long race to run and plenty of chances to stumble.

“You were magnificent…” Anselm took her hand and kissed it as he joined her. “I knew you would be, now all of them are going to be scuttling about trying to work out if the Empress wants them to be nice to you or not.”

“This is just the beginning…” Aleska said, hoping she was projecting as much confidence as he appeared to be feeling. “And you do know everyone is watching us?”

Anselm gave her a discreet wink, kissing her hand again. Taking two wine glasses off the tray and handing one to her.

“Let them… they’ll know we’re not such an easy target as they might hope.”

Aleska laughed quietly, sipping the wine, her eyes glancing over each nobleman, not a one bothered to take much note of anything else than Anselm standing beside her, whispers had already begun about their bold statements.

“It sounds like you have a strategy in mind…?” Aleska inquired, trying to force herself to focus on the matters at hand.

“Flirtatious wives have a tendency to let slip secrets…” he chuckled. “For once, my reputation might actually be to our benefit. What about you?”
Aleska glanced in the direction of an Elf in servant’s livery, carrying a tray of drinks and sauntering over to them. Placing the empty wine glasses upon the tray and picking up two full ones.

“I suspect I’ll have a better chance with the servants. I doubt a human would get anything useful out of them.” She gave Anselm a cautionary look, ensuring the servant had been out of ear shot.

“This one time, your reputation needs to excel itself; I need as much information as these bored nobles are willing to give. Do what you do best, just try not to get involved in any duels; at least, not until we’re officially the Saviours of Orlais.”

Anselm gave a throaty chuckle, adjusting his mask.

“I shall be on my best behaviour. Let the hunt begin!”

###

Leliana might find a use for this...

Aleska carefully folded the letter and slipped it into the concealed pocket inside the lining of her gown; briefly wondering about the nature of the weapon that it referred to, and why it made Gaspard consider the ‘Ambassador’ Briala such a threat.

She had yet to meet the woman reputed to be Empress Celene’s former lover but was certain it was her handiwork she was looking at. None of the bodies in this concealed room had been dead for more than an hour; probably less judging by their lividity. Missing servants, a Council of Heralds emissary gone astray and now this. There was mischief afoot behind the scenes of the ball; but whether one player was responsible, or many, still had to be determined.

She closed the door behind her and moved swiftly along the balcony, careful to keep out of sight of the guests in the garden below, until she reached the doors of the Imperial Library. The led her into a small vestibule; decorated with the memorial urns of previous emperors. A tall bookcase stood against one wall and something about it attracted Aleska’s attention. Closer examination revealed a hidden doorway, opening into a secret side-chamber lit by a pale glow she recognised as veil fire.

There were no signs of traps, magical or otherwise, and she stepped carefully inside. The room was small and well organised; the walls lined with bookshelves, and cabinets containing magical artefacts. Much of the floorspace was taken up by a large desk, its surface covered with charts and diagrams that Aleska couldn’t even begin to comprehend although some were written in Elven. Among the papers lay a brief note, signed by the Empress, confirming Aleska’s suspicion she was in the lair of this new adviser Leliana warned her about. She laid it back down; there was no new information she could glean here, and the room didn’t appear any different from how she’d imagined a Mage’s study would look. As she turned to go, something in the furthest corner caught her eye; a tall mirror, half-covered by a thin black veil. The frame appeared to have been repaired many times but was unmistakably Elven in origin; and very, very old.

Aleska reached out to pull off the veil and take a better look but suddenly stopped, slowly withdrawing her hand. She’d heard tales of the mirrors of Arlathan; the means by which the Ancient Elves communicated across their vast empire and entered strange spaces belonging to neither this world nor the Beyond. There were even rumours that one had been brought to the Free Marches from the furthest reaches of the old Brecilian forest and had eventually found its way to the city of Kirkwall; some of the clan whispered that the mirror was cursed, bringing disaster to all who touched it, and the source of the catastrophes which had befallen the city. Just the sort of thing a cunning sorceress might place in her chamber as a trap for the unwary, or overly curious.
She stepped away carefully, leaving the mirror to keep its own secrets. In the distance she could hear a clock chiming and she closed the door to the hidden chamber behind her. It wasn’t wise to be absent from the ball for too long; tongues would begin to wag. Aleska made her way quickly through the dark, silent, library and easily found the doors leading to the state apartments. The landing onto which they opened was dimly lit, although she could hear music and conversation drifting up from the Vestibule, and she paused to dust a cobweb from her shoulder.

“Well, well, what have we here…?” Aleska turned sharply as the woman descended the stairs from the upper floors, slowly emerging into the light as her high-heeled boots tapped on the marble. “A daughter of the Dales; acclaimed as Andraste’s Herald and feted by the Imperial Court. These are indeed curious times…”

The woman’s voice was strong yet pleasant, and it sounded as if she was enjoying some private joke; or at least appreciating the irony of Aleska’s situation. Her black hair was loosely pinned up, displaying the curve of her neck and her finely arched cheekbones; despite her jewellery, and the opulent gown of gold-embroidered black and purple there was a feeling of wildness about her – and of danger, although she seemed to be posing no immediate threat. She continued speaking in an archaic, almost hypnotic rhythm.

“…and she has been so very busy; hunting in all the dark corners. How much has she learned, I ask myself, in this palace of secrets?”

“Enough to know there are many more to uncover; not all of them hidden behind secret doors.”

The woman laughed; a rich, contralto, sound

“Indeed! But nothing is truly hidden from those who have the knowledge where to look… although sometimes wisdom lies in knowing when to resist the urge to look.” She extended her hand with an almost engaging smile. “I am Morrigan, some call me Arcane Adviser to Empress Celene, and it would be inadvisable to keep the court waiting for too long. Would it be too much of a scandal for you if we walked down together?”

“I doubt I could be the object of much more scandal if I danced naked on the tables…” Aleska said as she took Morrigan’s arm and they began to walk down the stairs. “Were you waiting there for me?”

Morrigan laughed again.

“Now that I would pay good coin to see… but to answer your question; no, I was not waiting on you, but you are not the only one who has been hunting tonight. I find myself wondering; do we hunt the same prey?”

“I don’t know.” Aleska replied with careful indifference. “Do we?”

Morrigan nodded approvingly.

“You are cautious; that is wise, especially in this place. There are many here tonight who should not be. One of them, an agent of Tevinter, sought to end my life. I was able to end his first and found he carried something of great interest…” She reached into a hidden pocket in her skirt and produced a brass key. “What door this opens I could not tell you; although, perhaps, you may have some idea?”

Aleska took the key from her; pieces of the puzzle slowly moving into place.

“The door to the servants’ wing is locked. No-one’s been in or out of there for over an hour.”
“Most curious, when the Empress hosts royalty and nobility on such a grand scale, wouldn’t you say?” She tilted her head slightly, arching an eyebrow with a mockingly inquisitive look. “That would be a good place to begin. I, however, must return to Celene’s side. I suspect she may need more than just my advice before tonight is done.”

Morrigan gave her a knowing smile then went ahead into the Ballroom. Aleska waited for a moment, to collect her thoughts, before noticing Anselm approaching with drinks in his hands.

“I was beginning to worry…” He whispered, handing her one. “Apparently there’s less than half the normal complement of Imperial Guards on duty at the palace tonight, but none assigned to the battle lines. Either Celene is cutting her household expenses, or…”

“Or she has them waiting in reserve to deal with Gaspard.” Aleska took a sip of her drink. “Anything else?”

Anselm gave a faintly amused grimace.

“Other than the Marquis de Colombe having wandering fingers after his fourth brandy, not much of direct importance; although I have few juicy little whispers that Nightingale might appreciate. What about you?”

Aleska drained her glass and showed him the key concealed in the palm of her hand.

“Finish your drink; and find Jonas and Dorian. We’ve got their scent…”
Chapter Summary

The Winter Palace held more secrets than Anselm and Aleska thought. A dance with the Count revealed another key indication at the palace and a stroll in the rose gardens left Cullen breathless.

Chapter Notes

Apologies for another slow update, reality caught up with both my co-author and myself. Chapter 37 will be uploaded later on so keep an eye out. Thank you again to everyone who bookmarked, left a kudos, subscribed or even glanced at this fic, you rock!

“You are not what I was expecting, Inquisitor Lavellan…” Ambassador Briala’s soft voice felt abnormally loud in the silence of the deserted gallery. “but you have been defying expectations since you stepped out of the Fade, so I shouldn’t be surprised. The Council of Heralds emissary in the courtyard; was that your work?”

Aleska shook her head firmly, carefully watching Briala’s movements. The woman appeared to be unarmed but that counted for little. She’d taken down a fleeing Venatori with a well-aimed dagger to the eye and her poise carried hints of specialised training.

“No, and I doubt it was Gaspard’s either. No man would give an assassin his own blade and I don’t see the Grand Duke as the sort to gets his hands dirty like that.”

“Indeed…” The Ambassador murmured thoughtfully, running her fingers along the back of an ivory Halla figurine. “There are a great many masters of the Game here tonight; all of them seeking to gain something. What is it you look for, I wonder?”

“An end to this damned war.” Aleska said, the determination within her tone apparent. “What about you?”

Briala laughed. “For my people to be citizens of their own country. The Dalish can dream of reclaiming past glory all they desire; what we want is a future that doesn’t consist of Alienages and servitude.”

“My grandmother came from the Ostwick Alienage.” Aleska informed her. “I can appreciate that goal better than you may think.”

Briala regarded her carefully, eyes bright behind the silver mask with its pattern of vines.

“I think I’m not the only person who will be surprised before the night is over…” She paused,
appearing to think something over. “What could you accomplish with an army of Elven spies at your disposal – eyes and ears in every noble house of Orlais?”

“That’s an attractive idea.” Aleska admitted. “What would you want in return?”

The Ambassador smiled slightly; with what appeared to be a touch of sadness.

“Only that you make the right decision for our people. Celene has made mistakes – bad ones – but Gaspard considers us no better than animals.” A bell chimed in the distance and Briala let out a quiet sigh. “I should return to the ball and so should you, Inquisitor. It would not do for either of us to be absent for too long.”

With a brief nod she nimbly climbed over the balustrade, clambering down the trellis to the garden below.

“She still loves her.” Anselm said quietly. “I could see it in her eyes when she said her name.”

Aleska thoughtfully fingered the locket they’d discovered in the sealed vault.

“I wonder if Celene feels the same way. This could give us an advantage…” She put the locket back inside her gown and took Anselm’s hand.

“We have their scent,” She said, strategies starting to crystallise within her thoughts. “We need to move fast before it gets cold.”

The Hall of Heroes was empty apart from a pair of Elven servants, one of whom gave Aleska a discreet nod as they slipped through the door of the servants’ quarters, and within moments they were back in the Ballroom amidst the chatter and the music. Aleska took a deep breath, taking in the panorama before her, then smiled. She nudged Anselm in the side, drawing his attention to Jonas down on the dancefloor; leading his mother through the steps of a stately bassadanse.

“I never realised Jonas was such a graceful dancer.” She whispered in Anselm’s ear. “I don’t know why I’m surprised; he’s always been light on his feet.”

Anselm chuckled quietly, nodding in agreement as he leaned on the balustrade to watch the dancers below.

“You’re not the only one defying expectation tonight.” He murmured, running a finger delicately along her arm. “It’s good to see Aunt Catarina smiling so much. It’s not always been easy for her; after Cousin Marc turned out to be a Mage as well, a lot of people wanted Uncle to divorce her and marry someone less… ‘tainted’. My father was one of those voices, unsurprisingly.”

“And your Uncle never considered that?” Aleska asked, still watching the dance and feeling a sudden pang of empathy for the Countess. Anselm shook his head.

“As you’ve noticed, a certain stubbornness is a Trevelyan trait and Uncle Boniface has plenty of it – especially where family is concerned. Another man might have chosen that course but, despite our disagreements, I have to admit he’s better than that.”

Aleska gave him a sly smile. “Careful; you’re starting to make me like him…”

A peal of brittle laughter caught her ear and she caught sight of Cullen with his back against the wall, surrounded by a gaggle of young nobles all vying for his attention. She leaned into Anselm and whispered in his ear.
“You need to go and mingle, prise out some more secrets; and I need to rescue Cullen before something terrible happens to him!”

Anselm’s eyes followed the direction of her gaze and he let out a snort of laughter.

“By the look on his face, something already has!” He took Aleska’s hand and raised it to his lips “I’ll be back soon…”

###

Oh Commander!” A woman in an elaborately feathered mask giggled softly. “You look so handsome tonight, care to dance?”

“No, thank you.” Despite Cullen’s carefully chosen words and tone, Aleska sensed the annoyance ready to erupt from him.

**Poor Cullen, they will eat him alive, perhaps I should rescue him, or Sophia.**

Aleska scanned the crowd for Sophia; spotting her dear friend surrounded by a group of dignitaries, including an older woman in Chantry robes.

*She’s one of the few surviving confidantes of Divine Justinia... Aleska reminded herself... and the daughter of the Count of Ostwick; of course, half the diplomats here will be wanting her attention.*

Aleska paused, noting the long and lingering glance Cullen gave toward Sophia who hadn’t seemed to notice his predicament.

**It is not her fault; she must play her part. We all must.**

Aleska wandered toward the group of nobility eagerly hovering around the Commander.

“I apologize for my rude interruption,” Aleska smiled, feeling the pierce of each dagger shot in her direction from the ladies surrounding Cullen. “Commander, you promised me a tour of the rose gardens, I would think it rude to keep a lady—much less the Inquisitor—waiting, wouldn’t you agree?”

“I… uh…” Cullen paused for a moment; the realization dawned. “Forgive me, Inquisitor, I had not intended to keep you waiting this long; excuse me.”

Aleska linked her arm through Cullen’s; her face aching from the muscle tension of keeping her smile fixed and steady.

“Don’t look back,” her tone dropped to a soft whisper.

“Thank you… for uh…” the words caught in Cullen’s throat, unable to express his gratitude. “Had you not come; I dread to think what they would do. One had the audacity to pinch my… erm… my bottom.”

“On that front,” Aleska allowed herself a laugh. “I can hardly blame them; it is a decent sight most of the time.”

A subtle pink burned into Cullen’s cheeks; he could not even respond to such a statement.

*It is called flirting and I am allowed my own fun.* Aleska leaned against the terrace balcony, looking down at the rose gardens beneath them, the beautiful maze of green and red which shot up before them; one could easily get lost in such a beauty. The maze bathed in rays of silver and
white, one could easily stare for hours at a time and not consider the troubles which plagued their minds.

“Would you like to—” Cullen began, a hand gesturing towards the maze before extending to her.

“You know what,” Aleska straightened herself, smiling warmly. “I am certain Sophia is tired of the relentless flattery from dignitaries that she hadn’t seen since she was a child, perhaps you should take her instead? Spend some time alone.”

“Of course,” Cullen cleared his throat, his hand now resting against his side. “It’s just…”

“Just what?” Aleska asked, sensing Cullen’s hesitation. He sighed, looking back towards the ballroom.

“This is her world, Aleska; it’s where she belongs, and I don’t know if I have the right to take her away from that. What have I got to offer her, except…?”

Aleska put her hand on Cullen’s arm.

“You can offer her kindness and understanding; I think that’s a good place to start.” Something Anselm had said came back to her and she looked Cullen squarely in the eyes. “This might be the world she was born into, but it’s not hers. I’ve seen that and so have you. None of us are where we should be; if things were ‘normal’ none of us would even have met. Sophia would be at her father’s side as Heiress of Ostwick, I’d be hunting deer in the forest and you’d be.”

She paused and Cullen gave her a quizzical look.

“I’d be where?”

Aleska laughed suddenly as an image came to her.

“You’d be farming in Ferelden with a rosy-cheeked wife, three plump children and a big slobbery dog!”

It was Cullen’s turn to laugh.

“I must admit, I like that idea but… in this ‘other world’ are we happy?”

Aleska took a sip of her drink, pondering the question.

“I think so but, deep down, we all feel that something’s missing…” It was a strangely sobering thought and they lapsed into a brief silence; broken only when Aleska had another idea. “I’ll be right back,”

She hurried back into the ballroom; beckon and servant and taking two glasses of wine off the tray. Returning to the terrace she handed one to Cullen.

“I’m going to teach you a trick that Anselm taught me, so link your arm with mine.”

Aleska’s careful instructions ensured no wine had spilled on either one of them, they both took a step closer, Aleska could almost sense his cologne. *It suits him,* she mused, outlaying the next set of instructions; her lips pressed to the rim of Cullen’s glass and Cullen’s pressed to the rim of hers; both taking a slow and long sip of the sweet fruity wine. Aleska’s laugh carried inside the hallways, a few guests stopping to observe the scene upon the terrace, careful enough to ensure their glances would not be seen by the pair.
“That was… interesting…” Cullen admitted, coughing as some of the wine went down the wrong way. Aleska thumped him on the back.

“Practise it a few times then try it with Sophia…” she told him. “Now, wait here…”

She unhooked her arm from his, placing the half-filled glass upon the stone balustrade and walked back inside; murmuring apologies as she elbowed through the crowd, she finally reached Sophia—seeing the polite boredom screaming from behind her calm expression as she paid dutiful attention to her supplicants. Aleska’s glance caught hers and she saw the ‘save me!’ look in her eyes.

“Lady Sophia,” Aleska approached the dignitaries. “There is a matter which I need your assistance in, on the terrace. I have tried to reason with Ambassador Cassius, but he seemed only interested in your patronage for the evening.”

The lie flowed from easily from her lips as if it were truth and Sophia nodded, grateful for the rescue. Murmuring a quiet thanks, she took her leave and headed off towards the terrace while Aleska turned to the ambassadors, a smile once again forced upon her lips.

“Lady Inquisitor,” one ambassador was audacious enough to break the silence. “If I may be so bold as to ask, how do you intend to assist in the efforts to close rifts beyond the reach of Orlais and Ferelden? Demons plague our lands and your envoys haven’t given us a straight answer.”

“Ambassador, we take the matter of rifts beyond our reach seriously,” Aleska turned to face them. “Perhaps if you were to send your own envoys to Skyhold, we can discuss arrangements that will benefit both parties. Currently we don’t have concordats to operate in either Rivain or Nevarra, so you can see the quandary we’re in.”

“With all due respect, my lady—” one of them, an elderly Nevarran with sweeping grey moustaches, objected. “King Marcus has yet to…”

“There you are,” A hand touched her arm and she turned to see Count Boniface at her side. “I apologize gentleman, but the Lady Inquisitor promised me a dance; unless the matters which you’re discussing are crucial.”

“N-no Excellency,” the ambassadors lowered their heads, backing away from Aleska and leaving her to the Count’s company.

For a moment, Aleska felt herself briefly frozen on spot, wishing that Anselm was nearby; he would be busy charming salacious gossip out of half the court though, and she would need to rely on her own instincts. She dropped a graceful curtsey

“Excellency,” Aleska kept her gaze low. “Thank you for your assistance, the ambassadors can be quite…”

“Demanding?” Count Boniface displayed one of his rare smiles. “I find they resemble dogs at feeding time, every one of them begging for their own special treat.

“I was going to say insistent about their requests,” Aleska responded carefully. “But I’m gratefully for your rescue… or was your offer of a dance simply a ruse?”

The Count laughed softly, extending his arm

“My lady, I never jest about a dance when a beautiful woman is involved.”

***
“I don’t want to stay away from the ballroom too long…” Cullen said with a hint of anxiety, taking a deep breath of the cool night air. “I just need to clear my head a bit, I hope you understand.”

“Of course; I know how much you hate these things,” Sophia slipped her arm through his as they walked along the quiet paths of the Rose-Garden. Even now, the scent still hung heavily around the gravelled pathways. “My poor Lion; this must be a nightmare for you.”

Cullen grunted irritably.

“Give me my sword and a dozen bandits; that I know how to deal with…” He paused and looked at her with sudden surprise. “What did you just call me?”

Sophia laughed at his bewilderment.

“The court has given you a title of your own; ‘The Lion of Ferelden’. I think it rather appropriate, don’t you?”

“Rather approp…?” Cullen huffed; his face suddenly relaxing as he saw the impish spark in her eyes. “From you, I can accept it; from them—”

Sophie stood on tiptoe and kissed his cheek.

“Well then; you’re my Lion, not theirs, and the next time those mice pester you—just snarl and watch them scatter.”

Cullen shook his head with a faint, almost embarrassed, grimace.

“I’m not good at this sort of things Sophia, I’m sorry…” He sighed quietly. “I’m not witty, or spontaneous, or?”

She pressed a finger to his lips, silencing him.

“You’re brave, and kind-hearted; and you’re always fighting to do the right thing. That means more to me than any pretty words.”

He drew her close to him, resting his forehead against hers with his eyes closed; inhaling the scent of her along with the lingering perfume of the roses.

“You’re more than I deserve.” He murmured, “…and you deserve more than anything I have to offer.”

“I don’t want anything other than you…” Sophia said quietly. “It seems strange, almost wrong, to say; but the Circle freed me from that world inside the ballroom, gave me choices I never would have had. I could be myself, not just a dynastic trophy, and I’ll be the one to decide what I need.”

She took hold of his face in her hands and kissed him hungrily. A sudden, fierce, urge overtook him, and he responded with equal intensity as she tugged at the buttons of his tunic; loosening them enough for her to slip her hand inside. He growled dangerously at the feel of her fingers, warm and soft, against his skin; her nails raking teasingly along his side.

Sophia gasped in surprise and delight as he lifted her up in his powerful arms; laying her down on the cool grass beside the path, one hand cushioning her head while the other explored beneath her skirts until she cried out in pleasure – a high, sharp sound like the call of a seabird. He couldn’t stop kissing her; his lips roaming over the smooth skin of her throat and shoulders, left bare by her low-cut gown.
“Maker, forgive me.” He groaned, burying his face between her breasts. “I need you!”

She raised his face to hers, kissing his eyelids with the gentlest brush of her lips.

“Don’t stop—" she sighed “Please, Cullen; don’t stop!”

He felt her fingers digging deep into his shoulders as he entered her and he paused, afraid he’d hurt her, but she wrapped her legs tightly around his hips; moving to meet him with a passion as eager as his own—or the danger of discovery fuelling their passion into a brief, voracious blaze. He felt her shudder in his arms; clinging even closer to him until he pressed his face into her shoulder to muffle his own, desperate, roar as it dissolved into hoarse, panting, gasps.

They lay there, entwined, for a few more minutes; dizzy and breathless, as the distant music from the ballroom washed over them both.

Sophia ran her fingers through Cullen’s hair, a few stray locks sticking to the sweat on his forehead.

“I thought you said you weren’t spontaneous?”

He raised himself up on his elbows and looked at her for a moment, then laughed.

“This… this wasn’t quite what I was thinking about.”

She lifted her head and kissed him again.

“That’s what makes it so delightful.”

The music came to an end and they heard the sound of applause. Cullen let out a deep sigh and got to his feet, helping Sophia to stand.

“We ought to get back.” He said, his voice heavy with regret. “There’s just… one thing…”

“What’s that?” Sophia asked, shaking down her skirts. Cullen gave her a sheepish look.

“Can you help me with these damn breeches?”

***

Music filled the ballroom as the dancers took their places; a Tourdion, the current fashionable favourite. Aleska felt grateful for the weeks of training Josephine had enforced, each step memorized with the precision of an assassin’s blade.

An interesting analogy…

Aleska thought as she raised her hand, palm to palm with the Count’s.

“Now, Excellency, you know the rules; no touching.” She smiled as she moved in a circle around him, his second hand dutifully placed behind his back.

“I am familiar with the dance,” Count Boniface retaliated, turning in the other direction with surprising grace and agility. “If I didn’t know any better, Lady Aleska, I would say you’re trying to tease me.”

“I don’t know, Excellency,” Aleska said sweetly as they changed hands and spun counterclockwise. “Do you think I am?”
They separated and, as Aleska executed a graceful turn the way Sophia had shown her, she noted the Baron standing against the bannister of the balcony, looking at the scene before him; his scowl deepening at the sight of his brother dancing with her. Aleska made sure to directly catch his eye as she made another pirouette, winning an appreciative gasp from some of the watching nobles, and his expression briefly shifted to one of raw fury.

*I swear he is about to throw his glass against a wall...*

Aleska allowed herself the small victory against the Baron; knowing the Count would be not so easily manipulated.

She was no stranger to dancing; many of the Dalish dances were every bit as formal and complex as those of the human nobility. With all the weeks of practise and instruction, she felt her confidence growing and found herself adding a few little touches of her own; the heels of her shoes striking firmly against the marble floor at the end of each turn, a gesture that the Count matched – giving her an intriguingly appreciative look.

“T’m willing to wager they’ll all be stamping on the floor before the weeks-end and calling it *Tourdion a la Inquisition...*” he whispered in her ear “Already it seems my brother cannot keep his opinions to himself.”

Count Boniface glanced in the direction of Baron Giulio voicing his discontent to any noble who would listen.

“I don’t think a man like you should be concerned with the opinions of sheep,” Aleska whispered in response.

“A man like me?” Count Boniface glanced at her for a moment, catching the eye of Anselm who watched intently from the other side of the ballroom. “Pray tell, what kind of man would that be?”

Aleska smiled softly.

“Someone who understands that power isn’t always about getting your own way; that there are times when you have to sacrifice something in order not to lose everything...”

The tune ended, Aleska stepped back, applauding the musicians alongside the Count.

“You have a better grasp of these matters than some who are born to them.” He said, with a thoughtful smile. “Perhaps I have underestimated you, my Lady Inquisitor.”

“Everyone does,” Aleska curtsied before him as he gave her a courtly bow. “You might want to bear that in mind for future negotiations.”

The Count laughed out loud, causing a few heads to turn, then he leaned close and dropped his voice to a low whisper

“Perhaps if I were twenty years younger, my lady, I might have used this dance to make my nephew jealous.”

*He had quite the scandalous reputation of his own when he was young...* Aleska reminded herself, recalling the tales of how he’d defied his own father to lead a mercenary company fighting alongside the Fereldan rebels. She gave him an impish smile and extended her hand for him to kiss.

“If you were twenty years younger, Excellency, I might have been tempted to let you.”
Aleska walked towards the stairs before her, allowing Count Boniface to ponder on her words; each step she took seemed more daunting than the last, her feet were not used to being in heeled shoes for extended periods and spasms began to shoot up her legs. *Keep calm,* Aleska repeated, finding Anselm leaning against the pillar with two glasses of wine in his hands.

Beside him, a woman that Aleska recalled was Comptess Julianna de la Tour, a woman past her prime; or so the gossip said. One of the rumours suggested the death of her husband caused her rapid aging; others, that the Comptess had more than a passing interest in the early demise of her spouse. The whispers in Court would have been enough to deter most potential suitors.

She toyed idly with one of the buttons of Anselm’s coat while her other hand wielded her fan coquettishly, and Aleska heard her high-pitched laugh as she caught Anselm’s gaze; her small nod and smile telling him all he needed to know.

*I need some air*

Aleska ran her hand along her waist, the dress now fitting tighter than before; her breathe quickening to the point she felt the air trapped within her throat and refusing to come out. Walking through the hallways, Aleska found a secluded balcony, enough to allow her some time to catch what little breath she could. Hands on the cold bannister, Aleska drew a deep breath, releasing it slowly. Warm tears stung at her eyes, images flashed of the Comptess’ hands upon Anselm’s chest, trailing lower down.

*This is stupid,* she reminded herself, looking up at the night skies. Stars burned against the blackened heavens, twinkling like a thousand little diamonds in the skies. One shot across the darkness in the blink of an eye. *What did Maela say about shooting stars? Make a wish and it would come true?* Aleska smiled to herself, her temples throbbed; the crisp fresh air hit her lungs, a refreshing change from the stuffy ballroom and over-perfumed nobles.

“Are you alright?” Anselm asked as he joined her on the balcony; closing the sheer curtains behind him, allowing them a moment of privacy.

“I am fine,” Aleska kept the lump from choking her. “Just needed some fresh air is all.”

Aleska picked up her wineglass, the fine Nevarran crystal like ice between her fingers, and took a long drink. Even that wasn’t enough to calm her nerves and a single tear ran down her cheek, threatening the makeup that Sophia and Josephine worked so hard to perfect.

“I would believe that…” Anselm’s hand cupped her cheek and his thumb gently dabbed the tear away. “…if I didn’t know you better. When are you going to learn you can no longer lie to me, mi amata?”

Aleska smiled, looking into those bright, soulful green eyes that could pierce through any wall she tried to put up. Her mind raced with a thousand and one things, but none of them she could dare to utter. A soft breeze brushed her skin and she rested her head against Anselm’s chest. The beating of his heart soothed her, and he wrapped his arms around her waist, pulling her into a tender embrace. She felt his hand running through the loose strands of her hair, not wanting to let go of this moment.

“It is silly,” Aleska laughed, holding onto him. “But when I saw that noblewoman touching you, in a way I know you’d only want from me… I needed to get out of there—or risk breaking her hand.”
Anselm chuckled softly, placing a gentle kiss against her forehead

“Do you have any idea how boring these people are? It’s like watching the same bad opera over and over again with different actors! Besides... she's got bad breath, and more stubble than Jo under all that make-up!” Anselm chuckled, placing a gentle kiss against her forehead.

Aleska stifled a laugh, sitting on the stone bannister before Anselm.

“Okay, that does make me feel better. Still. I know I told you to, but part of me wishes I didn’t…” She shook her head with an exasperated sigh. “This is stupid, I shouldn’t be even saying anything.”

“Nothing you say to me could ever sound stupid” Anselm’s fingers rested beneath her chin, lifting her gaze to meet his as his lips brushed against hers.

The whoosh of the curtains being drawn back caught their attention. One of the Imperial Guards stood before them, his armour glistening within the moonlight and his hand resting upon the pommel of his sword. The feathered crest of his helmet danced against the wind. He bowed to them with a faintly apologetic look as he moved to the side.

“Forgive me; Lady Inquisitor, Don Anselmo… guests are not permitted on this terrace.” he motioned with his hand, gesturing for them to return to the Ball.

Aleska nodded, her arm linked with Anselm’s as they strolled back through the hallways towards the noisy ballroom. She smiled at him, enjoying the murmuring of the other guests as they passed. Whatever else happened, the Orlesian court would be talking about this for years to come. Her grip upon Anselm’s arm tightened and a tremble travelled up her spine, a sensation of light-headedness rushing through her.

“That ruined a perfect little moment,” She whispered. “Perhaps later we might steal another one?”

Anselm squeezed her arm slightly and raised her fingers to his lips, kissing them softly

“I was about to suggest the same thing.” He whispered back. “But first I need to find out what that old toad Gaspard is hiding from us. I’ll explore his study while you keep an eye on things in the Ballroom. Now laugh… as if I’ve just said something utterly filthy…”

Aleska’s laugh echoed through the vestibule and a few guests stopped their conversations, hoping to catch a glimpse of some little juicy bit of gossip, only to turn their heads away in disappointment. Serves them right, what do they expect, for Anselm to rip my dress off in the company of the Heralds?

Aleska noted a man in the corner, a gold mask tripped with a silver leaf pattern around the edges raised his glass to them both, smiling at them both; even from beneath his mask; Aleska could tell he had been formulating his own ideas as to why the pair had been on the terrace.

A bell tolled nearby and Aleska listened to each chime carefully, counting down till she needed to make an appearance. Always be fashionably late, which means waiting till the next bell; or that is what Leliana mentioned. She moved away from Anselm’s side, a nod of understanding shared before they parted ways, and passed though the ornate double as the second bell chimed.

As she entered the whispers began and out of the corner of her eye she spotted Leliana, raising a wineglass and giving her an encouraging nod. As she stepped forward she felt a hand on her shoulder and turned to see the Grand Duchess Florianne at her side; her narrow features framed by the elaborate butterfly collar of her gown and her eyes sharp behind her heraldic mask.
She’s a lot older than I thought… Aleska observed with a certain sharp satisfaction. Orlesian noblewomen appeared to enjoy acting like schoolgirls well into their middle years; no wonder a man like Anselm bored of them so easily.

“Your Grace,” Aleska lowered herself into a curtsey. “How may I be of assistance to you.”

“Perhaps we could speak more freely upon the dance floor, Inquisitor,” Duchess Florianne gestured with a single hand.

“Two women—” Aleska’s chest tightened.

“It is not unheard of in Orlais,” Duchess Florianne laughed, linking her arm with Aleska. “The dance floor is a place where no one can hear our conversation; and we seem to have much to discuss on this fateful night.”

***

This is too good to be true… Aleska thought as she left the dancefloor, walking to where Leliana and Josephine stood with a look of intense anticipation. She saw Cullen and Sophia approaching as well but no sign of Anselm.

“What happened?” Cullen asked, handing her a glass of water. “Did the Duchess say anything?”

“Plenty,” Aleska took the glass and drained it in a single swallow “She was very eager to incriminate her brother… far too eager; and there’s something about the way she moves… something very familiar.”

“Florianne would throw Gaspard to the wolves to suit her own ends” Leliana took the glass from her hands, placing it upon a serving tray. “Whatever is about to happen, it’s going to be soon. We need to be ready to act quickly.”

Aleska’s turned her attention discreetly towards the direction in which her spymistress was looking. She could see Raffali whispering something on Count Boniface’s ear. The Countess Catarina was nowhere to be seen and the Count had a number of additional gentlemen-in-waiting with him; all of whom had a distinctly military demeanour despite their formal evening wear. The Count noticed her looking and raised an single, questioning eyebrow.

“Aleska, I can have additional men in place within minutes…” Cullen informed her. “On your order, Inquisitor.”

Aleska glanced at the clock, held high above the Imperial dais by two ornate statues – doubtless highly symbolic of something; they had just over an hour before the Empress was due to give her speech and she had the feeling that the plotters would strike then. Killing Celene wasn’t enough, they would want to make sure the entire court witnessed it.

“Make it so, Commander…” She instructed as the door opened, and three officers in Imperial Guard uniform approached them; their expressions hidden behind full-face military masks.

“What are they doing here?” Cullen whispered, his hand reached for his sword, but only grabbed the air.

“Wait,” Aleska smiled, gesturing for Cullen to ease his arms. “Let’s first find out what they want, then perhaps we can go from there.”

The guards came towards them, and the one in the middle spoke first. “Are you… are you
Commander Cullen?"

“I am,” Cullen grumbled, arms crossed along his chest. “Is there something you needed with the Lady Inquisitor?”

“No,” his companion shook his head, all three bowed before Aleska. “We mean no offense, my lady, but we wished to speak to your commander about the Battle of Haven. Don Anselmo told us you had some fascinating anecdotes.”

“I don’t…” Cullen began but Aleska felt relief wash over her, realising they now had the access needed, and she turned to them with a dazzling smile.

“The Commander virtually turned the tide of the battle…” She informed them. “His strategy with the trebuchets was little short of genius.”

“Indeed…” One of the officers agreed. “Bringing down a whole mountain on an advancing army? A masterstroke…”

Aleska suppressed as laugh as Cullen visibly flushed with pride

“Well; it’s all about proper calibration. If I can demonstrate…”

She left Cullen explaining about correct angles and compression arcs, and made her way over to Leliana.

“I need access to the Imperial Wing; can you arrange that?”

Leliana handed her a small key, the handle mounted with the lion-crest of House Valmont.

“Thanks to an… unanticipated… ally.” She said, glancing towards where Morrigan hovered near the Empress. “I must remember to compliment her gown later. Good luck with the hunt, Inquisitor.

###

Compared to the rest of the palace, the tiny study hidden behind the trophy room felt almost austere; in keeping with the stern, soldierly, personality the Grand Duke liked to project. Anselm was already inside; critically examining the contents of a crystal decanter, setting it down as Aleska sneaked inside.

“The man has disgusting taste in whiskey; that alone should disqualify him from any position of responsibility…” He said, with a wry smile. “and he also needs to be more careful about hiding incriminating documents. A child could break this cipher!”

Aleska took the sheaf of papers he handed her; messages confirming the placement of troops loyal to the Grand Duke around the outskirts of the palace, ready to move in at a moment’s notice.

“It’s a start, but it’s not enough; we need to find that mercenary captain.” Aleska said, keeping her voice low. “Did you speak to Celene about Brialla? The locket you found?”

“I did,” Anselm adjusted his sword-belt and handed Aleska her quiver. “She denied it of course, but if you should have seen the look upon her face; as if she was confronting a ghost.”

“Of course, she would deny it,” Aleska deftly strung her bow, feeling the resentment rise up in her again. “Hundreds died when she purged Halamshiral’s alienage, all to hide the truth about one of her ‘mistakes’…”
Anselm let out a heavy sigh

“In the circumstances I hate to say it, but she’s the best option we have. Gaspard…”

“I know, we’re vermin to him…” Aleska said grimly. “I’m not going to let personal feelings get in the way, not tonight anyway. Come on; we need to meet Joe and Dorian at the stairs to the Imperial Wing… Shit!”

She dropped her bow with a curse as the Anchor flared and crackled, filling the dimly-lit study with a sudden and vivid green glow.

Anselm bent to pick up her bow, looking at her with alarm.

“Please tell me that doesn’t mean what I think it does?”

Aleska nodded, clenching her teeth as the pain shot up her arm again.

“There’s a Rift somewhere in the palace; we need to hurry.”

Anselm peeled off his coat and threw it casually into a corner; grabbing his own bow and quiver.

“Stay behind me at all times,” He stroked her cheek gently before pulling her close to him and giving her a brief, intense, kiss. “You’re a walking target and I have special plans for that dress when this night is done.”
La Volta

Chapter Summary

Orlais applauds the Lady Inquisitor as Saviour of the Empire; and the Imperial court celebrates with favours and rewards for all. The battle is far from over, but this is surely a time when Aleska and Anselm can at least pause and take a moment for themselves - until the shadow of Kirkwall falls over them yet again.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Anselm lounged against a pillar, refilling his glass from the bottle of vintage port he’d rescued from the Empress’ private cellar. Nothing said Victory better than getting pleasantly drunk on a wine that was older than you.

His cheek throbbed insistently and, in the morning, his ribs and back would be a mass of bruises – but the warm combination of alcohol and euphoria dulled that edge for now. Enjoying the glow was certainly more enjoyable than listening to Celene and Gaspard give their carefully self-congratulatory speeches; celebrating their new agreement as if almost two years of bloody civil war was no more than a lapse in etiquette, on a par with dropping your sword or wearing the wrong mask to dinner.

Briala would be loitering in the shadows, no doubt, already planning how to run rings around the Grand Duke while extorting maximum benefit from her renewed liaison with the Empress. He drained his glass and filled it again, his mouth twitching in the faintest of smirks.

Schemes devised between the sheets are always the most delicious…

He let his attention roam around the ballroom; observing the subtle ebb and flow as courtiers, dignitaries and diplomats adjusted to the new political reality. Pages and messengers already scurried about, carrying messages from one player to another as they sought to amend their positions accordingly.

By morning, everyone would claim this was the result they foresaw and were working towards; and no-one would admit to having anything but absolute faith the Herald of Andraste, now standing – in glorious crimson – between the Empress and her cousin. She was too far away to catch her eye, but she knew he would be there; watching and applauding. This was her moment, the triumph she deserved and a blow in the mouth to everyone who’d doubted she could do it.

Saviour of Orlais… that must be sticking a few throats…

The orchestra sprang back into life as this round of speeches and toasts came to an end. Empress of Fire… the ballad which had become an unofficial Imperial anthem over the course of the civil war…

And a few grains of salt in Gaspard’s wounds.

He could see Aleska withdrawing to one of the antechambers as the Imperial Dais began to fill up
with other notables and he was tempted to sneak round and join her, but something held him back. He drained and refilled his glass again as the wheels turned within his mind. Let Aleska have a few minutes of peace to herself; there was something else he could do for her, and if the court thought the night’s surprises were over – they were very much mistaken.

It was easy to make his way through the grandees in their furs and velvets to the clear space around the Empress, where she stood talking with his uncle. The Count noted his approach with a careful smile, turning to Celene.

“I don’t believe you’ve met my nephew, Don Anselmo di Tresaquae…” He said, beckoning him forward as the Empress extended her hand.

“So, this is the notorious Sieur Anselmé? We have heard much of your adventures.”

“I’m honoured that your Majesty deigned to pay them any attention.” Anselm took her hand, bowing over it to the prescribed half-inch. “I must apologise for my dishevelment; the dancing this evening was more… vigorous… than I had anticipated.”

“Indeed!” The Empress laughed. “And I understand the success of the night owes much to your own endeavours. It is gratifying to see blades of Ostwick raised so… vigorously… on our behalf.”

“Merely my duty as an officer of the Inquisition Madame…” Anselm responded with a knowing smile. “All credit remains with Her Worship…”

“Nevertheless, we must see you rewarded as befits your status; as, indeed, we must reward all the gallant knights of the Inquisition who came to our aid in this hour of blackest treason.”

“Actually, there is one favour I would ask—if your Majesty is agreeable?” Anselm requested enjoying the brief flash of alarm in his uncle’s eyes.

“I will be needing cousin Laurent’s head for a little longer…” She said with a wicked smile “Apart from that; if it is in my power to grant it, you may consider it done.”

“M. du Barras can rest easy.” Anselm chuckled, savouring the moment. “What I desire is quite innocent—”

###

Aleska remained on the terrace as Morrigan returned to the palace; breathing calmly and deeply, savouring the night air and giving her thoughts time to settle. It was going to be interesting to see how Leliana took the news that one of her companions from the time of the Blight would be joining the ranks of the Advisors, and to see exactly how much Mme. Vivienne’s nose would be put out of joint by the presence of her rival. She shook her head with a quiet laugh, still finding it hard to believe this was all real, then turned and made her way back into the antechamber. A soft voice came from the shadows, causing her to flinch in surprise; one hand going to the blade concealed within the folds of her gown.

“It won’t last, of course…” Aleska turned to see Signor Raffalli sitting quietly on a couch in one of the alcoves, testing the consistency of a cake with a small silver fork. He shook his head with a sigh. “The desserts at Skyhold were far superior to this.”

“I imagine it helped that my servants weren’t being massacred by Venatori!” She retorted, relaxing slightly and taking her hand from the blade. “And it doesn’t have to last, they just have to keep the peace.”
“Oh, they will; in public...” Raffali set the plate to one side and began to rise, leaning heavily on his cane. Aleska instinctively moved to help him; despite her wariness of him, he was still harhen – an elder – and courtesy demanded it. “...but, squabble they will, and it will leave Orlais weaker in the long run. That is not something her neighbours will find displeasing. Your actions tonight may have won you friends far beyond the precincts of the Winter Palace, and made your enemies more dangerous...”

“Corypheus is on the run...” Aleska reminded him. “We’ve deprived him of the Mages, the Wardens, his army of demons and now his allies in Orlais. He’s running out of options.”

Raffali gave her a sharp look as he accepted her arm.

“Don’t forget the first lesson any good hunter learns, Da’Len.” He warned. “A beast is at its most dangerous and unpredictable when wounded; you would do well to guard your flanks and your rear against any unwelcome surprises.”

Aleska felt herself unsettled by his steady, acute, gaze; and the way his clear, grey eyes seemed to read her innermost thoughts and fears.

“If you have intelligence, I’m sure Sister Leliana...” She began, trying to cover her uncertainty with a veil of confidence. Raffali merely shook his head again.

“No intelligence, just a word of caution from an old man. You have cut your own path and done it well; I would regret seeing you stumble so near to your goal.”

They began to walk towards the doors leading to the ballroom; Aleska slowing her steps to keep pace with him, although she could tell from his movements that he was not as frail as he pretended. He might be old enough to be her great-grandfather, but there was little doubt in her mind that he could still be a dangerous opponent.

“I’m flattered that you’ve been paying so much attention to my exploits.” She said, trying to sound casual. Raffali chuckled quietly.

“I have spent the greater part of my life ‘paying attention’ on behalf of House Trevelyan, my dear Lady Inquisitor, but I have never forgotten who I am... or where I came from. You are a symbol of hope to our people, whether of the alienages or the clans; a sign that one day we may no longer be forced to live on the fringes.”

Aleska paused at the doors and turned to look at him, a question burning in her mind. She could hear applause as another speech came to an end, and music striking up again, but this candle-lit antechamber felt like a sanctuary from the frenzy of the evening and she was unwilling to give it up just yet.

“How did you get to be where you are?” She asked. “I don’t know of many ruling houses who would trust an elf with such an important position.”

Raffali glanced at her with a smile.

“The Trevelyans are not like many ruling houses, perhaps why they have endured for so long. Did you know they descend from the same line as your Lord Dorian? It was Travalian Pavus, last Urban Legate of the great Tevinter city of Vicorienta, who convinced his fellow nobles to free their slaves and open the city gates to Andraste’s army. ‘Better to surrender a little than lose all’ was what he told them. The Alamari called that city Ostwick and when their last Teryn died in the Second Blight, four centuries later, it was a descendant of Legatus Travalian who was elected to
the throne as Count Boniface the First. The dynasty he founded never forgot the lesson that true power lies in compromise and that lesson has served them well…”

“I know something of their history from Lady Sophia…” Aleska admitted. “and, from the way she tells it, I can guess she learned it from you; but it’s your history I’m interested in.”

Raffali seemed amused by her directness and glanced at his pocket-watch.

“She was always my most diligent student; and I think we can let your adoring audience wait a few more minutes…” He sat back down on a padded bench beside the door and gestured for her to join him. “Imagine an impetuous and ambitious, young elf; eager for a life beyond that of a servant or petty trader – bold enough to be able to steal from a member of the Count of Ostwick’s household as they walked solemnly to High Mass, but too foolish to realise that it is easier to obtain a jewel bearing the arms of a great noble house than it is to dispose of it…”

Aleska listened with growing fascination as he told of how Count Sergio – nicknamed *Il Magnifico* for the splendour and achievements of his forty-five-year reign – amused and impressed by the young thief’s audacity and skill, sent him to the care of his spymaster rather than the gallows. Under the care of Brother Serafimo, a deceptively mild and gentle-mannered old Chantry Brother, he’d honed and refined his skill; serving, and gaining the trust of, not only Count Sergio but also his son and grandson.

“…I serve as faithfully as I would my own family.” He said, with a wistful look in his eyes, before turning to Aleska with a sly little smile. “And I still remember when His Excellency was a rebellious and scandal-loving youth; swift to defy his family in the face of what he knew he wanted… not entirely unlike another young man we both have a fondness for.”

Aleska laughed, feeling her suspicions of Signor Raffali ebbing slightly in the face of his charm and the warm kindness in his voice. *Maela* was the only one of her grandparents she’d ever known, but she liked to imagine that her grandfathers possessed something of this gentleness and determination. It inspired her to ask one last, direct, question; the one that preyed on her mind the most.

“Is Count Boniface going to make Anselm his heir?”

Raffali got to his feet with a heavy sigh.

“There was never any question of that, only of when Don Anselmo would be ready for the responsibility; but you already knew that, I think…” He glanced again at his watch. “I fear I have kept you too long, my Lady. It would never do for your stalwart companions to think you’ve fallen prey to some last-minute plot, and there are still matters I must attend to for His Excellency.”

Aleska couldn’t avoid laughing again as she opened the doors; the light and music of the ballroom spilling over them.

“They’d probably tear the palace down to it’s foundations to find me… Thank you for your time and your insights, Signor Raffali. I hope the rest of the evening is a profitable one for you.”

Raffali bowed in acknowledgement as she made her way back to the adulation awaiting her.

“Walk safely, Da’Len…” he murmured, too soft even for her to hear. “May the Dread Wolf never catch your scent.”

###
Aleska walked back into the ballroom, head erect, giving small nods of acknowledgements to the well-wishers clustering around her. She would liked nothing better than to have jumped on her horse and ridden away from this place, never looking back. A few hours ago these people had been looking at her like she’d just crept out of the forest with mud on her face; now they fawned around her, toasting her triumph and almost tripping over their tongues to outdo each other in complimenting her.

She could see Anselm approaching across the polychrome marble of the ballroom floor, a swagger in his stride and a glass of wine in his hand. He’d recovered his coat at some point, but his cravat was gone and his shirt hung half-open. A jewelled decoration of some sort, hanging from a blue ribbon, glinted against the tan of his chest. The Empress had been bestowing titles and decorations like flowers at a wedding, following the announcement of her concordat with the Grand Duke.

His attention remained fixed on her as he moved through the crowd, his steady progress compelling courtiers to step out of his way as he drew nearer; she could almost feel his gaze caressing her skin as he drained his glass and thrust it into the hand of a random noble. There was something hungry, almost dangerous, about him and she felt her skin warming as a flush of desire spread down her throat.

“Your Worship, may I have a word?”

The voice pulled her from her reverie, and she turned to the freckle-faced woman in the sumptuous robes of a Grand Cleric.

“Ambassador Montilyet is dealing with all my business this evening…” She’d had more than enough of intrigues and politics for one night. The Chantry Mothers could stew in their own juices a little longer. “If you speak to her…”

“It will only take a moment…” The woman insisted. “It is quite…”

“I’m afraid I must steal the Inquisitor away from you; Eminenza…” Anselm interjected, with an elaborate bow. “I have some important business of my own with her, that simply cannot wait.”

“I’m sure you do, Don Anselmo;” The Grand Cleric huffed. “However, this…”

“The feast is not yet over…” Anselm’s voice was heavy with mockery, almost contemptuous, as he took Aleska’s hand. “…there’ll be plenty scraps for you and your sisters to cluck over in the morning.”

“Anselm!” Aleska gasped, caught between laughter and horror, as he led her away; leaving the Grand Cleric spluttering furiously in their wake. “That was…”

“I can afford to be impolitic, you can’t…” Anselm murmured in her ear, his lips brushing her skin for the briefest second. “and, right now, they need you a lot more than you need them.”

“Well don’t complain when Josephine comes to nag you tomorrow when you’ve got a blazing hangover.” Aleska responded, shivering with the echo of his touch. “And what it this important business.”

“Something vital you have forgotten…” He looked down at her, tilting his head with a warm smile. His face was flushed; with longing, wine and the exuberance of combat. A bruise was starting to form along the line of his cheekbone, and she brushed her fingertips lightly against it, not caring who was watching. This was their night. “Dance with me, My Lady?”

She glanced towards the empty floor.
“No-one else is dancing…” She pointed out, “and that isn’t a dance-tune they’re playing.”

Anselm’s smile deepened, becoming even more mischievous.

“I asked a favour of the Empress when she gave me this.” His fingers flicked the medallion. “It seems she owes me one or two…”

“Even after you wounded her cousin in a duel?” She asked with an equally mischievous spark in her eyes.”

Anselm gave a deep, throaty, chuckle.

“Especially after that; it seems the embarrassment to the Marquis proved quite useful – and you still haven’t answered my question; will you dance with me, My Lady?”

He bowed low, extending his hand and looking up at her with an intense yearning; she could feel the attention of the entire court upon them, the faintest shifting in the buzz of gossip and acid flattery. Aleska reached out and took his hand, raising him up.

“It would be my pleasure; My Lord.”

Anselm kissed her hand, drawing her close to his side as they walked towards the waiting dancefloor.

“I hope they’re ready for this…” He said to her, his smile wicked and intriguing. He turned toward the musicians who’d ceased playing, the Master of Music awaiting his instruction. Anselm gestured towards him with a commanding flick of his wrist, his voice ringing out. “Una Volta!”

Whispers of shock and delight rippled amongst the courtiers and guests as the orchestra struck up a steady tempo, a single violin carrying the tune as Anselm struck a stance in the middle of the floor, one thumb hooked into his belt while his other arm hung at his side. He turned, slowly, on his heel as Aleska circled around him; her steps matching the rhythm as each pirouette brought her closer to him, his eyes fixed on her – waiting and watching. She gasped as he caught her by the waist, hands sliding up her bodice as he turned with her; fingertips brushing her breasts as her took her beneath the arms, lifting her off her feet and spinning round in a strong fluid move that set her heart racing.

She felt the music in her blood; the quickening pace as Anselm lowered her, his breath warm upon his skin and his scent heavy with musk – turning till her back pressed against his chest, feeling his heat and brushing her hand against him as they turned once more and parted; their movements intensifying as the rhythm built and grew. Turning… parting… the exhilaration of his hands on her; lifting her against his waist as they moved in ever tightening circles, the dance possessing them both until they cared for nothing else.

Aleska felt herself swept in the air as the music reached a crescendo, then falling – but still with the strength of Anselm’s hands clasping her firmly as she dropped, pressed against his chest with his forehead to his; the tang of his sweat intoxicating her and they made one final turn and stopped. She didn’t know if the applause of the crowd or the rushing of her blood was what she could hear thundering about her. All she could be sure of was Anselm’s eyes still fixed on hers; fire burning in their emerald depths as he breathed hoarse and heavy.

“We… have an audience…” She reminded him, scarcely able to form her own words.

“I know…” he breathed back with a half laugh. “That’s the only reason I’m not tearing your gown off right now…”
They parted, Anselm bowing to the Empress and Aleska dropping a deep curtsey. Celene acknowledged them with a graceful tilt of her wineglass, appearing to laugh at something Briala – now Marquise of Halamshiral and her ‘Adviser on Elven Affairs’ – murmured in her ear.

“So, what exactly is this?” Aleska asked as they strolled with deliberate nonchalance from the floor, touching the glittering medallion and allowing her hand to linger on his skin. Anselm lifted it up with a faint smirk.

“I’m now a Chevalier of the Order of the Golden Lion of Monstimmard.” He chuckled. “Sounds impressive, but they dole them out like party favours to any visiting royal. I’m told Alistair uses his as a paperweight…”

Aleska pouted slightly.

“I didn’t get one…”

“You’re more than royalty; you’re the Herald of Andraste, remember?” He whispered. “And after standing beside the Empress tonight, not even those old hens in the Grand Cathedral dare dispute that!”

“Speaking of which…” Aleska giggled as she saw Josephine bearing down with a furious and harassed look on her face. “You can deal with this…”

***

“Was that even legal?” Dorian muttered to Sophia as they watched Anselm and Aleska leaving the dance floor. She laughed, taking the glass of champagne he offered her.

“Barely!” She took a sip of her drink. “But I imagine everyone will be dancing it before the week is out.”

“Doubtless…” Dorian chuckled. “By the way, you have grass stains all down the back of your skirts.”

“What!!!” Sophia gasped in alarm, anxiously pulling the train of her gown round to check and finding it unmarked. She glared at Dorian. “You’re an absolute beast!”

“Indeed…” He smirked, flicking the end of his moustache with his little finger. “I thought dear Cullen had a certain… spring… in his step when you returned from the gardens. Anyway, I’m going to get more drinks; I’m in terrible danger of sobering up and that would be a disaster for everyone!”

Dorian strolled off, humming a jaunty little tune to himself. It was entertaining the way the Orlesian court wasn’t quite sure how to deal with him. On one hand he was indisputably noble – House Pavus was already ancient when Val Royeaux was no more than a muddy little market – but he was also a despised Tevinter, albeit one in the service of the new Saviour of Orlais; they didn’t know whether to fawn or spit.

Turning a corner in search of more alcohol he caught sight of Jonas, apparently trying to squeeze himself behind the statue of some Emperor.

*It might be Etienne I…* Dorian pondered *but then, they all have that same look of belligerent flatulence…*

“My dear Jonas, whatever are you doing?”
Jonas glared at him, making frantic ‘shushing’ gestures.

“Tryin’ to bloody hide…” he hissed. “What does it look like?”

“I think you’d have more success with that one over there…” Dorian waved vaguely in the direction of another statue. “The fat one standing on a dead wyvern; and why in the blazes are you trying to hide?”

“Ain’t a wyvern; supposed to be a varghest… ‘cept they got the crest wrong… bloody stupid looking.” Jonas muttered. “And I’m hiding from that Yvette… Josie’s little sis!”

Dorian nodded understandingly, trying not to laugh.

“Ah, I see. Still trying to get you to pose in the… erm… altogether… is she?”

Jonas shuddered at the thought.

“She got intentions, that one… and I ain’t keen on having all me bits on display for the world to gawp at!”

Dorian opened his mouth to answer then paused, remembering the past three Wicked Grace nights at the Herald.

“That hasn’t seemed to bother you before.” He noted. “And you didn’t even lose the last game.”

“Yeah… well… that’s just messing about with mates…” Jonas grumbled, trying to squirrel himself out from behind the statue. “I ain’t gonna be sprawled out on a bearskin with nothing but me greatsword for company!”

Dorian hesitated, clearing his throat before answering.

“I imagine that would provide adequate coverage, in a manner of speaking…” He frowned as Jonas wriggled in obvious discomfort. “What appears to be the matter now?”

Jonas squirmed again; then looked over at Dorian, biting his bottom lip as his eyes widened in alarm.

“Dor…” he said quietly, “I think I’m stuck…”

“You’re what?” Dorian exclaimed, striding over. “Kaffas! So you are; here, breathe in and let me…”

“Ow! Ow-ow-ow! Not helping!!!!” Jonas yelped as Dorian tried to ease him out. The Mage let out an exasperated sigh.

“Just keep breathing in…” he instructed. “I think I see what the problem is; your belts caught on this projecting thing here, if I can just…”

“Hope that’s the only thing that’s bloody caught…” Jonas chuckled before suddenly squirming again. “Aaaah! Watch it, I’m ticklish!!!!”

Dorian groaned quietly as he gradually worked Jonas’ belt-buckle of the curling bronze ornamentation of the pedestal.

“If anyone sees us like this, they’ll have a lot more than a dance to gossip about tonight.”
“Sorry Dor…” Jonas mumbled, his face flushing with embarrassment. “I’m being a real bloody idiot, again aren’t I?”

Dorian shook his head firmly, continuing to ease the buckle around

“You’re not an idiot. If I had Yvette de Montilyet chasing after me, brandishing a paintbrush and an artistic expression, I’d be climbing the nearest flagpole to get away… No! Don’t laugh! Don’t! Laugh! I’ve almost got it!”

There was a sharp ‘sproing’ and Jonas slid out from behind the statue with a sigh of relief.

“Knew I shouldn’t have gone for third helpings…” he muttered, smoothing down his rumpled waistcoat. “Thanks, Dor, you’re a real friend; sorry if I’m spoiling your evening.”

“You’re spoiling nothing. I can be sneered at anywhere…”

“Are people saying stuff to you?” Jonas frowned. “Cause if they are… Ain’t gonna put up with it.”

Dorian patted his arm reassuringly as an idea occurred to him; a welcome escape for them both.

“I can deal with them myself, thank you. Believe me, I’m more than used to it. Why don’t we find that garden with the pool and you can show me that thing with the coins everyone appears so keen on?”

“The Caprice game?” Jonas’ face brightened. “Well… ain’t really a game, but I like to try and make the coins line up in patterns… like them ass-terry-um things!”

Dorian smiled back at him; if only everything in life could be as simple as cheering up the big Reaver.

“Well then…” He said brightly. “Seeing as there’s nothing left to kill, lets go and make some patterns!”

###

Anselm’s eyes flickered open with a soft moan and he raised his hand to shield them from the light creeping through gap in the curtains.

“I didn’t mean to wake you…” Aleska said, her chin resting on one hand while the other traced the outline of the purplish-red blotches now mottling his sides. “I just wanted to see how bad these were…”

Anselm chuckled, still covering his eyes, wincing a little as the pain of the bruised intruded on his consciousness.

“Nothing a hot bath and some ointment won’t cure… and I can think of worse ways to wake up.”

“I can tell…” Her lips brushed his shoulder and he felt her hand sliding under the sheet. “I’m can’t believe last night wasn’t just some bizarre Fade-dream…”

“Which part?” He murmured, moving his leg to raise the sheet a little more. “Telling the three most powerful people in Orlais to stop behaving like spoiled toddlers, or that Florianne actually thought those butterfly-wings were an acceptable fashion choice at her age…?”

He shuddered, although that had more to do with what Aleska’s fingers were doing than the thought of the former Grand Duchess’s gown.
“I was thinking more about our dance…” She laughed, leaning in and kissing him. “That was the one thing I really didn’t expect…”

Anselm took his hand away from his eyes and turned to look at her; her skin pale and clear, black hair falling in enticing tangles about her shoulders.

“I’m glad I’ve not lost the capacity to surprise you…” he said, shifting onto his side. The movement caused a sudden stab of pain and he yelped aloud. Aleska sighed, rolling out of bed and walking over to the bell-rope.

“That’s it… I’m going to get you that hot bath before we end up breaking something…”

“Too late for that…” Anselm gestured at the chaos in the room, clothes and bedding strewn over the floor; an armchair lay on its side, one of the front legs snapped and dangling awkwardly. “I really doubt it was designed for two people…”

“Not if they were doing what I seem to recall…” Aleska wrapped a chamber-robe around her and tugged on the bell-rope. “You ought to re-arrange the sheets; I don’t want you shocking the maid.”

“Probably not the worst she’s seen…” Anselm muttered, pulling the covers back up to his chest, and giving her his best puppy-dog eyes. “Come back to bed, Love… please? Just for a few minutes…”

Aleska picked up a cushion and tossed it at his head.

“It’s never ‘just a few minutes’ but, if you stop pouting, I might wash your back for you…”

The knock at the door came sooner than they anticipated; however, instead of the chamber maid, it was Leliana – carrying a message and looking uncharacteristically flustered.

“Apologies, Inquisitor; I hadn’t intended to disturb you, but I received this…” She handed the message to Aleska. “From Guard Commander Vallen of Kirkwall.”

“If it’s from Kirkwall then it can’t be good news…” Anselm grumbled, bunching the sheets about his waist and grabbing his breeches as Aleska scanned the note.

“It isn’t…” She replied, tossing the message to him and turning back to Leliana. “Why is he doing this?”

“Sebastian has been determined to avenge the death of Grand Cleric Elthina for years.” Leliana explained. “Now he’s fully in control of Starkhaven again, he has the resources to do that and he’s convinced Kirkwall is still sheltering Anders and his associates.”

Aleska rubbed the bridge of her nose, closing her eyes and letting out a long sigh.

“Anders is dead.”

“I’ve suspected that for some time as well.” Leliana replied. “But we’ve never had any definite proof.”

“I was there when Hawke cremated him, in the Trevisanto Forest. We scattered his ashes afterwards.”

Anselm put down the note, gawping at her in astonishment; even Leliana appeared taken aback. After a moment she regained her composure.
“That is an… unexpected… piece of information. It would help if you could tell me the whole story.”

Aleska took the glass of wine that Anselm offered her and sat down on the space he cleared on the couch. There wasn’t really much to tell; how Hawke and Anders had been ambushed by a squad Templars as they made their way north to Antiva, hoping to rally the Mages there. They’d beaten the ambush off, but Anders died of his wounds while the two of them tried to find a safe haven.

“But Anders was a healer, one of the best…” Leliana said with a look of some confusion. “Why couldn’t he…?”

Aleska shook her head.

“Hawke said his injuries were too severe for him to risk venturing into the Fade to draw on the spirits; he was afraid he couldn’t control them. They’d heard rumours the Clans had moved north, hoped to find them—or at least some other sympathetic Mages, before it was too late… It was almost too late for Hawke when we found him. No-one outside our clan knows about this, not even Varric, Hawke knew the danger it would put us in.”

“I understand…” Leliana nodded thoughtfully “We shall need to find some way of dealing with this that doesn’t expose your involvement, or that of your clan. I’ll inform the others and we can call a meeting when you’re ready. I don’t imagine it will be long before we hear from Sebastian…”

As the door closed behind her, Anselm put his arms around Aleska, drawing her head down to rest on his shoulder.

“I’m sorry, Love… I never knew he meant so much to you…”

“He was the first human I ever trusted…” Aleska said quietly, twining the belt of her robe around her fingers. “I should have told you…”

Anselm kissed the top of her head.

“It wasn’t your secret… it was his, and your people’s; you had to protect them…”

Aleska leaned back against him, closing her eyes briefly, before sitting up with a determined look.

“We’d better get dressed.” She said, pushing a lock of hair behind her ear. “And I need to find out exactly what we can expect in Kirkwall.”

Chapter End Notes

I deeply apologize to everyone, but Chapter 38: The Invasion will not be updated on Tuesday the 28th May, but instead we will do a double feature with Chapter 38 updated on the 4th June. My health at this present time makes it difficult to write as well as the health of my toddler.
Thank you for your patience and understanding, we hope you enjoy the fic, and wish to thank those who have left comments, kudos and subscriptions.

***Updated Note - Tuesday 11th June***
My sincere apologies for the delay in updating - a variety of personal circumstances have upset the normal schedule of weekly updates, but the story is still being actively worked on and will be updated as soon as possible. Thank you for your patience and understanding.
Kirkwall, the place where it all began. As Sophia and Anselm prepare to meet and negotiate with Sebastian, Aleska finds herself in Hawke's old estate with more than pressure plates and flying arrows to greet her. Will her actions win over her new companion, or condemn her in his eyes.

The lighthouse was first thing come into view just before dawn, the great beacon marking the only safe passage along this treacherous stretch of coastline; nicknames the ‘Wounded Coast’ for the untold vessels and lives claimed by its jagged cliffs, shifting sandbanks and frequent storms. By noon they could see the looming black seawalls that gave the city its name and could begin to make out the colossal pair of statues guarding the harbour entrance. Aleska’s fingers laced around Anselm’s, for comfort and support, as their ship approached to the city. He smiled and drew her into his warm embrace. There were heavy, dark circles beneath his eyes and she suspected hers were the same; neither of them had slept much on the voyage and they’d spent many sleepless nights together in the crow’s nest, counting the stars and wondering how they came to be in the night skies – a moment of peace before they were plunged into the chaos of Kirkwall.

“Will you be all right?” Anselm asked quietly, his voice barely louder than the distant sound of surf. “I could come with you… if you’d like.”

“No,” Aleska drew in a breath, filling her lungs with the fresh sea air. “I need you and Sophia to be vigilant in your task, we cannot afford to tip Prince Sebastian off. I will be fine.”

“They call it Lowtown for a reason,” Anselm warned her, placing his coat across her shoulders. “Even before all this it had the reputation of the most dangerous slum in all the Free Marches. Watch your back, and your sides… now that I mention it your front as well.”

“I’ll be careful.” Aleska placed a tender kiss against his cheek and let go of his hand. “And you need to remember to watch your temper. I doubt that punching the Prince of Starkhaven will do much to help the situation.”

“I promise to behave, even though Sebastian Vael has a very punchable face.” Anselm laughed. “Did I ever tell you what Marc said about him?”

Aleska shook her head; she’d never met the middle Trevelyan sibling, but had heard plenty about his sharp tongue and impish sense of humour.

“No, you haven’t; but I doubt it was complimentary.”

“Why bother with snow-white armour when it’s much easier to have ‘I’m a colossal prick’ embroidered on your banner’!” Anselm quoted, with a dry chuckle. “Marc’s a little shit at times, as Joe’s fond of pointing out, but he does have a way with words.”

“Another Trevelyan trait, I’ve noticed…” Aleska ran her hand softly along his arm. “I need to
speak to Cullen, and you ought to go and get changed. Sebastian may be a colossal prick, but we still have to put on a good show.”

She walked across the deck toward Cullen. The Commander stood near the bows; wrapped in the oppressive silence that had been gathering around him since they boarded the ship. He’d never ventured below decks once, either to sleep or eat, brusquely citing seasickness as the reason. Even by his normal taciturn standards, Cullen was withdrawn – almost surly – and had shown little inclination for company or conversation.

“Will you be ready for this? I know you haven’t—”

“I shall be fine,” Cullen cut her statement off before she could finish; his hands firmly gripping the edge of the boat as he continued to stare into the deep blue waters below.

Aleska stood beside him, her nail picking at a small wooden splinter sticking up from the rail. She could see his knuckles straining the leather of his gloves, and the fast pulsing of a vein in his neck. She could almost hear his heartbeat resounding as if his heart was trying to leap from his chest and plunge into the ocean below. A gentle hand upon his shoulder met with silence, and a light shrug told her to remove it. Aleska exhaled slowly; she knew the signs all too well. There was a dark place within the Commander’s thoughts that he’d hinted at, but never shared. The last time she’d seen him like this was in the wake of Haven; caught between blaming himself for the catastrophe and seething with fury at the former comrade who led the enemy forces. It was plain the Commander wished to be alone with his thoughts; he’d not set foot in Kirkwall since Cassandra invited him to join the Inquisition and it held no pleasant memories for him.

She left Cullen to his silence, the heels of her boots clicking against the wooden planks beneath her feet as she made her way towards the stern. Sophia’s expression was not dissimilar to Cullen’s as she gazed towards the city with a distant, thoughtful, look in her violet eyes. As Aleska came nearer she saw the colour drain from Sophia’s cheeks. She pressed the back of her hand against her mouth for a second before leaning over the rail and vomiting into the waters below. Aleska hung back, waiting until her friend was dabbing at her mouth with a handkerchief before approaching. Sophia turned; visibly tensing, then, relaxing when she saw who it was.

“How long have you been standing there?” Sophia’s hand rested upon her heart and she took a deep breath to steady herself. “I—I’m sorry I didn’t see you.”

“Are you feeling all right?”

“Just a bit seasick,” Sophia tucked the handkerchief back into the sleeve of her travelling-gown. “I usually don’t get like this; perhaps it’s all that Orlesian food.”

“And the nerves,” Aleska leaned beside Sophia, watching the seabirds turning and calling in the shops wake. “Worrying for Cullen as well, I imagine. He’s never really spoken much of his time in Kirkwall, but I doubt it holds happy memories for him.”

Sophia sighed, shaking her head.

“Kirkwall has been a worry for the Free Marches ever since the Chantry ousted House Threnhold…”

Aleska turned to her with a questioning look in her eyes.

“I heard the last Threnhold Viscount was a tyrant?”

Sophia laughed, adjusting the collar of her gown.
“Tyrant is a very weighted word and depends a lot on perspective. Doubtless there are those who consider my father to be such – although they would not say so in his hearing. Whatever the real truth of the man; Emperor Florian wanted him gone, Divine Beatrix only too happy to oblige and Grand Cleric Elthina swift to… encourage… Kirkwall’s Templars to take action.”

“The same Elthina that Prince Sebastian is here to avenge?” Aleska mulled this thought over. “It sounds like Kirkwall’s problems go back a lot further than I imagined.”

Sophia reached over and took her hand.

“Kirkwall is complicated and dangerous, even by Marcher standards, and you’re going into the dangerous part of the city whilst I sip tea, eat lemon cakes and try to talk some sense into Sebastian Vael’s thick Starkhavener skull!”

“I would actually prefer being neck deep in bandits over that,” Aleska leaned her elbows upon the bannister, soaking up the mid-morning sun. “Have you met him before?”

Sophia rolled her eyes.

“It was once suggested we should marry; the Maker delivered me from ever enduring that fate – although he might be more tolerable if he had someone other than Andraste between his legs once in a while!”

Their ship sailed into Kirkwall on the evening tide. On the far side of the great harbour, Aleska could see the looming bulk of the Gallows; now sealed and empty, occupied only by the baleful lyrium shards that had once been Knight-Commander Meredith Stannard. It might only have been her imagination, but it seemed as if a faint reddish aura shimmered around the deserted courtyard as the light faded. Cullen stood with his gaze fixed on the abandoned fortress, and she could see the muscles working in his jaw as he dealt with the memories it conjured for him.

Sebastian’s men had occupied parts of the Upper City; but all of Lowtown, together with the Viscount’s Keep and Hightown Market, remained under the control of the City Guard and the Provisional Viscount. A detachment of the Guard stood at the harbourside in a flawless formation, dressed in the finest armour the city could buy. Before them stood a woman, her fiery red hair tied back into a neat bun; beside her stood a dark-haired man, also in the armour of the City Guard. Above them flew a banner bearing the image of a diving cormorant; the presence of Kirkwall’s ancient standard proving the city yet unconquered.

Aleska and Sophia were first to disembark, with the others following. The red-haired woman approached them, giving a smart salute; followed by the dark-haired man.

“Inquisitor Lavellan, welcome to Kirkwall. I am Guard-Commander Aveline Vallen; this is my second-in-command, Ser Donnic Hendyr.” she bowed before Aleska then turned to Sophia. “My Lady Sophia, are you here on behalf of your father or as a representative of the Free Mages?”

“Neither.” Sophia smiled warmly, watching each soldier drop their head in respect as the guards drew up in ranks to escort the Inquisition delegates up to the Keep. “I imagine my father will be sending his own observers to report on the situation.”

“Lady Sophia is one of my chief diplomats,” Aleska walked alongside Aveline as they made their way through Lowtown between curious, half-silent, crowds of onlookers. “She’ll be assisting the Provisional Viscount in his discussions with Prince Sebastian while I lead the Inquisition investigations into the truth of his claims.”
“In other words, stall him until he runs out of coin…” Aveline gave Aleska a sharp, knowing look. “I was an officer in the Fereldan army under good King Cailan and know a bit about strategy. Sebastian doesn’t have the men or the resources to maintain a prolonged occupation under these conditions, not without outside support which he doesn’t have. He’s bluffing, and I want his bluff called before he can do any real damage.”

“That’s the plan.” Aleska said, responding with equal bluntness. “I don’t care about the Prince of Starkhaven’s personal vendettas, I just want to see him out of Kirkwall with minimal casualties.”

Aveline gave a grunt of approval.

“Then we have an agreement.” They continued walking in silence for a few minutes and Aleska had the sense the Guard-Commander was debating something within her own thoughts. When she spoke again her voice was quiet, almost tentative. “They tell me you were with Hawke when… when he died.”

Aleska nodded, it was the question she’d been expecting and dreading.

“He fought like a wildcat and, at the end, just about broke Carver’s jaw getting him to leave. There was no stopping him.”

Aveline gave a sad sigh that was almost half a laugh.

“That sounds like the Hawke I knew; he always had to be the one to finish a fight.” She paused, glancing up at the soaring towers of the Keep. “There are still many in the city who regard him as a hero, and who say Sebastian wouldn’t have dared cross our borders if he was still alive.”

“He’d have sent him running back to Starkhaven with a fireball up his arse…”

The day dragged for longer than Aleska wanted to acknowledge. It had been ages since Cullen had even ushered a single word to any of them, even the greetings he exchanged with Aveline were cold and formal.

There’s bad blood there. Aveline will tell me what happened here, Cullen certainly won’t.

Aleska drew in a deep breath, distracted by the footsteps of the guards paced the corridor outside Aveline’s office, it offered little in terms of privacy.

“If you want to find anyone with connections to the old Mage Underground, Darktown is your best bet. To be honest, there wasn’t much of it left after three years of Meredith being in charge, but even the Templars never ventured down there.” Aveline’s finger tapped the parchment, her finger trailing along a pathway that hadn’t been transcribed onto the newer maps of the city. “There’s something else you might want to look at. Some of the watchmen say they’ve been spotting lights in the old Amell mansion at odd hours of the night. Some say the place is haunted, but there’s an entrance from Anders’ old clinic. It hasn’t been used in years, but it would be the perfect way to sneak in and out of Hightown. I don’t have the men spare to investigate, but you…”

Aveline gave Aleska a hopeful look as she pressed the mug to her lips, the barrack-room coffee tasted like swamp water, but it did the job of heating her body up from the sea voyage. Aleska’s glance flickered to Anselm, sitting in a chair gazing at the book resting upon his lap. He looled distracted, but she could tell he was soaking up every nuance in the room. He shot a small wink in her direction when he caught her gaze. Sophia stood beside Cullen, her fingers touching the pendant upon her neck one last time, swinging it from side to side; clearly trying to think of the right words to make Cullen feel more at ease. The awkward silence between them reminded her of
an old married couple who had long forgotten how to speak to one another.

_He should never have agreed to come; this isn’t how he is going to get his closure._

Aleska remembered walking beside him, listening to the citizens whisper his name, sneering at the fact he dared show his face in Kirkwall; after being Meredith’s loyal lap dog.

_He pretends it does not affect him, but even my armour isn’t that thick._

Aleska nodded automatically as Aveline continued talking, knowing that if she missed part of the plan, then Anselm would inform her before they parted ways.

“I need a word with my Commander,” Aleska spoke loudly enough to catch Cullen’s attention. “In private if you please.”

With an outstretched hand, Aveline pointed Aleska in the direction of a vacant office. It would have to suffice, Cullen marched along the passageways, as if old routines had already instilled themselves within his body. The door closed behind them, Aleska ensured no curious guard would venture too close.

“Are you sure you can handle this?” Aleska folded her arms, “being back in Kirkwall… Cullen if you’re not ready to face this…”

“When will I be offered another chance?” Cullen retaliated, taking a tone with her he’d never dared to before. “This is my chance to be at peace with what happened here.”

“By gazing at the lyrium spikes protruding out of the courtyard?” Aleska shook her head. “That is not closure, you’re tormenting yourself with what happened. As your friend, I ask that you not shut us out. You haven’t said a word to Sophia since we boarded the boat.”

Cullen turned around, his step misguided, and he gripped a chair for support. A sharp breath left his lips, his jawline clenched, and his hands gripped the back of the chair tightly enough that he might have snapped it off if he were not careful. Aleska’s hand upon his shoulder, she could sense the tense muscles beneath the leather breastplate. Guiding him to the chair, Aleska ensured he had been seated properly as not to fall over.

“What was that about?” Aleska’s hand remained upon her shoulder, only to have Cullen’s envelop hers in a gentle squeeze of reassurance.

“It happens on occasion,” Cullen removed her hand from his shoulder, standing up. “We ought to head back, before the whispers—”

“Before what whispers?” Aleska cocked her hips to the side, resting her hands upon her waist. “If you mean before the guard’s whisper of the sordid acts, we do behind closed doors, then you needn’t worry about that. Skyhold is buzzing with that gossip already. I can’t imagine how it must make poor Sophia feel.”

“Does it not get to you?” Cullen straightened himself. “Your… our reputations…”

“Perhaps it used to,” Aleska confessed, moving her foot back and forth against the red rug beneath her feet. “But… anymore—” Aleska drew a deep breath, letting it out in a slow exhale, those amber eyes peered through her lie. “Okay of course it does, how do you think it makes me feel? Knowing that people assume you and I are—it doesn’t matter, the more we pay attention to it… the more we give people room to continue the gossip.”
“Are we truly happy?” Cullen asked, taking a step closer.

“You already asked me that,” Aleska leaned against the door. “At the palace. I would like to believe we are, even if we led completely different lives; never meeting any of the people we have… there would always be some small part of us we’re missing… we would just never understand what or why. For what it is worth, I count my blessings daily I met you, Jonas, Sophia and Anselm… even Bull and Varric.”

“The feeling is mutual,” Cullen broke into a small smile. “Thank you, you shouldn’t have concerned yourself with me.”

“You’re my friend Cullen,” Aleska playfully nudged him. “The day I stop caring or hauling your arse into an office to sass you, be very concerned.”

“Duly noted.”

Aleska and Cullen returned to Aveline’s office, Anselm’s arms wrapped around her from behind pulling her into a tight hold. A soft kiss placed against her cheek forced a small giggle from her lips. Aleska watched as Cullen kissed Sophia’s cheek, taking her hands within his. Undoubtedly spouting out some apology, well he better be. Aleska pressed her lips against Anselm’s.

“What was that for?” Anselm looked down at her, swaying from side to side.

“Just for being you,” Aleska retaliated as Aveline entered the office once more.

“Lady Inquisitor,” Aveline sucked in a breath. “I cannot in good faith ask you to endanger yourself in Lowtown. Not without—”

“I am going,” Aleska removed Anselm’s hands from her waist. “Whether I have you as back up or not.”

“If you’d allow me to finish,” Aveline looked past Anselm and Aleska. “I have someone who knew Lowtown’s corners like the back of his hand.”

Aleska turned around, leaning within the threshold was an elf, a sword as large as he appeared rested upon his back. Black armour adorned his muscular body, spikes protruding out of the pauldrens. Even his gloved resembled long spiked claws. White hair framed his handsome face, with piercing green eyes to even rival Anselm’s.

“Fenris, thank you for agreeing to do this.” Aveline straightened herself, noticing the glance between Cullen and Fenris.

“Remember your end of the deal,” Fenris pushed himself off the threshold. “Do I have to bow before you?”

“It isn’t expected,” Aleska swallowed the lump within her throat. “Let’s pretend that you did, as a fair compromise.”

“This might not be as horrid as I thought it would be.”

***

Aleska stood at the steps of the Viscounts Keep, with Sophia and Anselm before her. Anselm had been able to sneak her a pair of daggers past the guards at the harbour, the belt tightening around her waist the daggers locked securely in place. Removing her coat, her bare shoulders caught the
last of the afternoon sun, finally her hair tied back into a ponytail, only a few strands fell along her face.

“Remember,” Aleska reminded them. “Just keep Bran talking, until I get back, if he asks where I am… make something up—just not involving Varric and or the… what is that tavern called?”

“Hanged Man,” Fenris answered.

“Right, that.” Aleska placed a kiss against Anselm’s cheek. “And you don’t venture near the Blooming Rose, I don’t want another unpleasant surprise.”

“You wound me, My Lady.” Anselm took her hands within his and placed a kiss upon each of her knuckles. “My heart will yearn every moment it is away from you.”

Aleska raised a brow, Anselm might enjoy demonstrating his affections but he was rarely so melodramatic; even the emphasis on My Lady was heavier than usual. She glanced over at Fenris, waiting for her in a stance of calculated casualness, and swallowed back her laugh.

“You’re adorable when you’re jealous.” She whispered in his ear. Anselm looked at her in surprise but she caught way his glance briefly flickered in the direction of the tall Elven warrior.

“I’m not…” he began, then stopped and tilted his head slightly; looking down at her with a sheepish smile. “Alright, perhaps a little but can you blame me? He does have a certain… intense… quality about him.”

Aleska kissed him lightly on the chin.

“Now I’m wondering if I should be jealous.” She smiled. “I’ll be back before you know it; just try to behave.”

Accompanied by Fenris, Aleska made her way from the Keep down towards the vacant marketplace. The streets of Kirkwall seemed different then when she remembered it last. Only a few shopkeepers were doing business in Hightown Market, compared to the noise and bustle she recalled from all those years ago. Most of Kirkwall’s nobility had retreated to their estates and holdings in the surrounding country, others to the relative security and stability of Ostwick or Denerim; there they could drink coffee and play cards in safety, shaking their heads over how terrible things were back home. The Dwarven quarter still bustled with life, nothing would deter the Merchants Guild from turning a profit, but in the smaller streets and plazas scarcely a single street rat crossed the pathway. Stealing a glance, her eyes scanned Fenris, distant would be the best way to describe him.

He earned the name Broody from Varric, Aleska couldn’t help but smile for a moment, but it didn’t escape Fenris’ notice. Nor did the anchor upon her arm, every time his gaze shifted toward it; a sense of unease came over him. They both had questions, but neither of them would dare break the comfortable silence currently around them.

“You—” They both said, unable to continue from there. “I—” once again they spoke in unison.

The small cawing of a crow caught their attention as they made their way into Lowtown; the streets narrowed and became steeper, while polished marble and polychrome woodwork gave way to mud brick and peeling limewash. There was little wind in these cramped, winding, alleys and the stench filled Aleska’s nostrils. She covered her mouth for a moment, afraid the smell would force her to vomit, pressing her other hand against her stomach to prevent the queasiness overtaking her. I lived in a forest before, surely the smell of a little urine isn’t going to make me vomit. Aleska
shook her head, expelling the thought from her mind.

“Will you manage?” Fenris asked, keeping his distance and looking askance at her; as if concerned she would be sick at any moment.

“I will be fine,” Aleska cleared her throat. “The anchor… heightens my sense of smell. I am sure you can understand that… as an elf I mean.”

“I am not sure I know what you mean.” Fenris walked past her, ensuring there had been no one to see them slip down the stairwell into an even more foetid back lane. “I sense no difference.”

“Aren’t you lucky,” Aleska grumbled. Fenris responded with a deep, cynical, laugh.

“Spend enough time in Lowtown and the smell becomes like an old friend. You start to miss it after a while.”

“I’ll take your word for it.” Aleska muttered, still pressing the back of her hand against her mouth and feeling an irrational surge of irritation.

“I’ve spent so much time around nobles, I’ve forgotten what the real world smells like… at least that’s what Kay would tell me…”

The steps leading to Lowtown seemed vacant of much light, even the sun dared not peek from the towering buildings towering over the slums of Kirkwall. Only the Viscounts Keep remained visible through it all. All around the streets, Aleska noted the beggars, extending their hands for any alms she could spare. Unfortunately, she had none. Even a man dressed in the tattered remnants of a Templar mantle approached her. He must have bartered his armour for coin years back, only the tattoo of a flaming sword, barely visible under the grime, confirmed he’d once been a member of the order.

Aleska noted his hands trembling in ways she hadn’t seen in her own Templars, his ragged breath indicating a pain far beyond normal wounds. The blindness in his one eye told her of a battle and the scar running from his brow and along his cheek informed her of the manner in which the blindness had come to him.

I wonder if Cullen knew you. Did you serve under him?

Aleska found herself wanting to ask the question, but Fenris’ hand grabbed her shoulder and pulled her back into the shadows; pressing a finger to his lips and pointing further down the alley.

She saw a man and a woman emerging from the doorway of a rundown tenement. The woman’s garish clothes and bright make-up allowed Aleska to guess at her profession, and it didn’t strike her as an unusual sight until she caught a glimpse of the sunburst brand on the man’s forehead. The man quickly pulled his hood up and hurried off in the opposite direction, but the woman was coming their way.

“Apologies…” Fenris whispered, and pulled her into a tight embrace; to any but the most determined observer they would appear as just another couple taking advantage of a dark corner. As the woman passed, she paused and dropped a few coppers into the trembling fingers of the destitute Templar.

She’s a man…

Aleska fought back a gasp of surprise. A human would find it hard to tell but, despite her feminine appearance and gait, the woman now heading up the steps towards Hightown had undoubtedly
been born male. After she’d passed, Fenris let go of Aleska; brushing himself off with a faintly embarrassed look.

“What was that all about, and who were they?” Aleska asked; her thoughts spinning with the strangeness of the encounter.

“I didn’t recognise the man, although Tranquil in Kirkwall are a rare sight now. Some fled with the Mages, most died in the fighting or immediately after…” He paused, his face darkening as he recalled the grim days at the start of the Rebellion. “The woman is called Serendipity. She’s one of the more ‘exotic’ pleasures available at the Blooming Rose.”

“So why would an ‘exotic’ courtesan be meeting a Tranquil down here?” Aleska asked. “I doubt it was for her usual services.”

“That, I cannot say.” Fenris tapped his fingers against his chin thoughtfully. “What I do know is that your old friend Samson used to spend a lot of time with her when he could afford it. Varric always said she was his real addiction, Lyrium was just something he was stuck with.”

Aleska’s fingers tightened around the hilt of her knife.

“Should we follow her?”

Fenris shook his head.

“I know where to find her, and we have other business in hand right now.”

They walked on in silence, nothing but the murmurs of shop keepers trying to sell their wares caught her hearing. Some offered her watered-down perfumes from Val Royeaux at a discounted price and other offered her various herbs for potions. One even brazen enough to assume that she and Fenris lovers, offering them a potion for the bedroom, it took everything within Aleska not to burst out laughing at that moment. The shopkeeper placed the glass jar carefully within Aleska’s grasp, the thought of a potential sale sent a small sparkle within her eyes. Soft scents of lilac and rose reached Aleska’s nose, the sweet infusions reminded her of the moment after returning from Emprise du Lion. A bath laden with these oils awaited her after a long council meeting. Even now, after all this time, that memory remained fresh as if it happened only yesterday. A smile touched upon Aleska’s lips as she handed over the coins the woman asked for the small jar. The shop keeper counted it out, ensuring the amount was correct and placing it within a small box beside her. The emptiness ringing toward Aleska made her heart sink.

“You will enjoy it tonight, I can promise you that.” the shop keeper said, resting against a small chair. “Now remember, only one small drop before required, massaged gently into the—well you get the idea. I promise you’ll have ‘er trembling by the time the eve is up.”

“We are not—” Fenris’ hand scrubbed along his face, annoyance setting into his face.

“Thank you,” Aleska cut him off, the small jar resting securely in her pack. “Come along, darling.”

“You enjoyed that far too much,” Fenris scoffed as they made their way under a low arch and into the gloom of Darktown.

“Don’t be so broody, it doesn’t suit you; despite what Varric says.” Aleska laughed.

The cellar which had once served as Anders’ clinic appeared to have been abandoned for years, the
doors locked and bolted, but a bunch of flowers – only just starting to wither – rested on a ledge beside a guttering stub of candle. Anders had served as a healer to the poorest people of this town; risking his own life and freedom to tend their ailments without any reward.

Fenris stared at the grime wooden doors for a long time before speaking, his voice quiet and distant.

“I was not sympathetic when Hawke lost his mother. All I could see was another example of the evils of magic. Perhaps if I had paid more attention to his grief than my anger…” He shook his head with a frown. “Kirkwall twists the way people think, turns their darkest imaginings into obsessions. It was only after I left, that I realised how much it had poisoned my thoughts; made me do and say things I didn’t really feel. I think only Isabela understood something of what was happening and tried to help… in her own way.”

Aleska put her hand on Fenris’ arm.

“Hawke once told me his only real regret was that he never got to mend things with you…”

“We all have regrets we have to live with…” Fenris muttered, turning away from the clinic door and pointing at a dark passageway half-hidden behind a pile of crates. “The entry to the tunnel is over here.”

The old wooden door banged against the stone wall, rotten timbers splintering under the impact of Fenris’ boot. Only the light from cracks within the wall could shine through. The dust speckles illuminated by the afternoon sun, gently floating all around them. Old wooden chips rested against a dirty cot; this place had been undisturbed in what seemed like an Age. Except for a pair of fresh footprints breaking through the layer of thick dust and sand.

“Beggars seeking shelter I assume,” Fenris knelt, the tip of his finger traced against the shoe print.

“How many people know that this leads to Hawke’s old manor?” Aleska crouched beside him, these footprints no more than a few hours old.

“No one that didn’t need to know,” Fenris looked up, noticing the footprints leading toward the old trap door concealed from the naked eye.

“Knowing Hawke, one drunk night at the Hanged Man meant most of Kirkwall would know.”

Aleska moved the curtain across, not even a single speck of dust floated down toward her. *It has been used and quite recently.* Aleska’s fingers trailed along the metal railing. Not even an ounce of dirt touched against her skin. Her gaze caught Fenris attempting to open the door, in a moment she pushed him aside, slamming it shut.

“Are you trying to get us both killed,” Aleska’s finger pointed at a small trip wire, before pointing above her.

An elongated claw made from bone and blade would have impaled them against the wall, should the trigger be snapped without the proper key. Fenris’ green eyes glanced at her, then glanced at the trip wire; as if to curse his own carelessness. Aleska reached for a throwing knife, pacing backwards allowing enough space between them and the claw suspended above them. A graceful flick of the wrist allowed the knife to split the tripwire in two, sending the large claw into the backwall with a heavy thud, bits of rubble and dust released from the force.

“How did you do that?” Fenris eyed her, “I have seen rogues before, none could do that.”
“They didn’t have the trainer I did,” Aleska plucked her knife from the wood. “My trainer could have shot the wings off a butterfly should she want it.”

“And who was she?”

“My mother.”

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Tripwires and pressure plates were all but a few things which greeted the pair of elves. Neither of them unable to avoid them for long, even Fenris bore a wound from one of the arrows flung in their direction; the sharp head sliced along his pale flesh, one caught Aleska upon her cheek; had it not been for her leather armour, the tip of the arrow embedded in her abdomen would have caused a serious injury. The arrow now resting within her hand, only the tip pierced through, a small bit of blood stained the polished metal.

“These aren’t your normal beggars I assume?” Aleska threw the arrow to the ground, the wood clanged against the stone flooring. “None that I have met could ever trap a house like this.”

Fenris only response had been a single grunt, his eyes carefully scanning every inch of the floor at their feet. Aleska’s dagger drawn, her own eyes scanning the rafters. A subtle whimper reached her ears, that of a woman. She stepped closer to the bookshelf. A soft breeze touched against her skin; the whimpering grew louder. Then someone silently shushing. Begging another to be quiet, before they come back.

“How strong are you?” Aleska turned to Fenris, confusion set in his face.

“Wha—” Fenris’ brows furrowed; realization set in as to her request.

With a powerful tug, the bookshelf moved, revealing a small room behind it. Within, rested three people, a man, and a woman; within the woman’s arms a young child cuddled against her. Whimpering softly. Aleska placed a hand on Fenris’ chest, requesting for him to move to the side so she may enter. The woman curled even further back against the wall, but she couldn’t move any further. The child cradled within her arms buried his face into his mothers’ breast, the only source of comfort he knows.

“Slavers…” Fenris growled, clenching his fist. The sight of the angry warrior caused the three to shrink further back against the wall.

“We won’t hurt you,” Aleska’s hand waved, instructing Fenris to put his sword away. “What happened? Are you hurt?”

The man looked at the woman, placing himself between Aleska and what she assumed had been his wife. A fierceness she only seen when Anselm protected her, Aleska took a step back. How can I ask them to trust me? They have been beaten, betrayed and worse. Aleska inhaled, her hand extended as a sign of peace. A sign that she wasn’t there to harm them any further, her free hand ran along her pendant, the young woman took her hand despite her husband’s protesting. The young boy braved meeting her face, tear stains ran along his cheeks, his lips dried and cracked.

Removing the necklace, the cool chain rested within her palm. “Take this,” Aleska handed the pendant to the small boy, a trinket Anselm gave her after they returned from the Emprise. “Go to the Viscount’s Keep and ask to see Lady Sophia Trevelyan; should the guards try to turn you away, show them this and inform them that the Inquisitor sent you.”

“I—Inquisitor?” The woman stuttered, her hand enveloping her son’s.
“Sophia is a kind woman, she is also a healer,” Aleska continued. “She can help tend to your wounds, then go to Commander Cullen; he will be able to offer you protection under the Inquisition. I vow that the people responsible, will no longer have heads to scheme with by the time I am through with them. Now go.”

“Sweet lady,” the man knelt before her, kissing her knuckles repeatedly. “Thank you, thank you. I will never forget your kindness, there are others trapped in the basement. Please help them.”

The words rang through her ears, listening to Fenris instruct them how to look for the pressure plates and traps they could have missed. Aleska paced along the hallway, cursing in a mixture of Elven, Tevene and Marcher. *If Hawke knew! He would have set them alight!* Aleska seethed.

“Did you mean it?” Fenris came to her. “Or was that only an empty promise to ensure they trusted you?”

“I meant what I said,” Aleska hissed, her fingers tapping against her chin. “As long as I have the power, no slaver will ever feel safe to walk freely in any town where my influence can spread. I’m sure Aveline will not object to this diversion from the plan.”

A smile spread across Fenris’ features. “I see.”

“Is that a hint of appreciation I hear?” Aleska smiled softly, perching herself within a dusty chair.

“Perhaps,” Fenris leaned against the far wall, his eyes darting across the room. “Aren’t we supposed to free the slaves below?”

“Not yet,” Aleska’s legs draped along the arm rest, picking up a moulded book, flipping through the old pages.

“Why not!”

“Because I want them to return,” Aleska glanced at him. “I want to look into their eyes as I deliver their punishment, if I let the slaves go, they will know about it. They will not return, and I need you to play a part for me.”

“What part would that be?”

“Their executioner.”
Chapter Summary

The investigation into Samson's former lover uncovers a dark secret from Commander Cullen's past; a secret that will profoundly affect the Commander's relationship with Lady Sophia and force him to finally reveal the truth of what happened to him during the Blight.

Anselm dug his little finger into his ear, wiggling it around theatrically.

“I think my hearing is failing me.” He said with a grin. “I could have sworn you just said you want me to go to a brothel. Has Satinalia arrived early this year?”

Aleska threw him a sidelong glance, shaking her head as she finished pouring their drinks. Collecting herself and planning her words carefully.

“I know it’s a challenge but try and be serious about this for a moment.” She pushed the cork back into the bottle with a firm twist; her hand remained there, and her fingernails tapped gently against the neck. “There’s a woman called Serendipity, Fenris says Samson was obsessed with her. I saw her meeting with a Tranquil in Lowtown and while I can’t be sure there’s a connection—”

“I understand.” Anselm swallowed a mouthful of wine and set his glass back down on the table. “And you think that a devilishly handsome, suave and charming young client is more likely to get answers than a couple of Inquisition bruisers?”

Aleska nodded, inhaling the cool evening air deep into her lungs, much needed relief after the stench of Lowtown caused her to feel nauseated.

“There could be a thousand different explanations; and this city has enough ugliness without me adding more, if I can help it.”

Anselm stood up and took her hand, drawing her close to him and slipping his arm around her waist.

“You saved those people…” he said quietly, kissing her forehead, “and there’s a whole pack of slavers who won’t be doing any more hunting.”

“They were lucky.” Aleska rested her head against his shoulder and closed her eyes. Anselm could see the strain and exhaustion etched into her face. “How many more won’t have that luck today, or tomorrow?”

Anselm held her tighter, running his fingers through her hair. Slavery was banned in the Free Marches but the Imperium to the north provided a steady market and plentiful gold; there were always lords and magistrates willing to turn a blind eye for the right amount, and plenty of nameless poor in the teeming slums and Alienages. The chaos and disorder in Kirkwall, plus the
absence of any effective government, made it a particularly tempting prize for the slavers. There would be plenty others who’d find themselves chained in cellars, awaiting transport to Vyrantium or Qarinus, and the Inquisition couldn’t be everywhere.

“It’s still a victory, hold on to that.” He said, still holding her close. He paused and took a deep breath. “You’re really not comfortable asking me to do this, are you?”

Aleska laughed sharply, lifting her head to look at him. He had a past, one where each brothel Madam knew his preferences based on the tunic, he decided to wear that evening. The thought alone unnerved her in ways she wasn’t prepared to admit—not to him; not when she needed his charms to woo a one particular woman.

“Of course, not! If there was anyone else, I could send to do this I would but—” she sighed. “But there isn’t and, surprising though it may sound, I trust you.”

She kissed his chin and Anselm raised an eyebrow, smiling down at her sardonically.

“Careful! If you say that too often, I might get a reputation for decency and virtue—and that’s social death in the Free Marches!”

“You can be as immoral and indecent as you want, so long as it’s with me.” Aleska laughed, scratching lightly at his close-trimmed beard. “If you stopped gambling and started spending all day in the Chantry I’d start to worry.”

Anselm chuckled, brushing his lips against her ear, inhaling her intoxicating scent. Allowing himself this moment of contentment.

“So, you should, it would probably mean I’d been possessed by a singularly devious and cunning demon—"

“Or that you were up to something singularly devious and cunning.” She glanced at the mantel-clock. “You ought to start getting ready, you take almost as long as me when it comes to deciding what to wear.”

“Perfection doesn’t come easily, even I need to work at it now and again,” Anslem said, with the faintest of smirks, taking her hand and giving it a linger kiss. “I promise I won’t disappoint you tonight…”

The Blooming Rose hadn’t altered much since Anselm’s last visit. Some of the faces might have changes, but the dusty-red velvet draperies, the suggestive statues—and the eager glint in the eyes of Madame Lucine, at the sight of a wealthy patron—were still very much the same.

“Don Anselmo; this is a delightful surprise…” The way the woman managed to smile without cracking the thick layers of make-up amused him. Whoever painted the Madame’s face was an artist of illusion; in the soft patina of the candlelight she could almost pass for forty. “Will you be requiring something… special… this evening? I’m afraid Mathilde is no longer with us, but…”

“I haven’t decided yet…” he smiled, cutting her off with the clink of gold sovereigns into her palm. “I’m in the mood to browse a little.”

“Of course, Mio Signore, I’m sure we will have something to delight a man of your refined taste.”

At a nod from the Madame, a heavy-set dwarf in footman’s livery unhooked the velvet rope that
prevented the commoner sort of client from ascending to the upstairs salon. Anselm made his way up, pausing to check his reflection in the gilded-framed mirrors lining the staircase. The sleekly cut lines of the swallowtail coat and close-fitting knee-breeches defined the width of his shoulders and the trimness of his waist.

He turned his leg slightly to admire the curve of his calf—emphasised by the new Antivan style of silk hose and soft leather pumps. Far more elegant and, in the muggy heat of a Marcher summer, more comfortable than even the lightest boots. Another dwarven footman opened the doors of the salon as he approached. The heavy black tattoo across his forehead told Anselm that Madame Lusine had turned to the Carta, rather than the Coterie, to guarantee the safety of her establishment in these troubled times. A wise move; the Carta were more reliable, and no-one in their right mind would cross them if they wanted to wake up with all their organs in the same place.

The room would not have been out of place in a ducal or princely palazzo, if you overlooked the subject matter of the paintings and the attire of some of its occupants; although there was a locked salon in Ostwick’s Palazzo Comital that suggested not all of the entertainments given by previous Trevelyan Counts were the sort to which you would invite the Grand Cleric – despite the rumours about Her Eminence. Anselm laughed quietly at the memory. He’d learned the art of lock-picking solely so he and Jonas could sneak in one night and gawp at the frescos; eerily lifelike and animated in the gloom.

*I should persuade Uncle to re-open it and make it the state dining-room,* his thoughts trailed off; forcing himself back to the task at hand.

A quartet of musicians, concealed behind a fretted screen, played a soft accompaniment to a similarly concealed singer; whose rich countertenor rolled gently over the buzz of conversation. The salon was neither busy, nor quiet, a strange halfway house that reflected the mood of the city, but there was always time for pleasure—regardless of which army camped at the gates. Anselm cast his gaze around the room as he made his way over to the bar, groaning quietly to himself. This was a particularly obscure and cruel form of torture; like a man with the sugar-sickness being presented with confectionaries on a silver platter. A Qunari woman—clad only in a lattice of silk cords, which seemed to only cover her nakedness with little effort, with her horns artfully gilded—lounged on a sofa; watching him with lazy, hungry, eyes as he crossed the floor.

*Now that is just unfair.*

He was relieved to spot Serendipity seated near the bar; he hadn’t known the elven woman’s name before but had remembered her from Aleska’s description. Anselm could sense her watching him, alert and curious, and knew this was not going to be easy. Whores were better secret-keepers than any priest, and successful ones had good memories. He bought two glasses of the house speciality, brandy zested with lemon and a twist of brown sugar and walked over with a casually pleasant smile. Serendipity made room for him to sit as he approached, her brightly patterned silk robe hanging open to reveal a lithe, taut, physique; it’s slender musculature somehow complementing, rather than distracting from, her curling black hair and delicately painted face.

“I expected a different visitor.” She said, taking the drink he offered her; her voice was both light and full, not unlike that of the hidden singer. “One with more armour and fewer manners.”

She took as sip as Anselm made himself comfortable, observing him carefully with scarlet-lidded eyes; as intent and bright as Aleska’s but of a deeper blue. The comparison made him suddenly uncomfortable.

“With a voice like that you should be in the opera. You would make a super Diadona, her aria in the final act…”
Serendipity’s laugh undercut with a brittle nervousness. It became apparent to Anselm that no man who bought her services cared to woo her in the ways he knew how. Perhaps Aleska was right to be cautious, forbidden fruit always tasted the sweetest. Envisioning Aleska before him helped the process, but in the deepest pits of his gut, he knew under any other circumstances—this wasn’t right.

“Ricordati di me… the song of a woman abandoned to her fate by her lover. You have an elegant way of making your point, bel ragazzo.”

Anselm shrugged lightly, keeping his voice low. With the surrounding conversation and music, they could be sure of not being overheard.

“You met with a Tranquil in Lowtown; they provide a great many services…” Anselm brought his wine goblet to his lips, watching her over the rim.

Serendipity turned her glass slowly in her hands as Anselm left his sentence hanging. He could almost hear what she was thinking, that her next ‘visitor’ might not be inclined to buy drinks and make musical allusions. He shifted his position slightly, to get a better view of the room; just in case.

“Do you know why they made him tranquil?” She asked eventually, her voice as low and quiet as Anselm’s. He shook his head. “A few soppy love-letters smuggled to some market woman who sold cloth to the Gallows. She said it might be code…”

“Meredith was insane, she saw demons everywhere.”

Serendipity laughed bitterly and drained her glass. Anselm signalled to the bartender for a refill.

“The worst ones hide behind chantry-cloth, and that’s not the worst of it…” She fell silent as her drink was brought over. As the waiter left, she turned to Anselm with a sharp look. “You’ve got her Mabari trotting around with the Inquisition, he could tell you just as much as me.”

It took Anselm a moment to realise who she was referring to.

“Commander Cullen? Did he have a part in it?”

Serendipity gave him a long steady look, then laughed, her teeth captured her lower lip, her hand lingered atop Anselm’s thigh, travelling higher and higher.

“Is that truly what you desire to speak on,” Serendipity urged, her fingers skilfully unlacing the velvet rope of her dress.

“Nothing would delight me more,” Anselm cleared his throat, carefully moving her hand away from his leg, “but first tell me what role Commander Cullen played… for my own curiosities sake.”

“Oh, I have an opera for you, my sweetness; a real tragedy. Il Templare Traditore…”

“So, this Tranquil, Maddox, is working for Samson; why would he need the services of a Tranquil?” Aleska’s left forefinger tapped against the arm of her chair as she pondered this question. It was a tell Anselm had grown familiar with, a sign that she wanted to be out with bow and blades in hand; anywhere other the stuffy, over-decorated guest wing of the Viscount’s Keep.
“That lyrium-infused armour must need a lot of maintenance.” He said, pacing slowly back and forth across the floor. “Only a Tranquil, or a Dwarf, would be able to work it safely.”

“I doubt Samson would have access to many Dwarven Smiths, even then, something that specialised would need a unique set of skills.” Sophia interjected. “It would take someone with Dagna’s talents.”

“Maddox had a unique gift for enchantment.” Cullen said, toying with the hilt of his sword and staring out of the window at the bulk of the Gallows, looming over the far side of the harbour. “He would still require specific tools and materials though, hard to get even before the fall of the Circles.”

Aleska straightened herself and leaned forward, resting her elbows on the table. The pulsating of her headache worsened with each passing moment; a wave of nausea hit her; the anchor beneath her gloved crackled to life. Discomfort had occurred a few months back—but this was agony on a scale she wasn’t prepared for.

“That must be why he’s in Kirkwall. Leliana says it has a thriving black market for magical artefacts and rare components. If we can find who he is buying from, and what he’s getting, we may have our first real lead on Samson.”

Sophia shook her head in dismay, her finger trailing along her lower lip, her one hand neatly tucked beneath her arm, resting along her midriff.

“To be made tranquil over a few love-letters. Even for Meredith, I find it hard to believe—”

“Then you haven’t heard half of what I did,” Aleska straightened herself one she was sure the sensation passed. “I heard she would make people Tranquil over the slightest things, even remove Templars who whispered among themselves. The idol turned her into a monster, Varric’s hatred of Red Lyrium is enough for me to believe a lot of what she did under its influence, was covered up by the Chantry.”

“Meredith wielded the lyrium brand for far lesser offences.” Cullen added, confirming Aleska’s thought, his gaze never shifted from the window; his tone flat, almost lifeless. “No act of defiance was tolerated.”

He is not going to say anything… Anselm thought as the conversation continued to unfold about how best to track Maddox’s movements in Kirkwall and beyond; and he felt a stab of anger tinged with an odd sense of disappointment.

He’d hoped Cullen would have the balls to admit his own part in the whole sorry mess, but the Commander remained wrapped in the same stony detachment that had been gathering about him since they left Halamshrial; restricting his comments to blunt practicalities. He should call him out on it, here and now; put Cullen on the spot and see what justification he could produce. He shifted his position, opening his mouth to speak; Aleska noticed his movement and turned to him.

“Is there something you want to add?” She asked, and Anselm felt his heart sink. He should have said something before the meeting; to throw it in now would derail everything at a point where they needed to be focussed; he could not distract Aleska, or humiliate Sophia, in this way. He had to confront Cullen, throw his hypocrisy back in his smug face, but not here and not now.

“We should have Nightingale’s people keep an eye on the brothel.” He said, with a pang of guilt at his own evasiveness. “I don’t think Serendipity will be foolish enough to try and warn Maddox, or Samson, but we can’t take that risk; and there’s always the chance someone will try and contact her
“I don’t think her loyalty is free, it is sold off to the highest bidder for her services, mercenaries and courtesans have that in common I am afraid.” Aleska made a brief note before glancing at the clock. “Unless there’s anything else, I need to get ready to deal with Sebastian.”

“Then how do you explain Bull,” Sophia’s well-groomed brow lifted.

“He is an enigma,” Aleska waved her hand in spirals. “One I am rather pleased remains loyal to us. Plus, I give him good Dragon fights—”

“Sebastian’s a weathercock.” Sophia said recovering from her laugh, getting to her feet, and picking up her shawl from the back of her chair. “The slightest breeze will point him in another direction, we just need to be sure it’s the one we want.”

“I’ll need your help for that.” Aleska laughed and turned to Anselm. “You don’t need to join us; I think you deserve a bit of a rest.”

“I’m sure I’ll find something to pass the time, My Lady.” Anselm replied, with an elegant bow. “Even if it’s just taking pot-shots at seagulls from the roof of the Keep.”

Aleska and Sophia left to get ready for the Prince of Starkhaven, while Cullen muttered something about discussing troop rotations with Guard-Commander Vallen. Alone with his thoughts, Anselm walked over to the sideboard and poured himself an exceptionally large brandy. The rim of the glass had barely touched his lips when he sighed and emptied the contents back into the decanter. If he started drinking it would be difficult to stop, and that would be a recipe for disaster. He pressed his fingertips to his temples, massaging them to ease the throbbing in his skull.

If this is what being a responsible adult feels like, I really do not enjoy it…

###

“It’s customary to knock when you enter a superior officer’s quarters.” Cullen said sharply, not looking up from the reports in his hand. Anselm closed the door firmly behind him.

“I believe it’s also customary not to mislead your commanding officer, that is what Aleska is yes?” Anselm waited for a moment as Cullen continued looking down at the papers on the desk, noting the whitening of the man’s knuckles as his fingers clenched. “At least you’re not claiming ignorance of what I’m talking about. Did you really imagine Serendipity would not tell me everything? She had a lot to say about what happened to Samson and Maddox, and a lot more to say about Meredith’s faithful lapdog. I imagine it’s a song many people in Kirkwall could sing.”

“What I tell the Inquisitor, and when I choose to tell it, is my business and not yours; Knight-Lieutenant!” Cullen snapped, straightening up and turning to face Anselm who took a step forward; jaw clenching with the effort of controlling his near-boiling temper.

“Don’t fucking play that card with me Old Man!” He snarled; his tone dropped low. “It stopped being your business when your old comrade let his horde of grinning monsters loose on Haven; and it became my business when he captured Aleska—”

“You hear one courtesan’s story and think you know everything! What happened to the Inquisitor was not a direct result of my service here. How was I to know Samson would go after her?” Cullen snapped back, his eyes sparking angrily. “But, of course, you’re very quick to take the high ground, like all your kind!”
“My kind; what would you know about my kind?” Anselm scoffed, his voice rising. “You’ve spent your whole life hiding behind your mantle and the Chant; always ready with the right verse to justify the latest atrocity.” Anselm fired back, his words sharper than an assassin’s blade. “Samson did it to get to you, had was running on the intelligence that kidnapping her would hurt you; besides, he wouldn’t dare touch Sophia.”

“Get. Out. Now.” Cullen growled between his teeth; his fists clenched tight. Anselm did not move.

“I’m not afraid of you, in case you hadn’t noticed; and at least I had the courage to lay all my dirty laundry out for Aleska to see. Have you even told Sophia, or were you going to wait until after you’ve bedded her?” He saw the faintest flicker of uncertainty in Cullen’s eyes, and knew immediately. “You son of a bitch!”

Cullen side-stepped quickly, catching Anselm’s ankle with his foot, and almost sending him sprawling against a nearby chair. He held his balance, however, and turned sharply—fists raised—in time for the door to open.

“What in the Void are the pair of you doing?” Sophia dismissed the guard following her with a flick of her hand and closed the door, looking from one man to another with concern and uncertainty. “I could hear you shouting all the way down the hall.”

Anselm carded his fingers fiercely through his hair. This was not how he had wanted it to happen; he’d promised himself he’d keep his cool, not let his temper get the better of him, but it was Sophia… He remembered how he used to clamber into her lap when still a child; lonely and afraid in the echoing chambers of his uncle’s palace, still not sure why Mama wasn’t coming to take him home.

He’d clung, crying, to her skirts when the Templars came to take her to the Circle Tower and she’d gently eased his fingers away; told him she was just going to a ‘special school’ and he could come to visit any time he wanted. She deserved better than this… she didn’t need more stress.

“I’m waiting for an explanation.” There was a brittle edge to her voice. “Don’t just stand there gawping like I’ve grown another head.”

Anselm glared at Cullen, then walked over to the door. A hand resting upon the door, ready to slam it behind him.

“It’s up to you, Old Man; but if you don’t tell her, then you and I have a very serious conversation ahead of us.” He paused, with his hand on the latch, turning to Sophia. “I’m sorry, fringuella, this isn’t what I intended.”

He strode out, the door slammed shut behind him, the mere force rattled the windows.

“Tell me what?” Sophia put her gloves down on the table and crossed over to Cullen who stood, as if frozen, in the middle of the room. “Mio Leone, why were the two of you fighting?”

She raised her hand to caress his cheek, but he took hold of his wrist to stop her.

“I was the one who reported Samson to Meredith.” He said in a cold, flat, tone. “He told me about his arrangement with Maddox and I reported them both.”

He let go of her wrist and she stepped away from him, one hand grasping the back of a chair to support herself, looking at him is shock and disbelief.

“You… you reported them, knowing what that… that woman would do?” She stammered, her
other hand straying to the medallion of Andraste. “Cullen… why would you do that, betray his confidence?”

“I had no choice.” He said harshly.

Greagoir had sent him to Greenfell Cloister after the Blight, but there was little the Mothers there could do with a half-crazed youth who saw abominations and blood-mages behind every pillar. As the land began its struggle to recover from Blight and a bloody civil war, they had greater concerns than one unbalanced Templar.

He had been quick to volunteer when he heard of Knight Commander Meredith’s request for Fereldan Templars to aid in hunting suspected apostates among the refugees; a chance to prove himself, to atone for his laxness and wash away his guilt. But the ‘Maker’s Forge’ proved just another cesspit of madness and degeneracy. Meredith already suspected Samson’s guilt and deliberately assigned him to share quarters as a test. If he had not… he could have been the next recipient of the lash and the brand, begging for coin on the docks and easy prey for the suave tongue of corruption.

How could she even begin to understand that depth of shame, of fear? This was a mistake, a terrible mistake. He should never have let himself give in to these feelings. Mage or not, she came from a world he could never share; and she deserved more than a broken ex-Templar with nothing to offer. Better to make it swift, before it hurt too much…

“It had to be more than just that…” Sophia insisted, shaking her head. “Cullen; I know you, you would never…”

“Then you don’t know me very well!” Cullen snapped, causing her to take another step back in fright. The sudden fear on her face cut deep as a blade and he turned away so as not to have to look at her. It would be easier that way. “I don’t have the luxury of a royal name, or a father with half the Grand Clerics in his coin purse, shielding me from reality.”

There was an exceptionally long silence. Sophia wondered where this came from, not once would he bring up her family name or title, and she had been certain she’d never used it to influence or sway anyone unjustly. Now this… Did Kirkwall truly bring out the worst in people—or were those simply rumours that had been spun by those who feared the city?

“Why would you say such a thing?” It was barely more than a whisper and he could imagine the tears sparkling in her eyes. He dared not look, it would only weaken his resolve. It took every ounce of his will not to turn around and beg her forgiveness.

“Because it’s true, no matter how much either of us want to pretend it isn’t.” He took a deep breath and turned to face her; his expression fixed and stern, as if lecturing a new intake of recruits. “This was a mistake; I should never have let my feelings go beyond the bounds of friendship.”

“And what about my feelings?” Sophia exclaimed, her voice cracking, a painful lump formed within her throat. “Or am I to have no say in this?”

Cullen’s hands clenched tighter, steeling himself for what was about to come. In his mind the severance needed to be done with precision he was not even sure he was capable of. No room for arguing or second guessing his choices, he needed to free her from the burden of his sins and the punishment they carried.

“I was wrong…” His voice faltered briefly, and he took another deep breath to steady himself. “I was wrong to give you false expectations. I am sorry. It… It would be b-best if you left now.”
He could see it in her eyes; the pain and bewilderment, and then that moment when the shutters closed and the space between them grew even though neither moved. She was her father’s daughter; she would not beg or cry—not here anyway, not in front of him. She would not allow herself that final humiliation.

She said nothing, only giving him one final look before turning with a sharp rustle of skirts and walking out of the room.

There was a sharp snap and Cullen felt a sudden pain. The pen he had been clasping had finally broken under the strain, driving the splintered end deep into the ball of his thumb. Wincing, he grasped it firmly and pulled it out; bright red blood welling out, thick and fast. He collapsed back into his seat, clamping his hand shut to staunch the bleeding as a dizzy nausea threatened to overwhelm him.

###

“You will have my letter of resigna—"

“Not happening!” Aleska kicked the door shut and leaned against it folding her arms. “Whether you are still my Commander is my decision to make, not yours. Right now, what I want is the truth. Don’t treat me like a child Cullen, I am mad enough already.”

Cullen remained leaning over his desk, staring down at the contents of the small wooden box sitting on the blotting-pad. Aleska could see the trembling in his arms and shoulders and it seemed to her that the desk was the only thing keeping him upright. The fury which danced within Aleska’s eyes told him she wouldn’t be taking no for an answer.

They called her isenatha ashalan, a true Lavellan, even Cullen heard the whispers shortly after he met her. Those that knew her—knew her father knew she was his likeness in tempter and once the dragon was awakened, one ought to err on the side of caution—he was treading a thin line with her already.

“I withheld crucial details of my connection with Samson, and about Maddox.” He spoke with deliberate slowness, each word weighted as if he was passing judgement on himself. “Vital information that could have—"

“None of us even knew Maddox was alive until yesterday. As for you and Samson—” Aleska took a deep breath, calming her own temper, she stepped towards him; keeping the desk as a barrier between them. “That’s a conversation we can have later, when you’re well enough to discuss it properly.”

“When I’m well…?” Cullen looked up at her in surprise. Despite the dim light she could see the redness around his eyes and the heavy lines of stress scoring his face. “Inquisitor, I can assure you this is not about my personal health.”

Aleska shook her head with a heavy sigh, even now he still felt the urge to lie to her, as if the torment was his punishment for withholding information. Had she been a lesser person, she would let him suffer in the pit he’d thrown himself into—he could hate her for all she cared, she would not allow him to suffer any longer.

“I disagree. You’ve been in a decline ever since we set sail for Kirkwall and I made a mistake in not acting sooner. Rylen or Sidony would have been perfectly capable of assisting me here; I should never have brought you back here.”
Cullen grunted; returning his gaze to the box on the desk, closing the lid slowly the one hand. Sliding it to the corner, out of reach, but never out of sight.

“It would have made no difference. You still would have found out.”

Aleska’s patience snapped. The box on his desk now rested within her hands, with a powerful swing of har arm the box collided with the far wall, shattering into what seemed to be a thousand pieces. Her breathing heavy as her fist collided with the desk, sending a resounding thump through the small confined office.

“Yes, but I wouldn’t have had it blowing up in my fucking face! Anselm’s so far into anger and brandy I can barely get three coherent words out of him, and all that hatched-faced Nevarran Duenna of Sophia’s will say is ‘Madame is unwell and cannot see anyone.’!”

Cullen looked up sharply, the shock hit him like a maul being slammed into his chest.

“Soph… Lady Sophia’s ill? Did she say…?”

Aleska threw her hands up in exasperated frustration. “That is all you took from that?! I am happy you two found one another in this fucked up world Cullen, I know you care about her wellbeing, but if that is all you desire to take from this conversation, I have to question if your head is truly for the benefit of the Inquisition.”

“Did she say what was wrong?” Cullen repeated; this time slower as not to rile her up further.

“No! She didn’t!” Aleska knew he wouldn’t be cooperative until he received his answer. “All I’ve got to go on are rumours, drunken grunts and angry hints from a woman who looks like she eats Darkspawn for breakfast.” She placed her hands upon the desk, causing the candles to flicker and sputter molten wax. “I want the truth, Cullen; something happened to you that’s made you determined to destroy yourself, and I’m not leaving until I get it! I can deal with your self-loathing, but not when it threatened the very foundations of this Inquisition.”

She jumped back from the desk as Cullen grabbed the box with a roar of anger; turning and hurling it out of the open window with all his strength. He leaned against the window-frame, breathing heavily. For one bone-chilling moment, Aleska was afraid he was going to follow the box on its journey to the flagstones far below.

“You… you asked me once about what happened at Kinloch Hold…”

Each word came out as it if caused him physical pain. Aleska, still shaking at his outburst of rage, nodded; forcing herself to speak despite the sudden dryness of her throat. Knowing full well another outburst would have her on the other side of the closed door, and Cullen wouldn’t be willing to discuss such an event so freely again.

“You said… you said the Circle had troubles. That… that someone you cared about was killed.”

Cullen’s laugh was sharp and bitter. Recollection of the time even now stung at his heart, as if an invisible hand embedded within his chest squeezed the moment the memories resurfaced, a cruel reminder of the pain he felt at the tender age of eighteen.

“Funny, how a lifetime of nightmares can be summed up in two sentences… The Circle fell to abominations and blood-mages, Templars and Mages were slaughtered without mercy; they were the lucky ones. I was captured, along with some of the other Templars. We were caged, tortured, deprived of food and water; and they laughed while they did it. Some of my Brothers became their thralls, and they turned them on the rest of us…” Aleska saw his fists clench as he clung onto the
window-frame for support, resting his head against his arm. “It’s no easy thing to kill a man with your bare hands; especially when he’s a friend you once sang the Chant beside…”

“That’s why you always wear gloves.” Aleska whispered as she lowered herself into a chair, shivers running through her, violent enough to force her whole body to tremble. Cullen nodded silently, his shoulders shaking. Eventually he found his voice again.

“Afterwards… I went to Kirkwall; determined to take the fight to the evils that had slaughtered my friends, torn my mind apart. I thought I could find some sort of atonement there, a fresh start. I thought Meredith the very embodiment of what it meant to be a Templar; stern yet just, like Andraste when She raised Her sword against the Magisters. I trusted her; even though others saw her madness I defended her like Hector defended the Prophet against Her betrayers… You can see how that ended just by looking out of the window… How can I expect forgiveness after the things I did, the things I ignored? How… how could I presume to believe I deserved…?”

He staggered back from the window, half-falling into his chair, resting his head in his hands. Aleska resisted the urge to go to him, knowing he would not welcome her comfort at this moment. Instead she waited until the heavy, hoarse sobs faded.

“What about her…” She asked quietly. “The woman you loved?”

Cullen raised his head to look at her, almost smiling despite the deep grief and pain in his eyes.

“Elena? She was like sunshine in that gloomy place. I’d hear her laughing in the cloisters with those friends of hers, Neria and Finn, and just knowing she was there made me happy… Greagoir used to tell me off for spending too much time with them… I was barely 18, still fresh from the Vigil, and she was like a princess from one of the old tales… She… she was my first; until Sophia… my only…” His head sank back into his hands and he let out a long, shaky, moan. “I found her body at the foot of the stairs to the Templar Hall; she must have been looking for me. If it hadn’t been for me, she might have escaped, found Enchanter Wynne and the others. I killed her just as surely as those things…”

“No” Aleska walked around the desk and put her hands upon Cullen’s shoulders. He flinched but made no attempt to remove them. “She made a choice, for whatever reason, and that choice was hers, not yours. My mother did not die because I wanted to go into the city with her that day; she died because a group of men saw an elven woman on her own with a child. Elena didn’t die because of you, and you’re not going to protect Sophia by hurting her this way—or by hurting yourself.”

Cullen looked up at her with a strange, haunted, expression. A hand enveloped hers, even the smallest comfort from her eased his pain, a tender hand cupped his cheek, removing the tear which fell past his reddened eyes and stubble. She was even unaware of her actions.

“Elena’s mother had two cousins. One married Malcolm Hawke and the other married Boniface of Ostwick. Three Mages with Amell blood have entered my life and two of them are dead; what I am supposed to think?”

“That’s bullshit!” Aleska snapped, removing her hand. “And unless there’s something you’re not telling me about you and Hawke then you’re grasping at straws. It’s like those stupid Astrariums that Joe gets so excited about; look at anything for long enough and you’ll see a pattern. You’re not protecting anyone, least of all her; and if you don’t get your head on straight, you’ll have lost her forever! Is that what you really want?”
Cullen sank his head back into his hands. Aleska’s arms around his shoulders, her chin resting upon his head a blind attempt at comfort when they both seemed unable to truly give the other what they needed it when they needed it. Cullen’s hand patted Aleska’s arm, reassuring her that her comfort was welcome.

“What I want matters little now, after what I said to her…”

Aleska pulled open one of the desk drawers and pulled out a sheet of paper. Taking a pen, she dipped in it the inkwell and thrust it at Cullen.

“Write to her; blame it on the lyrium, Kirkwall or last night’s fish stew for all I care! Once she is willing to see you, tell her what you told me and – maybe – she’ll be able to forgive you.” Cullen looked at the pen as if she had handed him a dagger, and then back up at her. She shook her head with a sigh. “It won’t be easy. Do you think it is been easy for me and Anselm, with his past? Sophia will understand… eventually… but only if you’re completely honest with her.”

“Aleska—” Cullen sighed, unsure if he should be grateful or despise her for the stubbornness. There was a pause, then Cullen pulled the paper towards him and started to write. Aleska walked away from the desk to examine the contents of the bookcases. Whatever words he had for Sophia were not for her eyes. After a few minutes of scratching away he got up and handed her the sealed, folded note. “Ale—” he began, but Aleska shushed him.

“I’ll see Sophia gets this; and when we return to Skyhold you and I are going to have an unbelievably detailed conversation about what I expect from officers under my command. But until then…” She took Cullen’s hand and squeezed it kindly. “I know it’s pointless asking you to get some sleep but please try.”

Cullen nodded, wordlessly, and she took her leave. There was no point in discussing the matter further, the man was clearly exhausted beyond the ability to think straight. She walked along the corridor with dismay deep in her heart. Was this what it was to hold power, to be so caught up in the business of others that you did not see the pain eating at the people closest to you? All the clues had been there if she had wanted to read them.

Sophia’s maid took the letter carefully between thumb and forefinger, looking at it with an expression of sharp distaste. “I will see Madam receives this when she wakes. I cannot guarantee how she will respond.” She paused, glancing briefly behind her, and dropping her voice. “My Lady is not as strong as she pretends to be, nervous shocks like this are not good for her. The Commander should have treated her with more kindness.”

Aleska had never heard Commander pronounced like a swearword before. “Have you served Lady Sophia long?” She asked on impulse. The old woman joined Sophia on their arrival in Kirkwall and clung to her like mistletoe to an oak. The woman almost smiled. “Since she was a babe in arms, and a good few of these grey hairs are down to her!”

“Tell her to rest tomorrow, I can finish dealing with Sebastian.” The Prince of Starkhaven was finally beginning to realise the thin ice he was on, and the opposition he was facing from the other Marcher States. “She’s done more than enough to help.”
The maid nodded gratefully and Aleska eventually found herself back in her own quarters. The candles had almost burned out and a heavy snoring from the couch told her the brandy had finally claimed Anselm.

*I will deal with you tomorrow*… She thought, walking through to the bedroom and locking the door firmly behind her.
Chapter Summary

Sebastian’s army marched on Kirkwall, but will Sophia and Aleska have enough time to convince him to join the Inquisition? Sophia announces her plans to Aleska and confronts Anselm; but a surprise guest has them all concerned.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

_It has to be perfect_, Aleska stood before the three mannequins, each one adorned a beautiful dress of red and orange. _To symbolize Andraste’s holy fires, meant to appease Sebastian’s pious nature._ Aleska ran her fingers along the gold trim along the bodice. The one which appealed to her, a gown of dyed feathers showing off her toned midriff, had been shot down by Josephine with a single wave of her hand.

_“Prince Sebastian will not appreciate the Herald of Andraste looking like she belonged in the Blooming Rose.”_

Even now the notion forced a laugh from Aleska, as the maid finished her hair and make up to the specifications set by Leliana as being most likely to find favour with the infamously pious Prince. The comb holding her bun was on loan from Sophia, the rose-gold woven into elegant spirals around a large flawless ruby. Against the deep black curls, it shone like a drop of fresh blood.

Glancing towards the half-open bedroom door, Aleska noted Anselm tossing within the bed. _He is going to feel that hangover when he wakes up._

When he did, and once she’d dealt with Sebastian, there were going to be some sharp words about the mess he’d caused. A soft hand touched her shoulder and she looked round into Sophia’s warm violet eyes, noting the faint redness about them. Without thinking, she pulled Sophia into an embrace; a silent reassurance that her ear was open if she needed to talk.

_“We’re meeting Sebastian in half an hour,”_ Sophia fixed a few stray strands moving from Aleska’s updo, patting them to make sure they stayed in place. _“Why aren’t you dressed yet?”_

_“I said you should take time to rest.”_ Aleska reminded her. _“I can manage this myself.”_

Sophia walked over to the mannequins and examined them with her arms folded.

_“And I promised to help you with Sebastian; what kind of friend would I be if I didn’t keep my word?”_

_“I—that doesn’t matter right now!”_ Aleska’s said in a determined tone. _“I haven’t seen you since yesterday afternoon—none of us have, what happened?”_

Sophia inhaled quietly, letting her breath out slowly as she continued to inspect the gowns.
“There are some personal matters the Commander and I need to settle in due course, but we have far more pressing issues to deal right now.”

She nodded to the maid who began removing one of the dresses from its mannequin. Aleska felt an acid knot of nausea forming in the pit of her stomach.

_She won’t even say his name…_

“Sophia… this isn’t —” Sophia cut her off with a shake of her head

“I think this is the best choice.” She said, as the maid laid the gown out carefully it at Aleska’s feet. “Not revealing, but definitely suggesting. Sebastian may hold his Chantry-vows intact, but he’s still a man I assume.”

Aleska stepped into the dress; feeling the soft satin slide up her legs and easing her arms into the close-fitting sleeves with subtly patterned with embroidered flames. As Sophia fixed the straps along Aleska’s shoulders, ensuring the materials crinkled edged smoothed out, Aleska caught brief glimpses of her friend’s reflection in the cheval-mirror. The faint tightness around her eyes and mouth, and the set of her chin, was a look she knew all too well from when Mme Delilah made her appearance. It spoke to her of the depth of hurt Sophia was feeling, and an indication that the subject of Cullen, and their relationship, was not open for discussion.

“Sebastian has set himself up as Andraste’s champion,” she said as she adjusted the sit of the bodice. “Remind him that you are Andraste’s Herald, acknowledged by half of Thedas.”

“What about the other half?” Aleska asked with wry smile. Sophia shrugged dismissively.

“They don’t have an army.”

Sophia wore a gown of deep crimson brocade, the bodice, and skirts heavy with gold embroidery, slashed to reveal undersleeves and petticoat of red silk dotted with seed-pearls, and caught about the waist with a crimson and gold cord. The gown framed her body and the gold trim accentuated her eyes and hair. Woven into Sophia’s red hair a comb of silver woven around beads of pearl and beds of rubies. Even the eyeliner flowed freely beneath her eyes.

Aleska found herself wondering at the degree of self-control, of sheer will-power, that it must be taking for Sophia to act as if what was happening between her and Cullen was of no more significance than a spilled cup of tea. Whether that was due to her upbringing at the Court of Ostwick, her training in the Circle— or a blend of both, was hard to tell. She’d seen her father exercising similar iron-clad mental and emotional discipline when dealing with crises within the Clan.

As Sophia tightened the lacing of the corset, her finger trailed along the Vallaslin along Aleska’s shoulder, tracing the soft spirals. “This must have hurt.”

“I—I had it done when I was younger,” Aleska admitted, sucking in a breath as each layer tightened around her body. “I don’t remember if there is pain, but the Elven healer gave me some vile tasting liquid to dull the pain.”

“I think I know what it was,” through the reflection, Aleska saw Sophia’s smile, a soft one to begin with. “Probably an infusion of Elfroot and White Poppy juice; it tastes worse than the Fereldan idea of coffee, but it does the trick. Anselm had to drink three when he had the tattoo on his chest done.”

“I can imagine,” Aleska smiled turning to look at her. “You look stunning, red is your colour.”
“You’re one to talk,” Sophia neatened the skirt of Aleska’s gown, readjusting the spirals meant to represent flames along Aleska’s shoulder. “I saw you turn heads at the ball in Orlais.”

“That is only because you left the room,” Aleska playfully nudged her, lifting her neck as Sophia applied the perfumed oils to her skin.

“That is utter nonsense and you know it,” Sophia examined Aleska, nodding in approval. “Time to meet a Prince.”

“You mean time to manipulate a Prince.”

“Same end goals.”

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Provisional Viscount Bran had graciously allowed the Lady Inquisitor use of the throne-room to meet with the Prince of Starkhaven. Aleska had the feeling that he’d happily have granted her the title, the crown and the keys to the city in exchange for a berth on the fastest ship out of the Free Marches. She sat quietly, Sophia’s subtle hand gestures guiding her to the proper time to speak and when to allow the Prince to rant. Even his attempts at subtlety were grinding on Aleska’s temper. She got to her feet; stopping Sebastian dead in his tracks. He flushed as he took a step back, maintaining a respectful distance between himself and Aleska.

“You Grace,” Aleska began, “we all understand your grief, when the Chantry blew up and Elthina an unfortunate casualty within the blast—”

“Unfortunate?” Sebastian kept his composure, but the tone within his voice told Aleska that he was not to be trifled with. “It should never have happened; Hawke had an opportunity to right the wrongs; but he chose not to. I am sure you try and sympathise, but you don’t know my loss.”

“Your loss is great,” Aleska gritted her teeth. “But you are wasting valuable men on this witch hunt. Veteran soldiers, soldiers—”

“They are my men to command Inquisitor!” Sebastian surprised by his own firmness. “If I command them to walk through the Abyss, they will do so. I am their Prince.”

“Rightly so, your Grace,” Aleska lowered her head. “It just seemed foolish to me that is all; forget I said anything.”

Aleska turned around to return to the throne, the red of her gown shimmering like fire as it reflected in the polished marble floor. Sebastian’s look of fury melted away into one of confusion and he glanced at Sophia who shrugged and gave Aleska a questioning glance.

I am sorry for not informing you, but I need you to be surprised.

Aleska silently contemplated the Throne while waiting for the right moment. The last Sovereign Viscount of Kirkwall had been dragged from that seat of power by the Arishok, and beheaded in front of his terrified court as his city burned

Kirkwall’s history is written in fire and blood.

She took a deep breath and turned again to face Sebastian. He stood there; arms folded, his whole demeanour demanding an explanation for her statement.

Aleska placed a finger against her chin, tapping it slowly with the tip of her nail.
“May I be bold, your Grace?”

“So far you haven’t been?” Sebastian scoffed.

“Aleska,” Sophia hissed; only to be silenced by Aleska’s raised hand.

“I just wouldn’t want the reputation that is all,” Aleska walked over to the console table beside the throne and poured herself a glass of wine.

“Speak plainly, my lady Inquisitor,” Sebastian pinched the bridge of his nose before his hand slicked back his hair.

“You did ask,” Aleska held up her free hand. “I wouldn’t want to have the reputation of being a Prince who would rather focus his forces on some personal witch hunt than help the Inquisition—Andraste’s blessed Inquisition—with repairing the world; especially when the man he hunts is already dead.”

Aleska poured him a glass of wine and carried it over to him as his whole posture crumpled with the shock.

“D-Dead? How?! When?!”

“I cannot tell you for sure,” the lie flowed freely from Aleska’s lips, she almost believed it. “But it was one of the last things Hawke said to me, before giving his own life to help us escape from the demons of the Fade.”

Sebastian took the glass she offered him, looking down into its contents with a distant and thoughtful expression.

“Hawke was many things, but he was never untruthful.” He said quietly, and Aleska knew the iron was hot and ready for her to strike. She put her hand on Sebastian’s shoulder.

“Blessed are the peacekeepers, the champions of the just…” Leliana had prepared her with a selection of quotes from the Chant most likely to prick Sebastian’s conscience. “Is this what Elthina would have wanted? For you to bring needless suffering to this city while the killers of the Blessed Justinia still go unpunished and threaten the whole world with chaos?”

The slow ticking of the clock was the only sound in the room as Sebastian stood there, still staring at the glass in his hand.

“There is… truth… in what you say, Your Worship.” He said with slow deliberation. “Perhaps I have let the desire for vengeance blind me as to where my duty to the Maker truly lies…”

*And your men will likely mutiny from lack of pay if this drags on much longer.*

“No land is unaffected by this madness.” Aleska said quietly. “Your duty lies with your people.”

“No,” Sebastian turned and dashed his glass into the fireplace. “My faith will not allow it! I will speak with your Commander; my men will serve the Inquisition under the command of their Prince. Starkhaven will not idly stand by whilst these heathens wreak havoc on the faithful.”

He strode forward, dropping to one knee and seizing Aleska’s hands. Turning it over he kissed the Anchor with a more than pious fervour.

“I have never felt closer to Andraste than now,” Sebastian whispered. “I heard a rumour that if one
were to kiss your palm, they would receive Andraste’s blessing for themselves.”

“That makes you the first,” Aleska cleared her throat; thanking the Maker, Andraste, the Creators, the Stone and any other deity who might be listening that Anselm were asleep in bed. “Your Grace?”

“Yes?”

“My hand please? I need to meet with Provisional Viscount Bran and inform him of your decision; I would much prefer not to be late. We can begin making the formal arrangements at your earliest convenience.”

“He might be a pious fool, but he’s not an idiot.” Sophia said, as the throne-room doors closed behind the Prince. “The Inquisition will need to take responsibility for financing the mercenaries he hired and some of those companies don’t come cheap.”

“We’ll keep the decent ones and hire the rest out to the Orlesians as auxiliaries.” Aleska drained her glass in a single long swallow. “Once we’ve integrated his forces into the Inquisition, he won’t be in any position to threaten Kirkwall… or Ostwick.”

Sophia gave a quiet smile, getting up to pour herself some wine.

“I’m sure Papa will find a way to express his thanks discreetly.” She took a sip of wine and set the glass back down, nervously twisting the ring on her thumb as she turned to face Aleska. “Speaking of Ostwick… once we’ve completed the negotiations I’ll be going back there; for a little while, anyway.”

Aleska felt her heart sink. She’d come to rely on Sophia’s presence; finding comfort in her friendship and gentle wit as much as she relied on her diplomatic skills and deep scholarship.

“Sophia; you don’t have to.”

Sophia shook her head.

“I think we both know I do; I have a lot to think about and need to put a little distance between myself and…” she paused, still fidgeting with the ring. “Well, I need some time to myself. I promise I’ll be back before too long.”

“I’ll miss you.” Aleska said, taking her hands.

“I will too.” Sophia replied, with a quietly reassuring smile. “But I’ll write every day, and I’m sure I’ll be back almost before you know it. Now we’d better go and tell Messere Bran that he gets to stay Provisional Viscount for a little longer. I’m sure he’ll be overjoyed.”

***

Sophia closed the doors of her chambers behind her and leaned back against them with her eyes closed. She could feel her hands beginning to shake; ever since she was old enough to walk, the necessity of ‘proper’ behaviour in public had been drilled into her. She was a Daughter of Ostwick, after all; no hint of weakness or vulnerability could be revealed to their enemies or—worse—their allies.

‘Everyone wears masks, my darling,’ her mother had said once, when she’d asked why the Orlesian emissaries covered their faces. ‘Ours are just less obvious.’
She could feel her own mask slipping as she stifled a sob with the back of one hand as the fingers of her other clutched hard at the fabric of her gown; a few seed-pearls dropped and rattled on the floor as threads snapped under the strain. She opened her eyes to see Magda, her old Nevarran Compagna, standing there with an expression of embarrassed irritation, her hands neatly folded at her waist.

“I’m sorry Madam; I told him you would not wish to see him, but he insisted.”

Magda nodded towards the Salon and Sophia saw Anselm standing there, still bleary-eyed after a night with the bottle, and she felt a burning anger surge up and briefly overwhelm the heartbreak. If he hadn’t pushed Cullen into a corner like that, none of this would have happened. Her eyes narrowed.

“Get. Out.” She said, forcing the words from between her clenched teeth. Anselm stepped towards her, his mouth opening to utter some meaningless words of apology, and something snapped inside her.

“You couldn’t keep your mouth shut, could you?” She sobbed as he raised his hands to fend off the flurry of slaps she aimed at him. “You couldn’t wait to rub his nose in whatever you found out; and damn the consequences for anyone else.”

He caught her wrists to keep her hands away from his face.

“Fringuella… I-I’m sorry…” He stammered, visibly shocked by her outburst. “I-I didn’t think this would…”

“Oh, you never think; do you?” She snapped, pulling her hands away from him and turning her back. “You just jump straight in and hope that a smile and a few words will fix everything. Well I’m sick of it! And, right now, I’m sick of you!”

Anselm stared at her in stunned silence. She turned her back and walked away over to the desk where Cullen’s unanswered letter still lay. “Just get out… Please!”

She heard the door slam shut, and the quiet rustle of skirts as Magda approached her.

“Will Madam be sending a reply?”

Sophia closed her eyes, pressing her hand against her stomach as she felt a brief twist of nausea. She let out a long sigh.

“Tell the Commander… Tell him I’m grateful for his letter but am unable to give an answer at present. I think he’ll understand.”

Magda left to deliver the message and Sophia felt the last vestiges of the mask slip away. Arms clasped tight about her waist, she collapsed onto the couch to give free rein to her pain and grief.

***

Aleska slammed the door behind her, leaning against it, her breath heavy. Removing the comb from her hair, Aleska glanced at the finery resting between her fingers. Tears welled up in her eyes as she threw it against the wall; grateful the metal would withhold a little toss. The pins followed, letting her hair fall along her shoulders. A cough erupted from her chest; the sudden heaving caused her to feel nauseated. The door opened, sending a shiver through her spine.

She needn’t even look up to know who it was, the musky cent of cedarwood drifted towards her.
She couldn’t barely lift her head to greet him, powerful arms scooped her into his arms. A soft bearded cheek rested against her forehead, gentle kisses against her forehead.

“Aleska, il mio amore, you’re burning up.” Anselm’s hand placed against her forehead. “How long have you been here?”

“I don’t know,” Aleska shivered, “What time is it?”

“It’s past eight.” He told her. “Aleska… I’ve made such a mess of things…”

She looked up at him for the first time; seeing his woeful, almost defeated expression. She’d had her rebukes planned out as carefully as one of Cullen’s strategies, but those evaporated in the fever and the sense of sickness.

“I don’t care what you did, who you annoyed, I just need you to hold me.”

Aleska sniffed, the tears long stained the silk bedspread. Anselm’s hand caressed her cheek, wiping away any tears which dared to fall along Aleska’s cheeks, she turned over; her body aching at the slight movement; his green eyes filled with concern. A soft sob escaped her lips against his chest, even if she desired to, there would be no way to stop it. A tight sensation in her chest, she knew it all too well; she was getting sick.

“You’re scaring me, il mio più caro, did something happen with Sebastian?” Anselm’s fingers combed through her hair, removing the pins she missed.

A brush ran through her hair, fixing the knotted ends, servants scurried around them fixing a warm bath for Aleska; Anselm guided her off the bed, helping her out of the dress which now seemed three sizes too small for her. His fingers artfully unlaced the ribbons of her dress, waving off any servants.

“Tell me what is wrong,” Anselm asked, helping her into the hot bath.

“My everything hurts,” Aleska placed a hand across her mouth, concealing a harsh cough. “I think the foul air of this place has made me sick; or I picked something up in Lowtown.”

“Should I call a healer?” Anselm asked, an edge of panic creeping into his voice.

*He lost his mother to cholera*… Aleska remembered and she nodded, mutely.

***

The healer was a grizzled old man who’d served the City Watch for longer than both their ages confined. He assured them that what ailed Aleska was merely an ‘ill humour’ and recommended plenty of elfroot-infusions and fluids to flush it out of her system.

After he left, Anselm sat behind her, tying up any loose strands of hair to keep them out of the way in case of any further illness. His fingers rubbed the stiff muscles within her shoulders, only to receive a sharp breath in return. Anselm ceased and Aleska rested her head against his shoulder. A hand covered her mouth again, Aleska pointed to the clean chamber pot resting in the corner, in moments Anselm appeared beside her again, his hand gently stroking her spine.

Aleska could no longer hold it back, leaning over the side of the tub, she vomited. The waves of nausea struck her one after the other, it seemed endless. Only Anselm’s gentle encouragement kept her going. Everything from her head to the tips of her toes twinged in pain. The muscles within her back tensed up as if she’d lifted heavy objects upstairs.
“I am sorry,” Aleska wiped her mouth, submerging her hand within the warm waters. “Just stay with me? Please?”

Tears weld up within Aleska’s eyes, Anselm’s hands cupped her cheeks, he’d rarely seen her like this; she never cried before people. Now tears willingly came down her face, he was at a loss how to help her.

“What about your tunic?” Aleska clenched at the collar, her feet touching the soft fibers of the carpet.

“I don’t care about that,” Anselm placed a towel around her shoulders, lifting her within his arms once more. “Right now, all I care about is you. You are unwell, you carry too much on your shoulders.”

Aleska felt the warmth of the bed beneath her, Anselm walked to the dresser beside the fireplace, picking out the warm night clothes that he ordered for her. He knelt beside her, guiding her feet through the holes and lifting it along her waist. The shirt came next, placed over her head and her arms placed through the long sleeves.

“You really don’t have to,” Aleska cleared her throat, lying back into the soft pillows.

“I want to,” Anselm kicked his boots off, climbing in bed beside her; his arms around her shoulders. “I will remain next to you, until you command me to leave.”

“You’ll not be leaving anytime soon then,” Aleska sniffed, cuddling into his embrace.

“Then my watch begins,” Anselm kissed the top of her head.

***

“It is all falling apart,” Aleska chewed the ends on her nails, breaking them to the beds. “I can’t do this anymore.”

“Shhh,” Anselm soothed, a hand running through her ebony locks. “It isn’t falling apart. You are doing a good job.”

“Am I though?” Aleska looked up at him, watching as he kissed each individual finger. “Sophia is leaving—she says it will be for s short while, but I know different—Cullen is a basketcase at the moment... my Inquisition is falling apart and I don’t know if I have the strength to deal with everything.”

“This is my fault, not yours. I should have told you, and let you decide what to do.” Anselm stroked her cheek. “You can’t blame yourself, or carry burdens alone, when you have people to help you. I’m only sorry I’ve added to those burdens.”

Aleska rested her head against Anselm’s chest, his heartbeat thudding against his ribs soothed her in ways she couldn’t explain. A tender kiss placed along his torso. Her fingers lightly trailing along the elegant tattoo against his tanned skin.

“You’re right, you should have told me, and once we’re out of this cursed place we’re going to have a very hard talk about that. For now, I want you to promise me one thing.”
“Anything.” Anselm whispered, kissing the top of her head.

“Stay away from Cullen.” She said. “Don’t tease him, don’t provoke him and just… well… leave him alone. He’s in a very dangerous place right now and I don’t want him pushed any further.”

“You have my word.” Anselm assured her. “I’ll keep out of his sight as best I can.”

Aleska rested her head back against the pillow and closed her eyes. She’d suspected something bad had happened to Cullen at Kinloch Hold but, even now, remembering the whole story of torture and madness made her shudder. Much as she might want to cling on to the people around her, there was not telling what twist of fate or cruel luck might tear them away.

“None of you will always be here,” Aleska admitted. “Something my father taught me, if you cannot carry the burdens of commands yourself, then you have no business being in command. He is right, a leader has to make tough choices, be a beacon of hope, one of justice; when Sebastian kissed my palm... hoping it would give him some divine blessing from Andraste—it made me realize what the faithful must think.”

“It is plain superstition,” Anselm caressed her arm. “Should anyone touch you again, they won’t have a head upon their shoulders.”

“Now isn’t the time for jealousy,” Aleska settled down. “I hate being sick.”

“To this day,” Anselm laughed, “I have yet to meet a single person who enjoys it.”

“Don’t joke about it,” Aleska laughed. “We might be unfortunate enough to find someone just like that.”

***

A single night turned into several days, with Sebastian working with Aveline to coordinate his troops into proper arrangements, it allowed Aleska some much needed breathing room. As promised, Anselm had not left her side since that fateful evening he found her curled up in her bed. As she slept, he read beside her, every so often checking on her to ensure her fever broke. Her bare shoulder tantalizing him even further.

Touching the soft skin, Anselm felt his member respond, flashes of their activities danced before his eyes, his arm snaked around her waist, pulling her against him in a tight embrace; his nose buried in her hair, inhaling the sweet scented oils infused with her tresses. Her hand covered his, intertwining their fingers tightly together and pulling his arm up higher, her lips pressed against his knuckle.

“Morning, il mio amore più dolce,” Anselm’s lips pressed to her ear.

“Buongiorno amore mio,” Aleska whispered in return. “I’ve been practicing.”

“Yet you haven’t taught me a word of Elven,” Anselm huffed. “How is that fair?”

Aleska turned on her back, relieved able to move without her body dissolving in searing pain. Gazing into those green eyes, his silent pleading finally breaking her. “In elven we say on dhea, Ma vhenan.”

Aleska laughed softly, watching Anselm’s tongue twist at the elven phrase; the fluency would come in time, most humans struggled with the language. She would be more skeptical if his fluency was on par with her own. His lips finally cooperated, allowing him to speak the four simple
“See,” Aleska teased, “not so difficult.”

“Easy for you to say,” the tip of Anselm’s nose rubbed against hers. “You’ve spoken Elven your entire life, your Marcher is coming along nicely as well; perhaps we can attempt more difficult things next.”

“You needn’t learn a whole new language for my benefit,” Aleska placed an arm above her head, gazing at the ceiling above. “Not many in the Inquisition speak elven, those who do; they’re not Dalish, so their elven is broken in levels I can barely make sense of it.”

“What you fail to realize mi amor,” Anselm’s hands searched for hers, his fingers entangled within the lace string of her sleeping clothes. “I want to, to woo the woman I love in a language she grew up with.”

“What changed you?” Aleska searched his face, her hand against his cheek. “The Anselm I met a couple of years ago wouldn’t do this. How can I be so special?”

Anselm released a heavy breath, he guided her hand to his heart. “Do you feel that?”

Aleska nodded, the faint pulse against her fingers. The warmth of his chest sent her own heart fluttering. “Of course I do.”

“You showed me what it meant to love someone—truly love them—for who they were. Every woman eventually wanted something of me, my money, status; but for the first time in my life. I am with a woman who wants me regardless of all those things.”

“You could be a farmers son,” Aleska edged closer. “I would still love you for the man you are Anselm, I don’t care about your money; status or any of those Ostwick luxuries. I suppose we have my Dalish origins to thank for that.”

“I would thank each Creator personally in fluent Elven for delivering you to me.” Anselm’s lips pressed against hers, the tip of his tongue against hers.

Aleska’s lips parted, accepting his kiss with the same passion that he gave her, his arms around her waist pulling her against his body. Her fingers unlaced his breeches, pushing them down his waist; her hand travelled up his thigh; a soft moan escaped against his lips. Anselm’s hand travelled along her waist, caressing over her breast and resting behind her neck, his lips crushed against hers.

Within moments Anselm rested upon his back, Aleska lifted her shirt over her head, tossing it in the pile upon the floor. Anselm’s hands running along her waist, appreciating every inch of her curvacious midriff. His tongue wet his dry lips, the sensation of her grinding against him told him all he needed to know.

“All you needed to was ask my lady,” Anselm smirked, allowing his hands to wander along her thigh.

Aleska grinned, her hand slicking her hair back across her face, Anselm’s hand trailed up her waist, resting behind her neck, bringing her lips against his. The door knob twisted, the wood creaked under the pressure; an deep exhale escaped her parted lips.

“I hope I am not interrupting something—Valeska,” a voice which she hadn’t heard in almost three years echoed, sending a rush of adrenaline coursing though her veins.
Aleska slumped beside Anselm, the covers draped across her naked torso, standing there in his full battle armour was a man she hadn’t expected to see again. His black hair combed back, with the ends touching the collar of his breastplate. Blue eyes mirrored hers. Anselm sat up, clearing his throat before his mouth opened to prepare the elaborate apology he rehearsed a thousand times before.

“Bae,” Aleska found her voice, glancing between Anselm and her father. “What—what are you doing here? I have someone to announce guests.”

“Oh,” Isenatha peered outside the door, a young man stood a few paces away, still quivering from the idle threat issued. “If that were the case, he didn’t put up much of a resistance.”

“Ma te'elan gara, bae.” Aleska accepted the dressing gown from Anselm, shoving her arms through the open sleeves. “

“Ma ane ma’ ashalan, ar tel’isala shemlem dirthal ma ar ame tor.” Isenatha responded, the calmness in his tone forced the hairs upon the back of Anselm’s neck to prickle.

Aleska huffed, tightening the ribbons of her dressing gown, the pressure forced her to suck in a breath. *I have heard of being cock blocked, but by one’s own father. This has to be a joke.* The door of the bathroom slammed behind her. Leaving Anselm semi naked within the bed. His fingers reached for the hem of his breeches, sliding them back along his legs. The sudden awkward encounter with the man who bore the same ice within his eyes as Aleska now turned his gaze to him.

“No doubt you have heard of me, yes?” Isenatha poured them both two goblets of wine. “She will be in a huff for some time. So I wouldn’t worry about her storming out.”

“Ser—I wanted to uh... apolo—” Anselm began, formulating the words seemed to take more effort than before.

The man before him needed no weapon to cause any bodily harm, had he merely willed it, the goblet within his hand would be nothing more than molten steel. Anselm’s eyes glanced at the closed door, the realization set in that Aleska wouldn’t be out anytime soon. The goblet of wine rested beside the bed, few men had the power to make him feel like a small child of four, being punished for eating too many lemon cakes before dinner. He had this power.

*He could give my uncle a run for his money.* Anselm’s hand touched the wine goblet, the sweet wine within touched his palate, the small bit of comfort within this moment of embarrassment. *If I had my way, there would have been a thousand ways this could have gone, none of them involved his daughter on top of me. Not that I would be complaining—much.* Anselm finished the contents, only to have Isenatha place the neck of the jug against the rim of his glass, tipping in; the sloshing of wine filling in the goblet seemed to be the only sound he could register.

Cold blue eyes pierced into his, a sense of determination to find answers reminded him of another blye eyed elf. The rumours of how Aleska mirrored her father in multiple ways reached him shortly after they reached Skyhold. He hadn’t intended to stumble on the rumours, but once he found some tall tales, he could no longer contain the curiosity burning within his belly. The more he found out, the more intrigued by Aleska he became. Infatuated even.

“So,” Anselm cleared his throat, a wave of the hand refusing another glass of wine. “I hope you know I mean this when I say that this is not how I intended for us to meet.”

“Oh,” Isenatha rested back within the chair, his elbow resting along the arm rest; torso leaning to
the left; an index finger tracing along his chiselled chin. “How did you intend it?”

Anselm opened his mouth, but no words came out, not as easily as they normally would. What was wrong with him? It wasn’t as if he had a knife to his throat and another pointing at his unmentionables ready to strike at the slightest incorrect answer. Years he had long been the scorn of many a man, noblemen eventually refused to leave their wives at home alone, but each time he was caught in the liaison with a woman of the duchy; he happened to be met with rage unparalleled to any his uncle would ever bestow upon him. Perhaps that was the thing which frightened him the most.

Isenatha hadn’t raised his voice, issued a threat or any of the normal things Anselm had come to expect once he was caught in a dangerous entanglement. The elder elf only scanned him, every inch of his features, making an odd sigh or huff as he went along. Perhaps this was to see what Aleska found so appealing about him—or perhaps to find a weakness and exploit it.

“I would have—” his statement halted by Isenatha’s hand raised.

“I think it is time,” Isenatha began, lowering his hand and resting it against the arm rest. “That you and I have a little chat.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to everyone who helped make this fic a reality. To all the kudos, subs, comments and bookmarks. My co-author and I have a small announcement, our updates will occur more sporadic than normal. I sincerely apologize for this, but my work schedule is demanding as anything right now making it hard for us to write and communicate. This fic will be updated at least once a week. My work schedule should normalize once more come Jan of 2020. Thank you for your understanding in this matter and happy reading.
Chapter Summary

Sophia's plans to spend time in Ostwick are changed by some unexpected news; while Aleska has to deal with the strain caused by her father's continued presence, and finds a surprise awaiting her in Highever.

**Things rarely change here...** Sophia thought, trailing her hand in the cool waters of the pool as the carp stirred and moved beneath the lily-pads. Across the valley she could see the jagged ruins of the old Tevinter fortress that gave Castrotrevalli its name, sticking up above the cedar-trees shadowing the town below. The Qunari had destroyed the fortifications during the ravages of the Storm Age and, once peace had been restored to the Free Marches, her ancestors had taken the opportunity – and much of the stone—to build a new summer retreat overlooking the confluence of the Tarchus and Psacantho rivers.

Castel Castrotrevalli was a light and airy fantasy, supposed modelled on the famous Bahadur Palace at Ayesleigh; with terraced gardens spilling down the hillside to merge seamlessly with the citrus groves below, and peacocks calling to each other along the gravelled paths. It had been her favourite place as a child; far from the formality and gloomy shadows of the Palace of the Counts in Ostwick City, and the place that always came to mind when she thought of home.

She looked up as her mother made a small ‘tutting’ noise. The Countess Catarina contemplated the cards she’d turned over with a faint frown, drumming her fingers lightly on the marble tabletop.

“When are you going to tell me what’s really the matter?” She asked, sitting back, and folding her hands in her lap.

“That’s the matter.” Sophia insisted, still tracing lazy circles in the water. “I overexerted myself in Kirkwall and wanted to spend some time at home with you, and that’s all; no matter what those stupid cards say.”

The Countess laughed, with a gentle shake of her head.

“You might be able to fool your father, but I don’t need the cards to tell me when my chaffinch is miserable; or that this is something to do with a certain lion-eyed Fereldan who caused such a stir at Celene’s little party.” She patted the seat beside her. “Come, tell me what happened.”

Sophia sat for a moment, drying the drops of water from her hands, as her mother watched her with a quietly expectant smile; then she got up and joined her at the table, adjusting the seat-cushion slightly before sitting down.

“We made a mistake.” Sophia said, smoothing out her skirts and not meeting her mother’s eyes. “It can happen when two people spend a lot of time in each other’s company.”

“A mistake... really?” Catarina fell silent as a soft-shoed elven servant placed a tea-tray on the table before withdrawing with a curtsey. “The way the two of you were looking at each other...
suggested otherwise.”

She poured the tea; a fragrant Tevene blend known as ‘Seven Dragons,’ suitable for hot afternoons. Sophia lifted a slice of lemon from the dish with a silver fork and let it lightly float on top of her cup, waiting for her mother to continue.

“Something happened in Kirkwall to change that, didn’t it?” Catarina shook her head with a sigh. “It was a mistake for you to go there; you should have let your father deal with it. It wouldn’t be the first time he’s had to manage an awkward Vael.”

“It’s thanks to father’s ‘management’ of the Vaels that we ended up with Sebastian,” Sophia said dryly, looking down at the cup in her hands. “I still can’t believe you ever considered marrying me to that man!”

The Countess took a sip of her tea and set her cup back down, a look of regret on her face.

“It was either him or Seamus Dumar; you were too young for Cailan, even without the other complications that would have entailed.” She glanced over at her daughter with a sad, knowing smile. “In hindsight, you made the right choice when you insisted on going to the Circle; and don’t think I haven’t noticed you changing the conversation. We were discussing the present, not the past.”

Sophia put her cup to one side and dabbed at her eyes.

“We can’t escape our pasts though, can we? Something always comes back to haunt us. If you really want to know what happened in Kirkwall; Anselm happened.” She balled her fists in her lap, feeling the pain and fury still seething deep inside her. “He found out something that happened a great many years ago and couldn’t wait to blurt it out.”

Catarina let out a slow sigh and reached over, taking her daughter’s hand.

“I think I can see where this is going. Many cruel truths are spoken in the heat of the moment and can’t be taken back.”

Sophia nodded, interlacing her fingers tightly with her mother’s. The tight sensation returning within her chest, now her mask was cracking. A shuddered breath escaped her parted lips, followed by several small breaths in an attempt to recompose herself.

“The Commander sent me a letter, full of regrets, and I don’t doubt he means them; but he still meant the things he said; and I can’t help wondering if part of him is right, that I have been protected from—"

“Don’t be ridiculous!” Catarina interjected, waving her hand dismissively. “People seem to think that nobility is some magical aura that shelters you from everything cruel in the world. It’s as stupid as prancing about playing at being shepherdesses and thinking that the simple life doesn’t involve spending most of your time being cold, wet and hungry. I only wish we could have protected you more than we were able to.”

Sophia felt her mother’s grip tightening and both women fell silent. She could barely remember when she was brought here after the attack on the road from Cumberland; hovering between life and death, her sleeping and waking haunted by the look in Guenther’s eyes as they yanked back his head and slashed his throat. It had been days before she was able to speak, a month before she felt capable of leaving her rooms; if it hadn’t been for Jonas, and Olivia’s constant letters, she might never set foot in the world again.
“I keep asking if I expected too much of him.” She whispered. “If it’s my fault for wanting him to be just like Guenther and how unfair that is, to both of us.”

Catarina let go of her hand and tilted her head slightly to one side, watching her daughter carefully while she formulated her next statement. The only sound was the gurgling of water from the fountain at the centre of the pool.

“I don’t believe that, and neither do you; but, perhaps, you both allowed things move a little faster than they should have?”

“Perhaps…” Sophia admitted. “But we can’t go back to what we were, regardless of how we still feel about each other. I can’t be sure that the same thing won’t happen again the next time something goes wrong and I won’t put myself, or him, through that.”

“And neither you should.” Catarina said, then frowned and reached over to place the palm of her hand against Sophia’s forehead. “You have a slight fever, how long has this been going on?”

“Only for a few days and not constantly; I think it’s the change in the weather. The sea voyage was long.”

Catarina shook her head, taking Sophia’s wrist and feeling the rapid throb of her pulse. She sighed quietly.

“The weather has nothing to do with it; and you’ve hardly been touching anything at breakfast. I’m going to send for Dr. Janicus.”

“Mother! You’re making a fuss about nothing.” Sophia protested. “I’m just a little over-tired and need to rest.”

Catarina picked up a small bell from the table and rang it with more determination than normal. Quickly the sound of the servant’s sandals echoed across the courtyard as they heeded their mistress’ call.

“You’re my only daughter, I’m entitled to make a fuss; and if that’s all it is then Janicus can prescribe a nerve-ting.”

###

“Mia Tesora! This is wonderful news.” The skirts of Count Boniface’s morning-coat billowed behind him as he strode into the bedchamber, taking his daughters hands and kissing them effusively. “We grant you the Barony of San Acantho, with all its revenues, for you and your heirs in perpetuity.”

Sophia felt her heart sink within her; she’d almost hoped her father would take the news badly, he was much easier to deal with when he was in a foul mood.

“This isn’t really necessary…” She began and her father raised his eyebrows.

“Not necessary? Of course, it is.” He kissed her hands again. “You carry Our first grandchild; perhaps, even, Our Heir.”

“Father!” Sophia exclaimed. “Can you at least wait until my child is safely born before you begin deciding things!”

“Indeed, indeed…” The Count sat on the bed beside her, patting her hand with a look of
exaggerated penitence. “But We must begin making some preparations.”

“I warned you he would be like this.” Countess Catarina said, sitting down on the other side of her daughter’s bed.

The Count glared at her and huffed.

“Like what? Can’t a man get excited about his first grandchild?” He turned his attention back to Sophia. “We shall have your Great-Aunt Lucille’s chambers opened and prepared for you. You always loved the view from there, and the sea-breeze will do you good.”

Sophia sighed, looking to her mother for support. If she didn’t put her foot down now, her father would have her tangled up in a web of plans and arrangements for the next twenty years, one she’d never be able to escape.

“Boniface, my dear.” Catarina said gently. “Aren’t you forgetting about someone else who might want to have a say in this?”

The Count looked confused for a moment before his jovial expression gave way to a frown.

“Who, the sour-faced Commander? I’m surprised he removed that armour long enough for the act of conception to take place!”

Catarina gave an exasperated shake of her head.

“I mean Sophia. Perhaps you should hear what she has to say before you get everything signed and sealed!”

Count Boniface huffed once more.

“Do you think I would ignore our daughter’s wishes in the matter?”

“You’re doing a very good job of it at the moment.” Sophia grumbled, adjusting the bedcovers. If Dr Janicus hadn’t ordered her to rest until the tonic took effect she could have been packed and halfway to the harbour by now.

“Well, what do you wish to do?”

“I’m going back to Skyhold, while it’s still safe for me to travel.”

“Nonsense!” Boniface snorted derisively. “You should be here, surrounded by your family; with the finest doctors and midwives in the Free Marches tending to you.”

“I have family at Skyhold, and the Inquisition doesn’t lack for healers.” Sophia reminded him. “Anyway, I promised Aleska I would go back. What type of friend—Trevelyan even—would I be if I broke my word to her, she also needs me; I feel she will be sympathetic enough to my condition, she has always been good to me Papa.”

“You are with child now.” The Count said firmly. “That changes a great many things.”

Sophia squared her shoulders.

“It does indeed, and that is why I must return.”

Count Boniface sighed heavily, taking her hand between both of his.
“You don’t need him.” He stated calmly, his tone lowered. “Your child will be a lawful Trevelyan from birth; and you deserve so much better.”

“And he deserves the chance to be a father to his child, if that is what he wants. I can’t deny him that.”

“I could, very easily.” The Count grumbled; giving his daughter a long, steady, look. “Andraste’s Pyre! You are a stubborn and wilful woman!”

“I wonder where she gets that from?” Countess Catarina murmured, as though to herself; earning another glare from her husband.

“I can see the pair of you have already decided this between you.” He grumbled. “Very well, you may return to Skyhold; but, only on condition you let me make you Baroness of San Acantho.”

Sophia leaned over and kissed her father’s cheek.

“There, that wasn’t so difficult was it?” She said, with an innocent smile. He drew her head down to his shoulder, stroking her hair.

“What a Countess you would have made, my darling. I never should have agreed to let you go to the Circle. We had everything under control.”

“I wanted to go, Papa; it was the right thing to do.”

He sighed heavily again.

“And you are very good at getting what you want.” He kissed her forehead and stood up. “The only other thing I will insist upon is that you be accompanied by a doctor and a midwife on your journey back. I do not intend to take any foolish risks with either of you.”

“You always did appreciate the art of compromise.” She smiled up at him. “Thank you, Papa.”

“Art?” The Count grunted in vague amusement. “In this family, compromise is a bloody necessity!”

###

“Can’t you do that somewhere else?” Aleska said, laying down her pen and massaging her temples. “It’s going right through my head.”

Anselm laid his guitar to one side. He’d been sure to not play a single note out of tune, the tune she claimed to love hearing coming from his chambers in Haven. Things changed; she’d changed. Since the talk with her father, she’d said nothing more to him than a few words when pressed.

“I thought you said my playing relaxes you?” Anselm adjusted one of the tuning pegs, running his thumb along the taunt string.

Aleska reached over to stop the pen from rolling off the table, tucking it between the pages of her journal. The crossing from Kirkwall to Highever had been smooth so far, but the wind was picking up as the ship drew nearer to the Storm Coast. Neither her stomach nor her head appreciated the increased movement.

“Not when I’m trying to keep my breakfast where it should be. Why don’t you go up on deck? I imagine being stuck with me in this small cabin isn’t ideal for you.”
Anselm settled back onto the cushioned bench beneath the stern window of the master cabin; folding his arms with a grumpy look.

“And where, precisely, would I go?” He muttered with a hint of petulance. “Cullen’s glowering at the rear, your father’s at the front – staring at the waves like they personally offended him—and if I hang about the middle, the sailors threaten me with all sorts of unmentionable things if I don’t get out of their way. I’m not sure what a marlinspike is, but it sounds painful.”

Aleska laughed, despite the intermittent twists of nausea, a hand covered her mouth to prevent her breakfast from making a one-way track back up. Even holding it in sent her stomach twisting into knots. The rocking motion of the boat did little to aid her.

“How is it that you can tell the ingredients of a perfume with just a couple of sniffs, and yet you couldn’t name the parts of a ship to save your life—despite growing up in one of the largest port-cities in Thedas?”

Anselm pulled one of the cushions out from behind his back and tossed it lightly at her with a grin. She easily swatted it away with the back of her hand.

“I only care to learn what’s important, and not every scent works well everywhere; however, it’s very unlikely that I’ll ever be required to furrow a mizzen-sail, or whatever you’re supposed to do with them.”

Aleska shook her head with an amused sigh, pouring herself another glass of Elfroot-tonic. It wasn’t doing much for the headache or the seasickness, but it helped to have something in her stomach.

“You do have a curious sense of priorities, and you’re not going to be able to avoid them forever.” Aleska opened the journal once more, dipping the tip of her quill in fresh ink; the boat rocking caused her hand to slip, a long black line now seeped into the parchment. Frustration forced Aleska to slam the book shut, the inkwell jumped, but landed again on the base without a single drop spilt.

Anselm shrugged, turning to look out of the windows at the gulls flying and screeching in the ship’s wake.

“Cullen’s easy; I just have to stay out of his eyeline. I’m more worried about what Jonas is going to do—probably soak my breeches in bacon-grease and let Cuddles loose.”

Aleska gave him a sharp glance, her arms folded along her chest, the small glimmer of satisfaction within her iris warned Anselm that should he push his luck any further than he had already, she was willing to consider Jonas’ idea.

“It’s no more than you deserve. Don’t think I’ve forgiven you for causing this mess; I just need your support more than I need to be angry with you right now.”

Anselm sighed and stood up, grabbing hold of one of the roof-beams as the ship rolled again. He waited for her to right herself before walking over to Aleska; resting his hands on her shoulders and kneading them gently. She leaned her head back against him, closing her eyes with a smile “…and don’t think this is going to get you off the hook either.”

He bent down and kissed the top of her head, his nose imbedded in her ebony locks, inhaling the sweet scent of summer lavender. A small taste of home, walking through the lavender fields as a child; disturbed by no one.

“I’m just grateful you didn’t kick me into the harbour and tell me to swim back to Ferelden.”
Anselm spoke against her hair, muffling his voice slightly.

“I was tempted, believe me—” She said, shifting her head up slightly. “But you make too comfortable a pillow.”

“I’m glad I can be of some worthwhile use.” He chuckled quietly as he continued to work on her tense muscles. “Perhaps if you got some fresh air it would make you feel better? I can stay here and finish my song; you can get come much needed peace.”

“Between the choice of awkward silence with Cullen and angry silence with my father, I’m not sure if that’s a good idea. What did the two of you say to each other, anyway?” She felt Anselm’s fingers pause and knew she’d caught him off-guard. “I want the truth.”

Anselm took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. The conversation came back in flashes, he’d been subjected to the angry and verbal abuses of husbands and fathers alike when he’d been caught in bed with a woman, but this time had been different. There was no screaming, his face did not redden. None of it.

“He said that, if I cared for you, I should end this for your sake and that of Clan Lavellan; as there was no way it could end well. I may be paraphrasing slightly; I was looking for my clothes at the time, so it was hard to pay full attention. Previously, when an irate father has interrupted things, I’ve been more concerned with getting out of the nearest window before they tried to turn me into a hunting trophy.”

Aleska sensed the tension creeping back into her shoulders. It was no surprise Bae would say something like that, he was as proud and jealous of their lineage as any human nobleman; more so, perhaps. Anyone who married out of ‘The People’ was little better than a traitor to many Elves, whether Dalish or City. The more obvious Elven physical traits rarely—if ever—passed on to elf-blooded children, so these unions represented a loss they couldn’t afford. Clan Lavellan might be more open than others, accepting Elves from the Alienages and even giving shelter to sympathetic humans like Hawke, but there were limits.

“Go on…” She sighed. Anselm let go of her shoulders and crouched down, so their heads were level. He rested his forehead against hers and took her hand.

A thousand thoughts ran through her mind, her father would not have given up, not that easily. If he couldn’t get his way through diplomacy—or what he passed as diplomacy—then force was the way he intended to have things done his way. She had him to thank for her persistence and stubborn nature.

“There were a number of variations on the same theme, to be honest. In the end, I told him that if he saw the way you handled them at the Winter Palace, he’d know you weren’t a child anymore; and that perhaps he ought to start treating you like an adult who’s capable of making her own decisions.”

Aleska drew her head back and looked at him in silence for a moment. Her eyes searched for any signs of over embellishment, there were none to be found; people rarely spoke back to her father, and those who did found themselves wolf bait.

“You said that? To my father? How did he, I mean, what did he respond with?”

Anselm gave her a rueful little smirk; the tips of his fingers caressed her cheeks, before both hands cupped her face.
“By that time, I’d found my other shoe and took my leave; I think he was still trying to decide which bit of me to set on fire first. We’ve not really spoken since. I got the impression he’s not used to being defied.”

She took her face in his hands and gave him a long, slow, kiss; enjoying his look of grateful surprise as their lips parted. His fingers now firmly entangled within her hair, his lips aching for her to kiss him again, his body aching for her touch once more.

“What was that for?” His voice a whisper, his lips edging closer to hers, his hands combing through the strands of hair and resting along her shoulders.

Aleska laughed, running the fingers of both hands through her hair, smoothing the knots he now created.

“For doing the bravest thing you’ll probably ever do in your life, or the stupidest. I haven’t quite decided yet.”

“I did take an arrow in the guts for you once.” Anselm reminded her, and she answered his silent plea, her lips pressed against his with a force which would have sent them both tumbling backwards had it not been for his powerful legs.

“I’m including that.” She said, then grimaced as her stomach heaved again. “I think I might go on deck for a while, and there’s a couple of things I need to say to my father.”

Aleska inhaled deeply, the salt-smell of the air heavy in her nose and throat. Wisps of cloud scudded fast across the clear blue sky, while the cliffs and hills of the Storm Coast were already visible as a dark line on the horizon. If it wasn’t for the churning of her stomach—and the tall, slender, figure standing in the prow of the ship—it might have been an invigorating, even enjoyable experience. She made her way forward, dodging around the sailors at their work.

Anselm hadn’t been joking, the business of the ship was foremost; and woe betide any land strider, whether lord or servant, who got in the way of it. Her father stood with one hand resting on the railing, cloak wrapped tight around him, contemplating the approaching shore with his dark eyebrows knitted in a heavy frown.

“It has been many Ages since our Clan wandered these lands.” He said as she approached, his eyes still fixed on the horizon. “I wonder what memories the forests still hold of us?”

Aleska stood beside him, folding her arms and trying to maintain an air of confidence. Her eyes peered at the horizon, wondering of the times the elves would roam freely through the forest, before the Blight all but consumed the land. Ferelden still hadn’t recovered from the effects, she doubted it ever truly would.

“A pilgrimage? Is that why you insisted on coming with us?” Aleska tone remained calm, knowing her father was a spark amidst dry grass, one wrong word and the field would be set ablaze.

Keeper Isenatha stood silent for a moment, his face set and steady. Aleska had lifelong experience of reading her father’s moods and she could feel the anger echoing around him in that silence. The lines upon his forehead hardened, a thousand things he desperately wanted to say to her, but none which wouldn’t result in her continued silence toward him.

“I see my daughter forgetting who she is, seduced by the lure of the humans and their praise. I am doing what any father would do; reminding her of her own truth.” Isenatha stated, his arms folded to mirror hers. “It saddens me Da’len.”
"I don’t need you to remind me, Father," She said sharply, pulling the glove from her left hand. "I carry my truth with me. As I always have."

He took her wrist, turning her hand palm uppermost; glaring at the Anchor with a mixture of disgust and resentment. The magic circled beneath her skin, no ordinary mage would be able to wield such power, yet his daughter did it with effortlessness which would put most mages to shame. A grim reminder of what she could have been.

"There is no truth in this, no matter how often they call you ‘Herald’. This is our magic, all but forgotten for good reason. I know it, and I see in your eyes that you do too.” She pulled her hand away from him and thrust it back into her glove. "You are no prophet of their religion; what do you think will happen to you when they realise this?"

Aleska felt the sharp bite of anxiety deep inside her. Cullen and Cassandra might choose to believe this was the will of the Maker, and Leliana more than willing to manipulate widespread belief for the ends of the Inquisition, but one doubting voice could swiftly become ten thousand. The words of the spirit who might have been Divine Justinia came back to her.

*Either you believe in the Maker, in which case these events were guided by His Hand; or you don’t, and nothing has changed…*

Since regaining her memories of what happened in the Temple of Sacred Ashes, she’d played those events repeatedly in her mind, trying to make sense of them and the woman’s words. She turned to her father, pushing back her fears with a surge of boldness.

"There were hundreds in that Temple; priests, mages and templars, but I was the only one who heard their Divine call for help. Even if this is some ancient magic of the People, there were plenty of Elves among the mages; why did it call to me and not to them? Who am I, or even you, to say what role the Creators played in all of this?"

A deep anger flared in her father’s eyes, the orange glow of his hand shone, almost illuminating the side of his face, his hand balled into a tight fist, the skin of his knuckles turned white. He peered deeply into her eyes, searching for some truth that she remained faithful to her clan. He only saw her mother within her, and the loss still ached him.

"So, you speak for the Creators as well as Andraste?” He snapped, laughing of out anger. “Perhaps I should hand over the Keeper’s robe and staff, and let you guide the Clan according to Their will?”

"Even if you would do that just to get me back, only a mage can be Keeper.” Aleska retorted. “And I’ve disappointed you enough in that regard, wouldn’t you agree?"

For the briefest moment, he looked surprised—even hurt—by the vehemence of her response; but the moment passed, and the inscrutable mask of the Dragon was back in place. There was no denying that his daughter was his likeness in many ways; she knew how to strike where it hurt the most. Had it been any other day, his face would beam with pride, but not on this day.

"The only thing that disappoints me is the way you shame yourself with that insolent boy! Does it please you to be paraded on his arm like some trophy, knowing you are only the most recent of his conquests?”

Aleska felt her hands clenching, and the muscles of her jaw tightening, as she fought back the urge to shout. Fighting even the tears which wanted to fall freely along her cheeks, her teeth gritted, and her jawline tightened; she was not about to allow him a final word—not now.
“How dare you.” She said, her voice shaking with the effort to stay calm. “You know nothing of him, or of what we’ve been through together.”

“And you believe his interest will remain once the adventures are done? Don’t be naïve.” He replied, with scathing indifference to her rising temper. “He will find a new plaything, they all will. You are nothing but a pawn for them to use in their game and discard when that usefulness has ended. Do you believe the proud Count of Ostwick will tolerate your presence once you no longer present any possibility of advantage?”

Aleska turned her face away from him to stare out at the sea, and the approaching land; the towers and walls of Highever now coming into view. Every one of the arrows he was firing had struck its target and she could tell he knew that. Every one of her fears left raw and bleeding. She gripped the rail tightly; he could wound with words, but so could she.

“At least Count Boniface managed to show courtesy and respect; more than you’ve shown me since you arrived. You’re my father, and I love you, it doesn’t mean I have to tolerate you treating me like I am sixteen again. I am not my sister; as much as I find the Game abhorrent, at least I know my enemy strikes because I pose a threat—not to wound his own daughter.”

There was a long, steady silence; and when her father spoke again there was ice, not fire, in his words.

“You side with a Shemlen lord against your own kin. I weep to think what your mother would say.”

“Mae is dead!” Aleksa fired back, feeling the twisting in her guts again. “It wasn’t a Trevelyan, or a Pentaghast, or even a Valmont who was responsible. It was bandits; drunk, cruel, and brutal. They would have done it to anyone who crossed their path. If you hold me responsible for her death then fine, so be it. I am done trying to atone for my mistakes.”

It was what she’d told herself, time and again, as she tried to remind herself that it wasn’t her fault for wanting to go into the forest that day. Those men were just waiting for the first victims to cross their path. It was bad luck, nothing else.

“But they did it to my wife; your mother.” Keeper Isenatha hissed, his eyes narrowing. “We are nothing but animals to these people; you would be wise to remember that.”

“And you would have me treat them all as rabid beasts who could turn at any moment. Where is the wisdom in that?” A thin, metallic whistle cut through the air; Aleska looked forward and saw the white sails of a sloop approaching from the harbour. “That’s the pilot-boat; I have to go and greet it. If your principles won’t permit you to be the guest of the Shemlen Teryn of Highever for the night, I can probably arrange for our scouts to help you on your journey to the homeland of our ancestors.”

“That will not be necessary.” Her father replied; the ice still heavy in his voice. “I can play the subservient knife-ear so as not to embarrass your noble friends; but do not think this is over.”

“I’m counting on that.”

Aleska turned sharply from her father and walked swiftly away, knowing that another word from her would spark a shouting match she did not want to have in front of an entire ship’s crew.

“What?” She snapped at the bo’sun as he approached her. The man held out a spyglass.

“Beg pardon, Your Worship.” He said, unaffected by her ill-mood. “The pilot-boat is flying the Royal Standard; I thought you might like to see for yourself.”
She raised the spyglass to her eye, focussing it the way Cullen had once shown her. Sure enough, there was the Theirin Standard; twin Mabari rampant against a field of white and gold. Beneath it, at the stern, she could make out a tall man with a distinctive mop of reddish-blonde hair.

“Wonderful!” She handed the spyglass back to the bo’sun. “Thank you for the warning.”

###

“Any idea why King Alistair would be on the Highever pilot-boat?” She asked, kicking the cabin door shut behind her. Anselm looked of confusion was quickly overtaken by one of dismay.

“Shit… I forgot it’s Cloudreach.”

“And the importance of that is? I am not clued up on Ferelden customs.” She grumbled, opening her travelling-chest to look for one of her dress waistcoats.

“Bryce and Eleanor Cousland’s wedding anniversary.” He said sheepishly. “The family keep it as a kind of private memorial.”

Aleska rested her hands on the rim of the chest, taking a deep breath to steady her temper. Sophia would have alerted her to this well in advance, giving her the time to prepare properly.

“Find yourself a decent tunic and get ready.” She said in a sharp, clipped tone. “They’ll be here soon.”

“I’m sorry, Love; with everything that’s been happening, I… well, I just forgot.” The quietness of his voice showed he clearly sensed her change of temper, but she was in no mood to indulge him right now.

“It’s fine, just hurry up… please.” She replied sharply, pulling a blue and gold waistcoat from the chest. “And try not to forget anything else of importance!”

Teryn Fergus of Highever was a tall man in his late thirties; lean and handsome, with his collar-length brown hair held back by two thin braids fastened at the back of his head. It was a style favoured by some of the older Ferelden nobles; Aleska recalled seeing portraits of King Cailan wearing his hair in a similar fashion.

The Teryn was about the same age as that ill-fated monarch, she remembered. The two men must have grown up together, given the close relationship between the Theirins and the Couslands. All this was still strange to her. She’d heard tales of the Fifth Blight, and Ferelden’s bloody civil war, but they’d always felt like things that happened Ages ago—like the great battles of the past sung of by the Clan’s storytellers. Standing in the presence of people who had been at the heart of those events made her feel like she’d walked into the middle of an ancient legend.

“It’s an honour to welcome you to Highever, Inquisitor Lavellan.” Teryn Fergus said with a gracious smile, bowing over her extended hand, his large hand enveloped hers; his lips pressed against her knuckle. “Permit me to present His Grace; King Alistair Theirin.”

“We’ve already met; no need to be so formal.” Alistair chuckled, striding forward and shaking her hand eagerly, pulling her closer and playing a kiss of greeting upon each cheek. Even out of armour he was a colossal figure, taller than Cullen and as broad in the shoulders as Jonas; he loomed over her, grinning down in a very unkinglike fashion. “At least it’s a bit less awkward than last time, eh?”

“Indeed, Your Grace.” Aleska said, hoping her smile conveyed the same relaxed goodwill.
Alistair’s gaze flickered briefly from her to Anselm and Cullen and there was the faintest hint of a frown.

“Riiight… you look well, travels went well I hope” He said carefully, before the grin reappeared; despite his cheerful demeanour it was clear he was no fool, and as astute as his wife. “Well, we’d better let the sailors do their job; do you mind if we join you as you sail into port?”

“I’d be honoured, Your Grace.” Aleska assured him and he rubbed his hands together gleefully.

“Excellent! Liv is back at the castle and can’t wait to see you again. How are you with children and dogs by the way?” He paused and chuckled again. “You’ve survived Joe and Cuddles, so I suppose that answers my question.”

Aleska couldn’t help herself from laughing.

“I am honoured her Grace remembered me at all, our talk was very brief at the time.” Aleska peered over her shoulder, noting her father’s icy stare. “I’ll tell him you said that! I’m grateful for the invitation, but it wouldn’t feel right intruding upon you, we can stay within—”

“Nonsense!” Alistair snorted. “We’ll be delighted to have you as guests; and after dealing with Sebastian I’m sure you could do with some decent company. For all the use that man makes of his… ah… Royal Prerogative… they might as well stick him in a frock and make him the next Divine!”

Aleska’s hand muffled a laugh, her hand hooked within Alistair’s extended arm. The first genuine laugh in a while. “Your Grace, you jest.”

“Do I though?” Alistair raised a brow. “I have often wondered—"

“Excuse me, Your Worship…” Teryn Fergus interjected. “Is the Lady Sophia not travelling with you? I understood she was with you in Kirkwall; I…and…erm… my sister… were rather hoping to see her again.”

“Lady Sophia is visiting her parents.” Aleska said, uncomfortably aware of King Alistair’s scrutiny. “Kirkwall was stressful for her and I thought she needed time to rest.”

“Oh… that’s… unfortunate; but I suppose it’s to be expected. I should write to her with my best wishes”

“I am sure she would enjoy that,” Aleska nodded. “Though travelling makes Lady Sophia rather exhausted, so don’t be disheartened if your response is delayed.”

Teryn Fergus’ disappointment was obvious, and Aleska could see the King’s attention wandering in the direction of Cullen and Anselm; and then to her father who stood well apart from the small crowd.

“Yeeeesss… a bit less awkward than last time…” He muttered to himself.

###

The first time Aleska had been in Highever she was just one face in a crowd, trying to find passage south to the great Conclave. This time, they pulled into what seemed to be a private dock, separate from the main harbour. Horses were waiting for them and they rode up a winding, cobbled, lane towards the Castle.
“I thought you might prefer a more discreet route.” Teryn Fergus explained. “No cheering crowds or speeches in front of the Chantry.”

Aleska nodded gratefully. “I’ve had enough cheering and speeches to last a lifetime; this is a welcome relief, my lord.”

The lane opened onto the castle esplanade and Aleska saw a small shrine standing beside the entrance to the main gatehouse. Instinctively she dismounted and walked over to it, vaguely aware of Alistair following her. From the outside it appeared little different from the many wayside chapels to be found across Southern Thedas, places for weary travellers to rest and pray, but inside —under a delicately beautiful painting of the Merciful Andraste—a few lines were carved into a simple altar of white marble.

_Sacred to the memory of:_

_Cailan I Theirin; King, Hero, and Beloved Friend_

_Teryn Bryce and Teryna Eleanor Cousland; The Soldier and the Seawolf_

_Orianna and Oren Cousland; Beloved Wife and Son_

_And all the innocent souls who perished in the Night of Treason._

_Also, to the memory of:_

_Warden Commander Duncan of Ferelden; Hero, Friend and Mentor_

_And all those who perished to protect Ferelden and Thedas from the Fifth Blight_

_“Blessed are the righteous, the lights in the shadow._

_In their blood the Maker’s will is written.”_

She lit a candle and placed it in front of the altar; bowing her head in prayer for a moment.

“We wanted them all remembered together; it seemed right.” Alistair said in a soft, sad, voice behind her. “Strange, how so much loss can be summed up in so few words.”

“I sometimes wonder what they’ll say about me.” She said, in equally hushed tones. Alistair just laughed quietly.

“Time enough to worry about that when all’s done. Now let’s get inside; I don’t know about you, but I’m starving!” As they left the chapel he leaned down and whispered in her ear. “Just to warn you; Livvie is _definitely_ going to want to know the real reason Sophia’s staying in Ostwick.”
“Another feast?” Aleska repeated the words for the umpteenth time “Why do nobles always feel the need to throw feasts? Is it some habit that was formed and no one desires to get out of?”

Anselm’s fingers trailed along her knuckles; this was their first moment of solitude since their feet touched the docks of Highever. If it wasn’t her father lecturing her, it was some other trivial matter claiming her attention. Anselm could see how it exhausted her, but she carried on without much complaint, the bags beneath her eyes darkened with each day that passed; the sleepless nights would catch up with her sooner than she would be willing to admit.

“Oh, you know what it’s like,” He said in a deliberately light tone. “You throw one fancy party and then everyone wants to outdo you; besides, it’s easier to be pleasant to someone you despise when you’re drinking their best wine.”

Aleska looked across the gardens; further down the path, an elven man hummed tunelessly to himself as he trimmed the hedges with a large pair of shears. Aleska’s throat tightened at the sight, unable to tear her eyes away.

Servants or outcasts; is that all we can ever hope to be?

Anselm’s hand touched her cheek, drawing her attention back to him.

“Many have said that Bryce—Olivia’s father—was one of the few lords who treated his elven servants well,” Anselm’s hand trailed down her cheek, resting upon the back of her neck. “All of them work because they want to work for his family.”

“I wasn’t—” Aleska stammered, her gaze now at the slippers upon her feet. “I mean.”

“I know that look you get,” Anselm embraced her; resting his chin atop her head and gently caressing her arm.

Aleska inhaled slowly, savouring his scent of his sandalwood and cedar as she relaxed into the comfort of his arms and pulled herself closer to him. The elven man stopped, suddenly aware of their presence, and lowered his head in a bow.

“Pardon me, my Lady,” he cleared his throat, gathering up the cut off shrubbery into his hand to throw away. “My Lord, I didn’t see you there.”

“Please,” Aleska smiled, “we are disturbing you. I apologize for that; if you could just tell us where the fountains are, we shall be on our way.”
With the directions provided, they were able their destination. Well before it came into view, Aleska could hear faint noise of babbling water.

*I can’t even trust my hearing anymore, what is next, my sight?* Aleska pondered, tightening her grip on Anselm’s arm and hoping he didn’t sense her unease.

Passing through an archway of roses, Aleska inhaled sharply at the sight of the fountain before them; a simple marble design with a gold plaque within the centre. The water flowed from a pair of vases held by two small women, with ribbons curling about their wrists and into their dresses. The waters sparkled with a crystalline clarity she hadn’t seen since the Winter Palace.

Anselm seated Aleska on the bench in front of the fountain, her hand reached behind her and trailed the water; her fingers tracing rippling patterns. She exhaled slowly, her fathers’ words still ringing within her ears, as they had since he spoke them.

*Is Bae, right? Am I forgetting who I am? Forsaking my kin for these humans?*

Aleska’s attention tore from the ripples she created toward Anselm, his hand cupped hers within his and he edged closer to her.

”I know what it's like to deal with family disappointment; and I know I haven't dealt with it in the smartest way, but if I hadn't made all those mistakes I'd never have met you, and that would have been the worst mistake of all. I don't care what your father expects you to be. I want you just the way you are; beautiful, brave, and kind in a way that never ceases to amaze me. The woman who taught me what it means to fall in love.”

The corner of Aleska’s lips formed a smile, despite the tears which so desperately wanted to fall along her cheeks. A single nod, that was all she could muster. Her stomach twisted and turned into knots which she hadn’t endured since she was a child. A gentle hand touched her cheek, his thumb trailed beneath her eyes, wiping away the tears which had gathered there. Anselm’s lips skimmed the sweep of her cheek, moving closer towards her lips.

“Have you always had such a way with words,” the tip of Aleska’s nose touched against his. “You always know exactly what to say, to make me forget all my troubles.”

“It is both my gift,” Anselm’s hand rested upon her cheek. “And my curse.”

Anselm’s voice dropped to a whisper; his face edged closer toward hers until the tip of his lip touched hers in a soft kiss. Light as a feather, yet it held enough passion behind it to make goosebumps appear across her bare skin. A hunger overtook them both, their lips moved seamlessly with one another. Aleska’s hands cupped his neck, pulling him deeper into their kiss. His hands wandered along her torso, his fingers bumping along the indents within her armour before resting on the lace strings. With a tug, the knot freed itself and her waistcoat opened slightly.

“Anselm,” Aleska broke their connection, breathless. “Do you believe the Queen of Ferelden would condone our actions? This fountain is special to the Cousland family.”

Anselm’s lips trailed along her jawline, moving down to her neck, easing her back against the stone bench.

“I believe she would do more than condone it,” he lay her flat, pulling at the strings of her waistcoat. “She would encourage it.”

“You are a scoundrel,” Aleska ran her fingers through his hair.
“Yes,” Anselm smiled down at her. “But you forget the most important part of that statement, My Lady.”

“And what would that be?”

“I am *your* scoundrel.”

***

The fires roared within the hearth, steam from their bath barely dissipated before the dinner bells rang. Aleska fixed the hair pin within her braided updo. Her hair fixed within a simple bun joined by braids on either side of her head. A dress lay upon their bed, a single shade of red to match the earrings Sophia had once lent her. A shade now accepted as Trevelyan red.

The dress was simple in its design, an open collar resting upon her shoulders showing off her shoulders and neckline. The corset beneath shaped her figure to match the tight fit of the dress. Open sleeves allowing free movement of her arms with a simple leaf design upon the material. The flowing skirt touched the floor, covering the shoes beneath.

“I feel ridiculous,” Aleska mumbled, watching Anselm button up his dress-shirt with a wicked smile.

“You look beautiful,” Anselm tucked the loose ends of his shirt into his breeches, moving to her side. “I won’t be able to take my eyes off you—I worry about the rest of the court; I don’t have the energy to duel every man; maybe even some of the women.”

“Now you’re being silly.”

Aleska fixed the collar upon his shirt, running her hands along his chest, the firm musculature evident to her touch through the delicate fabric of the shirt. Aleska’s teeth captured her lower lip, had it not been for the dinner bell ringing through the halls reminding them that they wouldn’t have another opportunity to themselves until the evening, she would have continued their moment by the fountain.

*Getting dressed used to be easier with Sophia around.*

Aleska’s gaze shifted to their feet, she felt a longing for Sophia’s company. Somehow Sophia always knew what to tell her when she needed to hear comforting words, a stern talking to, or to even get her arse out of bed. Aleska would always be surprised with some little bauble that Sophia had tucked away. Something which always tied her wardrobe together nicely, as if she were a fabled seer of Rivain, able to see into the future.

“What is on your mind?” Anselm’s fingers rested beneath her chin, lifting her gaze to his.

“Just that I must write to Sophia later,” Aleska removed his hand, allowing it to fall against his side. “Don’t think I have forgotten about it. You still owe me an explanation to what was running through your mind Anselmo Trevelyan.”

“Ouch,” Anselm placed a hand to his beating heart. “I must be in trouble for you to use my full name.”

*Hai fatto una cazzata, la mia rabbia non si è placata. Sono abbastanza chiaro?*” Aleska stated, her Marcher fluency even took him by surprise.

“My Lady! I hadn’t expected such—” Anselm gasped.
“You aren’t taking this seriously Anselm,” Aleska sat upon the ottoman, her face within her hands. “This ends now, what ever vendetta you have with Cullen; it stops. Am I being clear?”

“But—”

“I don’t want to hear it,” Aleska stood up. “Not once has Cullen pulled the stunt you have, he has had more than ample oppertunity. He has more than enough ammunition against you, it was not your place nor did you have any right to force him into such a corner. So before we even leave Highever, you will apologize to Cullen.”

“You can’t—”

“Anselm,” Aleska shook her head. “I refuse to be with a man who would stoop to such pettiness, so either you apologize to Cullen and mean it. Or I will pack you in the first ship to Ostwick. I am not making an idle threat. Do I have your word?”

“You drive a very hard bargain,” Anselm ran his fingers through his hair, slicking it back. “Fine... fine, I will speak with Cullen before we leave for Skyhold.”

“Thank you,” a tender kiss placed against his cheek. “I doubt Sophia will be so easily convinved to listen to you. I hope you have a plan.”

“I am working on something,” Anselm mumbled.

“Work harder,” Aleska turned on her heel, exiting the bedroom and making her way to the dining hall.

***

To be seated beside the royal family of Ferelden was an honour that not many would have been afforded. The head table had been reserved for the Cousland family for almost a century, but on this occassion, old traditions had been amended to show a the alliance between Ferelden and the Inquisiton. An alliance in the face of the Orlesian dignitaries who had been invited so begin negotiations with Alistair for peace. A word that Ferelden and Orlais would never have shared had it not been for a single goal binding Thedas.

Aleska raised her wine glass, listening to King Alistair fumble about his speech. He seems nervous, I would be to addressing such a large room. Aleska’s eyes scanned the court before her, whispers already echoing through the dining halls. Aleska’s eyes locked with a pair of golden eyes, the corner of her lips broke into a smile as Cullen raised his glass toward her. Instead of sitting where Sophia would have sat, he chose to dine with his men; the biggest surprise, was her father sitting before him, engaging in idle chatter and laughing at the soldiers anecdotes.

What game is he playing? Aleska placed her glass down, clapping along with the guests at Alistair’s speech. The servants swarmed the hall, placing platters of foot on every table and pitchers of wine and water beside the platters. It didn’t take long for the court to be filled with the sound of forks scraping against the ceramic platters and the clinking glasses. In the corner of one dining table, Aleska noticed two of the Orlesian ambassadors sniffing the wine, even with the masks covering their faces, she could imagine the disgusted looks. They never regarded Ferelden wine highly, comparing it to swill that one would fine in a filthy tavern.

Her gaze returned to her father, indulging Cullen in one of his many anecdotes, he had no shortage of interesting ones to tell. Many served as a warning to any human who crossed his path; whether
they realized it or not. Isenatha’s gaze fixed upon his daughter, raising a glass to her. Even she knew it was mocking her, reaffirming what he had told her upon the passage to Ferelden.

“Let us dance?” Alistair held a hand out for Olivia, “you might have to lead this time my dear.”

“When don’t I lead,” Olivia laughed, placing her hand within his.

Anselm rose, offering her his gloved hand, Aleska too deep in her own world to even notice it. He is up to something, it will either bode ill for myself or Cullen... perhaps both of us; no... this is a show. To what end? To gain Cullen’s trust? Perhaps to see how much Cullen knew about my relationship with Anselm. Aleska leaned forward, resting her hands beneath her chin. Already Anselm had been roped into a waltz by one of Olivia’s ladies, judging from the pained expression; the lady had two left feet.

My father can be charming when he wants to be, many don’t realize it is a trap until they are so deep in the dragons maw. Aleska watched as Isenatha bowed before Olivia, extending his hand for her; she seemed only to happy to oblige. Father of the Inquisitor, that would get many nobles attentions, he would use their facination to his own ends... what is his end? This is not for mere parlor tricks.

“Aleska,” Cullen leaned over, calling her name loudly. “You are quite deep in thought, is everything all right.”

Aleska snapped back to her reality, noticing the waltz ended. “Yes—no—what are we talking about?”

“I have only sat down now,” Cullen refilled her wine glass. “I have not seen you so deep in thought before.”

“Right,” Aleska took the wine glass, pressing the cold rim to her lips. “It’s nothing... don’t worry.”

“Now I know something is wrong,” Cullen chuckled, leaning back within his seat.

“Dance with me?” Aleska rose.

“I beg your pardon?” Cullen near choked on his wine. “I don’t dance... we... that is Templars were never taught—”

“Oh come on,” Aleska took his hand. “Just follow me lead.”

Aleska dragged him into the floor, Cullen put up less resistance than she expected. Positioning themselves beside her father and Olivia, the violenist strung his bow against the strings. A faster paced waltz than she was used to. Cullen positioned his hands the way Sophia had taught him, watching his feet the entire time. Aleska spun around, changing partners with Olivia and allowing her to pair up with her father.

“You have that look in your eyes,” Isenatha stated, his voice low enough to avoid unwanted ears listening to their conversation. “I know that look.”

“Do you?” Aleska feigned innocents, “tell me bae, where did you learn to dance? You didn’t miss a step with the Queen of Ferelden.”

“I have my secrets,” Isenatha stepped back, lifting Aleska’s hand up with his own. “Perhaps if you were more discreet, some of yours would remain so.”
“Mine?” Aleska’s eyebrow raised. “What secrets have spilled? It is unlike you to listen to idle gossip Bae, much less entertain a shemlen commander. To what end was that I wonder?”

“You noticed that?” Isenatha smirked, lowering himself to one knee as Aleska spun around him.

“You never have been subtle. Leave Cullen be, what ever tricks you have conjured, he doesn’t deserve to be your puppet.”

“From shemlen Lords to shemlen Commanders,” Isentha narrowed his eyes. “Tell me my daughter, which one truly has your heart? I see the same fire burn within you when you speak of your Commander as you do when you speak of your bed mate.”

“This conversation is over,” Aleska lowered herself into a curtsy. “I will not repeat myself again.”

“You speak as though I plot your downfall,” Isenatha lowered his voice as she walked past.

“Everyone should be treated an enemy until they prove otherwise,” Aleska turned to meet her fathers eyes. “Your most valuable lesson, not once did you say family couldn’t be the enemy.”

“You still have a lot to learn ma’ ashalan,” Isentha scoffted, breaking into a smile. “Do not forget who made you into who you are today.”

“How could I forget,” Aleska smiled. “By any means necessary right? I am not the only one with secrets Bae, you would do well not to cross me. I am your daughter afterall, I don’t take kindly to betrayal. Remember that.”

***

Only the sconces on the outer walls of Castle Cousland continued to burn late into the night as the lamps and candles inside were gradually extinguished. Alistair and Olivia retired shortly after dessert was served, Cullen followed as did her father. Anselm hadn’t spoken a word to her since dinner. She could hardly blame him. Her firmness over the matter with Cullen had taken him by surprise, but she had to think as the Inquisitor, as well as his lover. Cullen was the commander of her armed forces, she couldn’t afford to let him be publicly undermined by a junior officer; no matter what their relationship was.

Have I indulged him too much; given him license to run wild without realising it?

He lay beside her, one hand resting against her stomach; he’d slipped into a deep sleep as soon as he took the vial of elfroot tonic that the apothecary provided. Sleep evaded her that night, only one thing would cure her sleeplessness.

Moving out of bed, Aleska ensured that Anselm wouldn’t notice her absence, she placed his hand over a pillow; a vain attempt to imitate her. Her arms slipped through the nightgown, fastening the ribbons tightly along her waist; her hair tied in a side plait. She remembered seeing the library upon having the servant escort her and Anselm to their chambers. The one thing she hadn’t counted on, was that she wasn’t the only one having sleepless nights.

“What are you doing up?” Aleska’s eyes adjusted to the lightness of the library.

“I couldn’t sleep,” Cullen grumbled, leaning over a chessboard. “It has been happening more regularly.”

“Headaches?” Aleska folded her arms, leaning against the threshold.
“Headaches, bad dreams; the list goes on.” He said, tiredness and resignation heavy in his voice. He looked, and sounded, exhausted and Aleska felt a sudden guilt at intruding on his solitude.

“If you want me to leave you in peace, Olivia said I could use her father’s old library.”

“No,” Cullen slumped back within his chair, “please, I think I would prefer your company right now.”

Aleska closed the library doors, only leaving a small crack. He hasn’t even gotten out of his armour, she sat before him. Both of them moving their respective pieces where they belonged. The pot of coffee beside Cullen still had steam rising from the spout, this told Aleska that he hasn’t been here long. Cullen extended a hand toward her, offering her a cup. Their game began in silence, both focusing on their own thoughts.

The pieces moved across the board, time seemed to have no meaning to either of them, had it not been for the unchanging skies; they would have assumed they’d been playing for hours. The tip of Aleska’s tongue trailed along her lower lip, ensuring no coffee residue remained. Aleska looked down at the board, looking for ways to find weakness in Cullen’s strategy.

The man always puts up a good defense.

Aleska moved her Grand-Cleric, knowing Cullen would use his Fort to capture it.

Sacrifices have to be made to win the Game.

“May I ask why you are awake?” Cullen’s words broke the comfortable silence. “Skyhold is large enough that is one of us have sleepless nights, we wouldn’t notice.”

“I just couldn’t sleep,” Aleska cleared her throat, eyelids fluttered up and a smile came across her lips. “It happens you know, being the Inquisitor is no easy task and just because I don’t complain —”

“I meant no offense,” Cullen shook his head. “You needn’t explain further if you don’t want to.”

“I never said I didn’t,” Aleska leaned back in her seat, the wooden backing creaked at the sudden weight against it. “What did you and my father discuss?”

Cullen remained silent for a moment, unable to recall the conversation word for word. “He was more interested in our next course of action, I was more surprised he entertained the idea of acknowledging I exist.”

“Ar ady ema ueolasa,” Aleska stated through gritted teeth, cursing her own stupidity for falling into his trap.

“I... uh... what?” Cullen’s brow followed, watching Aleska’s fist press against her forehead.

“Don’t worry about it,” Aleska shook her head, “just—no matter what, don’t entertain him for longer than possible. He knows how to manipulate Cullen... I don’t want you to fall into his trap.”

Aleska took Cullen’s hand, giving it a squeeze, whether Cullen realized his own action or not, his thumb trailed along her knuckle; sending all to pleasant chill down her spine, one she didn’t wish to push away.

Is Bae right? Do I feel something more for him? No, surely not.
Aleska removed her hand from his grasp.

“I may never get this opportunity again,” Cullen rose from his seat, walking onto the balcony beside them; a subtle sign for her to follow him. So their conversation would remain private, regardless of who might pass outside the library.

Aleska knocked her king over, watching the piece fall to the floor, her stomach twisted into knots. Even as she rose, her legs seemed to be made of lead. Heart racing, she couldn’t calm it down long enough before the adrenaline surged through her system. *I’ve been alone with Cullen a thousand times, not once have I felt like this. He is my friend, why... bae can’t be right... can he? Aleska’s hand rested on the bannister of the balcony, looking up at the stary skies which seemed to go on for miles and miles.*

“What opportunity would that be?” Aleska turned her gaze to Cullen, feeling the summer winds blow past them.

“I am going to apologize beforehand for how this will sound,” Cullen inhaled, his hands tightened around the bannister. “Do you ever wonder... that is to say, has the thought crossed your mind if perhaps you and I could ever—”

“You mean had we not fallen for the Trevelyan’s we have?” Aleska leaned against the bannister, her arms folded. “I don’t know, maybe once... okay twice.”

“Does it make you wonder what it would have been like?” Cullen looked at her, a fire burned deep within his golden eyes, one she hadn’t seen before.

“For you and I to be together?” Aleska looked down at the ground, “I don’t know if this will make me sound crazy or not, but perhaps in anothe realm... or another part of time, exists a version of us... in love, even raising a family; with a Mabari of course—though knowing you, you’d want three—and we’re happy, but Sophia and Anselm either don’t exist in this world, or they died at the Temple, and that’s not a thought I’m happy entertaining. Cullen... what brought this on?”

“I have been thinking about what I said to Sophia,” Cullen looked away for a moment, a look Aleska knew all too well—shame. “The things I said were unforgivable, I wouldn’t have been able to forgive so easily should she said those things to me—or part of me has always wondered, what if I met you first.”

“You technically did,” Aleska smiled softly. “Sophia is a wonderful woman—”

“More than I deserve,” Cullen rubbed the back of his neck.

“May I finish?” Aleska raised her brow, a single nod from Cullen told her to continue. “Sophia is a wonderful woman, perhaps if you just spoke to her; told her what you told me and help her understand why you said what ever it was you said; you both can find a way to work past this little bump in the road. This will not be the last argument either of you have, that much is a promise. How you handle this one, will make or break your relationship—but that is up to you... Sophia cannot keep doing all the work.”

“Would you forgive Anselm—assuming he did what I did?” Cullen leaned over the bannister, his gaze fixated at the fields below.

“Chances are I wouldn’t,” Aleska inhaled deeply, leaning beside Cullen. “Then again, I am too proud to even consider taking him back if he ever hurt me like that, but I’d like to believe that Anselm wouldn’t—just like I wouldn’t hurt him by trying to imagine something that could have
been. If we were lesser people, perhaps capable of such things; we wouldn’t allow them to stop us. You hear the whispers, I am sure.”

“What is they are true?” Cullen looked at her. “I will not deny you are a beautiful woman, intelligent; perhaps my animosity toward Anselm is jealousy.”

“What if it is not?” Aleska looked over the fields. “What if it is you wanting to protect a friend? Cullen, you are hurting yourself and Sophia more by dwelling on this; if you’d ever felt any romantic feelings toward me, you would have acted on them surely? Before you and Sophia even had gotten together. You are not that kind of man Cullen, it is why I value you as not only my adviser, but as my friend.”

“I don’t know what I would do if you’d abandoned me,” Cullen smiled to himself.

Aleska placed a hand upon his shoulder; his hand enveloped hers for a moment as they watched the skies lighten. It was unlikely Anselm would wake soon; he was never an early riser, but neither was she unless duty demanded it. Aleska bit down upon her lower lip, she knew that Cullen needed her and would continue to need her in the days, even weeks, until Sophia’s return—assuming she returned.

“As sure as the sun is rising this moment, I will never abandon you—there is a far greater chance of your abandonning me.”

“You have my word, I will not.”

“Cullen,” Aleska sighed, concerned at the depression wrapping itself round the Commander and searching for the words that would give him much-needed encouragement. “I do love you, just know that.”

Aleska patted his shoulder, the exhaustion from the nights festivities now weighing down upon her already broken body. It would be a long day of smiling at nobility and ensuring that every alliance would feel secure with the Inquisition, Aleska missed Sophia; having her there during negotiations always helped calm her. As if her mere presence was a reminder that the power and influence of House Trevelyan supported the interest of the Inquisition.

Cullen’s next, half muttered words sent chills running through her spine and she froze on spot; not wanting to believe what she’d heard, but recalling her own words spoken in a moment of exhausted distraction. A lump formed within her throat as she turned around; peering into the golden eyes she couldn’t get away from. Her mouth dried and felt her palms prickling with sweat.

“W—what did you just say?” Aleska struggled to get the words to leave her lips.

“I love you too.”

Aleska swallowed hard, trying to ease the constriction in her throat. Cullen’s gaze held hers and she tried to find a way to respond that wouldn’t complicate things even further. She’d only wanted to let him know how much she cared for him.

But hasty words carry the most truth; that’s what Maela always says.

The hooting of an owl broke through the silence; before Aleska could speak Cullen stepped away, running his hand over his face.

“In… Inquisitor forgive me; I spoke without…” He paused, his face reddening and his hands starting to tremble. “I should go.”
He turned sharply, his pace quickening almost to a run as he left the library. Aleska leaned against the balcony rail with a groan, still aware of the scent of elderflower and oakmoss in the night air.

*Fuck…*

***

The sun had barely risen when Aleska returned to her chambers and was alarmed to find Anselm gone. A single sheet of paper lay on her pillow. She sat upon the bed and read the note; scribbled with haste instead of the genuine care he normally took.

*Hunting with Alistair, I shall return this afternoon.*

No words cut her deeper than those words, she couldn’t even blame her father for this; this was her own doing. By even entertaining Cullen’s thoughts, she’d hurt Anselm once more, fearing this time it could be the last. Tears weld up in her eyes, she even allowed them to freely flow down her cheeks.

The note slipped from her fingers and drifted toward the floor, she sat there—helpless, dressed in her hunting gear. Perhaps she needed a break, to figure her own head out. What did she truly want? Rising from the bed, the springs squeaked from her weight now being released from it. She threw the balcony doors open, followed by every window she could find, even then the air wasn’t enough to stop the choking sensation which now over took her.

Aleska sank into the seat beside the desk, a shaking hand outstretched for the correspondence piling up, ready to fall onto the floor; the wax seal which held the parchment folded, now cracked beneath the pressure of her fingers. Small fragments of wax fell upon her lap, the letter couldn’t contain her interest for long. With a swift movement, the contents of her desk fell to the floor; her head within her hands, she sobbed. The tears now staining the polished wooden desk. The door opened, her heart jumped and she raised her head.

“Your Grace,” Aleska rose, wiping the moisture from her cheeks. “I apologize for not hearing you knock.”

“I heard a suspicious thud,” Olivia entered the room, closing the door behind her. “Now I see it was the inkwell hitting the wall. Is everything all right?”

“Yes,” Aleska forced a smile, hoping her cheeks hadn’t puffed out from her crying. “Is there something I can do for you? I have all this—”

Aleska paused, noticing the papers scattered around the room, Olivia was older than she was, she would know the signs of a tantrum when she saw one. *She is just too polite to say anything about it.* Aleska knelt down, picking up the letters closest to her and rearranging them neatly upon her desk.

“I know I am not Sophia,” Olivia knelt beside her, a reassuring hand upon her shoulders, forcing Aleska’s gaze to meet hers. “But I do have a good set of ears. What is really bothering you?”

“I wouldn’t want to burden your Grace with my trivial nonsense.”

“I won’t say this is trivial,” Olivia smiled, wandering toward the bell-rope in the corner of the room and giving it a gentle pull. “I know this type of carnage, a confliction of the heart perhaps?”

“Am I that obvious?” Aleska rubbed her eyes.
“Not at all,” Olivia laughed. “But I was where you were once, for now, I am not the Queen of Ferelden and you are not the Inquisitor. We are just two women, complaining over tea and lemon cakes.”

The servants cleaned up the mess before Aleska had time to argue, a fresh tray of tea and platter of lemon cakes rested on the small coffee table toward the left side of the room. Aleska ensured that no one saw Anselm’s note. Aleska was grateful for the distraction, she didn’t know how to make sense of what had transpired only moments ago, but it felt like a lifetime for her. Aleska accepted the cup of tea, the fresh scent of jasmine and honey reached her senses. Compelled by her own grief, Aleska reached for one of the neat yellow squares on the platter, not caring for protocol or any of the lessons Josephine instilled within her.

“Well, at least you’re comfortable enough to eat from your hand,” Olivia laughed, following Aleska’s movements. “So, what is wrong.”

“Have you ever—” Aleska paused, the realization set that her cheeks filled with tarty lemon cake. Swallowing the mouthful, she continued. “Have you ever felt so conflicted? When you knew you were certain?”

“There have been times,” Olivia nodded, “but I might need some more details? There are times in war and in love—though the two are usually one in the same.”

“Cullen and I had a conversation last night,” Aleska leaned back within the seat. “I don’t know what to make of it, how I am supposed to feel. Can a woman love two men and be faithful to one?”

Olivia paused, taking a slow sip of her tea, pondering the information laid before her. “In my experience, yes. Love doesn’t need to be sexual, there is the love for a brother, the love for a family member… even a unique love shared between friends. It took me a long time to realise the difference, and even longer to realise that my love was Alistair was different to the love I still feel for Cailan.”

“How do you know the difference?” Aleska sighed. “I love Anselm, I have loved him and we have been through so much together, but Cullen… can I love him as well?”

“Yes,” Olivia nodded, removing her shawl and unfastning the pins from her hair. “Doesn’t mean either of you are wanting to rip one anothers clothing off, or else it would have happened by now and you wouldn’t be here in such a state.”

“I don’t want to hurt Anselm, much less Cullen and I don’t want to hurt Sophia; but what if it is easier to be with Cullen? He knows me, he knows what it is like to be from humble beginnings; Anselm tries, but will he ever fully understand?”

“He won’t,” Olivia thought of her next words carefully. “Not until you show him what it is like, I lost everything, my home, my family; I know what starvation, cold and hopelessness felt like. Anselm doesn’t. I am not saying he should forsake his comforts, but help him understand you in ways Cullen does.”

“Do you think it could work?” Aleska rested her head within her hands. “Cullen told me he loved me, I know him, he wouldn’t say it unless he meant it... he is just as conflicted as I am.”

“Well, Anselm and Sophia might even hate me for suggesting this,” Olivia smiled to herself. “Perhaps the one way to truly find out about Cullen is to cross that line, you will either regret it or you won’t... there is one secret passageway in the castle, not even Alistair knows about it; servants assume it was closed off when the remodelling happened.”
“So what are you saying?” Aleska sat up, refusing to believe her ears. “Sleep with him? I could never do that to Sophia... to Anselm. I might have had a moment of weakness last night, but to cross that line would make me sick.”

“Would it really Aleska?” Olivia rose from her seat, placing a hand upon her shoulders. “Perhaps you want to believe it will so you won’t, out of courtesy to Sophia and Anselm, but how fair is it to them both for you and Cullen to keep up this charade? If he loves you and you love him... it is more of a kindness to find out the truth, than leave one another wondering for the rest of your lives. Think about it.”

Olivia left Aleska alone, a thousand and one thoughts ran through her mind, she needed to know—but was she prepared to pay the price?

***

Aleksa knocked on Cullen’s door, clenching her fingers tightly to prevent her hand from shaking. Anslem and Alistair would be returning from the hunt soon and she had to address this before they got back, in the hope of finding some sense of resolution. There was a moment of silence before his gruff response and she opened the door. Cullen stood by the window, a letter in his hand, looking down at the courtyard below.

“Inquisitor; I think it’s best if we regard our earlier conversation as the result of tiredness and stress. It was a lapse of judgement on my part and I would prefer if we did not allow it to create complications.”

Aleksa could feel the wall he was building with those polite, emphatic words. It was the voice of the Commander she was hearing. She walked over to the window, keeping a few feet of distance between them. From the deep hollows beneath his eyes it was plain he’d had no more sleep than her.

“It was my lapse as well.” She reminded him. “And, regardless of what we meant, it’s hard just to move past words like those as if they were never said.”

Cullen shook his head, looking up to meet her gaze.

“Nevertheless we must.” As he folded the letter and put it inside his coat, Aleska caught a glimpse of the handwriting; immediately recognizing the sharp, precise script. “Sophia is returning from Ostwick. Judging by the date of her letter, her ship will arrive on the next tide.”

“Is that all she says?”

Cullen shook his head again and took a deep breath.

“She says there are things she needs to say to me that cannot be conveyed in a letter. Whatever she may mean, I have to make her understand why I acted the way I did, and to see if there is a chance that I may be able to atone for the pain I caused her. She must be my priority and, although it does not come easy to say this, Lord Anselm must be yours. I’m sorry, Aleska, it can’t be any other way.”

Aleska nodded, keeping her hands folded at her waist, she inhaled a deep breath; her eyes scanned the room searching for something to hold her focus that didn’t include Cullen. We were stressed, tired... so tired; what I said to him... no. It is not fair to Anselm or to Sophia.

“You’re right, of course; neither of us can afford to ignore our commitments. Perhaps it even be best to not spend as much time together, to avoid things which could lead us down a path neither...
want to travel.” She turned and took a step towards the door. “You should try to get some sleep, and have something to eat, before Sophia arrives. If she thinks I’ve been letting you neglect yourself I’ll never hear the end of it.”

The reminisce of a smile formed as Aleska left Cullen’s chambers, not for the potential reunion that awaited Cullen—for more selfish reasons—she was getting one of her closest friends back; her world would be complete once more; damned be the soul who would drive a wedge between them.

As Aleska walked down the corridor, humming a tune to herself, she noticed Olivia seated in the gardens, her nose buried deep in a book. Aleska watched for a moment, she is graceful, yet fierce; a true Queen. Perhaps she could teach me how to be graceful like she is. In that moment Olivia looked up, a smile exchanged between both women and Aleska’s lips formed two incoherent words.

Thank you.
Chapter Summary

Alistair has some words of advice for Anselm while Aleska looks for a way to balance between personal feelings and her duty as Inquisitor. Sophia returns from Ostwick with news for Commander Cullen and the Inquisition gains a new recruit.

Chapter Notes

Chapter updates may continue to be a little irregular for a while owing to various commitments. We would like to thank our readers for their continuing patience and support, and for all the positive feedback which we deeply appreciate.

Alistair picked up a smoked venison sausage from the spread lying on the cloth in front of them, while the huntsmen set to work skinning and cleaning the boar they’d brought down. He broke it in half and tossed one piece to Anselm.

“Sooollllll—” Alistair began, drawing out the vowel; the way he tended to do when about to broach something personal. “Are you going to tell me why the whole Inquisition appears to be walking on eggshells, or am I going to have to start guessing? I should warn you, some of my guesses can be pretty outrageous.”

Anselm took a bite from the sausage and chewed slowly while he considered how to respond. Some considered Alistair a fool, and he was happy to leave most of the business of ruling the kingdom to Liv, but he saw—and knew—a lot more than those outside his immediate circle gave him credit for.

“It’s a long story,” Anselm threw a stick into the bushes before them, rattling a few songbirds out of their solitude, but Alistair shook his head with a laugh.

“People only say that when they’re trying to avoid looking like a complete idiot; believe me, I know. Just give me the basics without any fancy sauce.” He pulled a flask out of his pocket and handed it to Anselm. “Here; take a swig if it makes it easier.”

Anselm pulled the cork out and sniffed, jerking his head back with a grimace as the sharp scent hit his nostrils.

“Orzammar schnapps at this time of the morning; what will Her Grace say?”

Alistair gave a wry chuckle and shrugged.

“I’ll just blame your bad influence. She might even believe me this time!”

“Good luck with that!”
Anselm took a long swallow of the fiery spirit. It was the real thing and he could feel it scorching all the way down to his stomach. The recipe for Orzammar schnapps was a secret closely guarded by the family who distilled it. Given what it was likely made from, that was a wise business choice. He wiped his mouth on the back of his hand and passed the flask back to Alistair, taking a deep breath.

“Well, to give you the bare bones—which is probably what this mess consists of—Commander Cullen and I had a falling out about something he did years ago in Kirkwall; Sophia walked in on the pair of us almost fighting, then she and Cullen had an argument which ended in him breaking off their… understanding.” He sighed, feeling his stomach twist into knots at the memory, and rested his head in his hands. “I only wanted to do the right thing and get Cullen to admit what he did. Now Sophia isn’t talking to me and I don’t know where I stand with Aleska. One minute she’s all over me like nothing’s wrong and the next she’s keeping me at arm’s length. Now she wants me to apologise to Cullen, and I don’t know if I can—"

Alistair reached out and patted Anselm on the back, a hand ran along his shoulder, giving it a reaffirming squeeze. The silence filled the air, only the crickets and birds dared pierce the veil of stillness around them.

“Doing the right thing at the wrong time… I know what that feels like. It’s not easy, everyone telling you—or just assuming—it’s your fault; after a while, you start believing it.” He took a mouthful of schnapps, swilling it around before swallowing. “Maybe I shouldn’t say this; but Liv once told me that her father had spoken to your uncle about you coming to live at Highever for a few years, squiring for Fergus or something like that. Thought it might get you away from that blighted father of yours and give you a bit of stability. But then everything happened, and… well… I am sure you know the rest.”

Anselm took the flask from Alistair once again, toying with the cork before taking another swig.

“I used to think all families were like mine; cold and formal, where even how you wiped your arse had dynastic significance. It wasn’t until my first time here I realised that’s not how it’s supposed to be… even for people like us.”

Anselm lapsed into silence; memories of that last summer at Castle Cousland rising up. Being able to roam and play in the gardens without having to dread a lecture on the behaviour expected of a Trevelyan, tussling with the dogs and trying to sweet-talk Old Nan into handing out pies and pastries fresh from the oven.

Even Cailan’s ‘secret’ visit hadn’t broken the informality, with the King gleefully joining in their games and daring them to climb the tallest trees. He and Joe had carved their initials and the Trevelyan crest near the top of one, and he briefly wondered if they—or the tree—were still there before Alistair’s voice broke through his thoughts.

“You know, taking responsibility doesn’t mean being everyone’s doormat.” Alistair said, the tone of his voice softened. “I used to believe that, until I learned the hard way.”

“I didn’t say that’s how Aleska’s treating me!” Anselm objected; his brows furrowed. “I just don’t see why I should be the one to apologise to Cullen when I’m not the one in the wrong.”

“Then don’t!” Alistair’s tone was unusually blunt for him. “If you don’t mean it then it’s not going to solve anything, and it sounds to me like there’s a deeper problem here you all need to deal with. Just think very carefully about what you’re going to say before you speak to Aleska.”

He got to his feet, dusting sausage-oil from his hands and wiping them on the seat of his breeches.
“One of the dogs had pups a few weeks ago.” He said, conversationally. “The two of you should go down to the kennels to see them before you leave.”

Anselm got to his feet as well. The huntsmen had finished dressing the kill and it was high time to begin riding back.

“You’re plotting something, aren’t you?” He said, with a sidelong glance at Alistair; who gave him a look of exaggerated innocence.

“Me? Plotting? Nooooo… But everyone loves puppies; don’t they?”

###

“Good hunt?” Aleska asked as he closed the door behind him. Her tone was clipped, and she didn’t look up from the book resting against her knee as she sat with one leg up on the window-seat.

Anselm began to unbuckle his tunic. He needed a hot bath and a change of clothes; he’d hoped to manage that before talking to her.

“You were already gone when I woke up and I couldn’t find you. I didn’t want to keep Alistair waiting. Where were you?”

“I needed to do some thinking.” Aleska cleared her throat, closing the book and looking up at him. “And I needed some time to myself.”

Anselm nodded slightly, biting at his bottom lip. There was more to it than that, he was sure, but this wasn’t the time or place.

“I’ve been doing some thinking as well…” He pulled idly at the lacing on his shirt cuff. “And, I’m sorry, I can’t do it.”

“Do what?” Aleska asked, sitting up and turning to face him. Her voice had taken a tone of calmness, but there was no way for him to tell if this merely heralded the storm to come. He ran his fingers through his sweat-damp hair.

“I can’t apologise to Cullen. I know what you said, but I just can’t do it. Even if I did, I wouldn’t mean it; and we’d both know it. A hollow apology is far more insulting, but you knew that.”

Aleska put her book to one side, clasping her hands in her lap, and lowered her head briefly; taking a deep breath, she raised her eyes to his once more.

“I knew he would never do it,” Aleska’s teeth grazed her lower lip; the words remained within her throat.

“All right.” Aleska drew a deep breath, her tone remained calm. “Why not?”

Anselm could feel the pulse in his throat. They’d argued before, but this was the first time he’d consciously defied her over anything. He wiped the sweat from his palm on the leg of his breeches, trying to hold on to the train of thought he’d rehearsed through the ride back with Alistair.

“Before we left for Adamant, you said I needed to be completely honest about my past; every mistress, every courtesan, every bored noblewoman or willing tavern-wench. It wasn’t easy for me to do that and it was even harder for you to hear it; but I told you everything I could remember.”

Aleska nodded with a quiet sigh, the memory those conversations evoking a sour, twisting anxiety;
reminders of what Anselm had been, and who he had become, tangled with the ever-present fear that one day he would tire of her.

“I know, and it wasn’t fair or right of me to expect you to apologise to Cullen; he hasn’t exactly been friendly or welcoming to you since your arrival.”

Anselm sat on the window-seat beside her and gingerly took hold of one of her hands, feeling a surge of relief as she twined her fingers around his. The last of the mid-morning sunshine cascaded down toward them.

“It’s no secret I don’t like the man, but I didn’t want to be the one running to tell tales; I confessed my sins, I wanted to at least give him the same chance. I suppose I should have realised my temper would get the better of me, but I didn’t expect Sophia to walk in us.”

“And if she hadn’t walked in when she did?” Her grip on his hand tightened. “Be honest. Did Sophia deserve the consequence of those actions? After all she’d done for you?”

Anselm grimaced slightly, knowing how Aleska felt about the deepening dislike between him and the Commander. Aleska’s words about Sophia cut him like a knife through hot butter, not once had she ever spoken to him the way she did when she asked him to leave. Sophia never raised her hands to anyone, yet she physically pounded her fists against his shoulder. The pain and sorrow within her eyes was a sight he would never forget.

“We probably would have found a plausible explanation for the bruises; men are like that when it comes to these things.” He gave her a sheepish smile. “Maybe it would have been better if we did have an all-out fight; get it out of our systems, that sort of thing.”

Aleska released his hand and stood, shaking her head slowly. “So that is how you would have dealt with it, a fist fight? What are you both? Sixteen? This is not how mature men—officers of my Inquisition—behave. If it was anyone else, I might agree; but, even in private, the idea of the two of you coming to blows is something I can’t allow. You should have told me; I could have gone to Cullen myself to sort it out… that is my job Anselm. You need to also see your own wrongs in this whole mess.”

“You’re right.” Anselm sighed. “You’re the Inquisitor, but this just felt too… personal.”

“Perhaps that’s the problem. I know you care for Sophia as if she were your own sister, but there are always better times and places for this.” Aleska sighed, walking over to the wardrobe, and opening the door. “This isn’t an Inquisition, this is a joke, I have allowed it to become a joke. I won’t tolerate this any longer.”

Anselm remained sitting, rubbing the palm of his hands together slowly as he watched her browse through the wardrobe, his eyes watched her pull out various dresses to match his attire. Mumbling over which one wouldn’t upstage the Queen of Ferelden—not that Liv cared too much about these things.

“What do you mean by that?”

She turned to face him, holding a green silk shirt with silver lacings in her hands. In her other hand, she held a satin dress with a tight corset top and free flowing skirt. The dark green material matched that of his shirt and the crystal beading along the skirt would sparkle in the light.

“You don’t need to apologise to Cullen.” Aleska lay the items upon the bed, unlacing her waistcoat and throwing it into a corner. “I won’t ask that of you under the circumstances, but I will need to
speak to both of you—officially—later today in order to make sure nothing like this happens again."

“I understand.” Anselm’s voice a whisper, the sinking feeling within his stomach resurfacing.

“And you will apologise to Sophia; regardless of whether either of you meant it, she’s been badly hurt by both of you.” Aleska held out the shirt for him. “You should wear this today, with the crimson waistcoat. It suits you.”

“Does this mean I’m forgiven?” Anselm asked, with an uncertain smile, taking the shirt from her.

“I am not the one who needs to forgive you.” Aleska touched his side, running her fingers along the line of the scar beneath his shirt. “You’re an idiot, Anselm Trevelyan, but a brave one; and you mean well even when you’re messing things up.”

He leaned down and kissed her cheek, his lips touching her soft skin more of a reassurance to him than to her.

“I’ll be sure to have that engraved on my urn.”

###

Aleska remained seated at the desk, taking a moment to focus her thoughts, as Anselm and Cullen waited side by side across from her. She took a deep breath and sat back, folding her hands in her lap and fixing her gaze firmly on the pair of them.

I must be Inquisitor now, nothing else. Aleska reminded herself, despite her friendship with Cullen and her romantic ties with Anselm; she needed to remain impartial, as if they were two ordinary officers.

“This is something I am only going to say to you once. If I ever need to repeat this, to either or both of you, I can promise you won’t like the consequences.” She kept her tone calm and measured, trying to recapture the authority she had felt when confronting the Empress and the Grand Duke at Halamshrial. “You will remember that you are officers of the Inquisition and I expect you to behave as such, to each other and to me, at all times. Your conduct in Kirkwall, regardless of its reasons, risked undermining an extremely sensitive diplomatic mission; to say nothing of the personal distress you caused to Lady Sophia, someone I consider a dear friend as well as a valued advisor. I can’t order you to be friends, but I expect you to find a way to resolve your private disagreements that does not disrupt the business of the Inquisition. Is that perfectly clear?”

Both men nodded their assent and Aleska felt a surge of relief than neither of them was willing to argue the point. She got up from the desk and walked round to them, letting the mask of Inquisitor slip a little.

“I can’t have the two of you constantly at each other’s throats; aside from anything else, it’s bad for morale and makes us look weak at a time when we need to be focused on ending this war. Cullen; whatever you may think about Anselm personally, his service in the field and as a trainer has been exemplary. And Anselm…?” She folded her arms and leaned back against the desk, shaking her head with a sigh. “Cullen is still your superior officer, regardless of whether or not you answer to him directly, and I can’t be seen to be playing favourites because of my feelings for you. The pair of you are putting me in a position where I risk having to be unfair to both of you to appear impartial. Do you have any idea how difficult that is?”

Cullen shifted his footing slightly and coughed to catch her attention. He looked like he’d been
caught with his hand firmly lodged within the cookie jar before dinner. With a look like that, one tended to forget what a formidable warrior he was.

“Inquisitor, might I speak candidly?” Aleska nodded and he threw a glance at Anselm before continuing. “Knight-Lieutenant Trevelyan currently answers directly to you. I understand this was an… expediency… to subvert a forced marriage, however it disrupts the chain of command and creates a conflict of interest which could be resolved if he were to be made answerable to one of your other senior officers.”

Anselm’s eyes narrowed for a moment, then he suddenly grinned. Aleska narrowed her eyes, a silent warning that if the next words that came out of his mouth were anything other than helpful to the conversation—the consequences would be amplified tenfold.

“I have to admit that isn’t such a bad idea; it would take some of the pressure of you. Just—” Anselm paused, looking sheepish.

“Just what?” Aleska asked cautiously and his grin became a little wider.

“Please don’t make it Josephine! I’m already running out of plausible excuses to avoid those damned tea-parties she keeps throwing.”

Aleska pressed a knuckle to her lips to stifle the laugh that threatened to burst out. She cleared her throat and squared her shoulders. With a shake of her head, she turned to Cullen for a moment. He is your military adviser, your second in command in the field. Treat him as such.

“Commander,” Aleska cleared her throat, leaning forward. “You are my military adviser, imagine Anselm were just any other Inquisition officer. How would you handle this situation? It is no surprise my lack of ability in this area has undoubtedly led to this.”

“Given his existing role within the Inquisition, I believe Sister Leliana would be the logical choice. He’s already worked extensively with Charter and seem to have a rapport with her other agents.” Cullen stood with his hands folded behind his back, speaking in a tone she’d heard many times when he addressed his officers. “That would be my suggestion, Inquisitor.”

Aleska nodded, neatening the papers upon her desk. Her hand vanished within the drawer, pulling out a silver box and some green sealing wax. Leliana won’t tolerate his mischief for long. This is my fault, had I intervened sooner… perhaps this—all of this—could have been avoided. Aleska dipped her quill within the ink well; resting the tip upon the clean sheet of paper.

“I see no issue with that, and I’m sure Sister Leliana would…” Aleska’s statement interrupted by a knock at the door, and a footman in Cousland livery entered.

“Beg pardon, Ma’am.” The servant said, with a bow to Aleska. “The harbourmaster reports a ship flying the Trevelyan colours has been spotted rounding the headland. It should be in harbour within two hours.”

Aleska waved him out with her thanks and turned back to the two men. For the sake of professionalism, she attempted to contain her smile, she not only had one of her closest advisers back, but one she considered a dear friend. The thought sent a warmth flowing through her, as if the missing piece of the puzzle within their group of friends had returned to them.

“If you can’t find a way to resolve your differences for my sake, then do it for hers. She’s the one who’s been hurt most by this mess and I’m not going to see that happen again.”

Anselm had been the first to leave, knowing that Sophia wouldn’t want to even look at him till she
was ready. Aleska looked up to see Cullen still standing there, she placed the quill back within the inkwell. Does he need me to formally dismiss him?

“Shouldn’t you be going to see Sophia?” Aleska stood up, removing her coat from the back of the seat. “I thought you’d be the first out the door.”

“Normally you’d be correct.” Cullen cleared his throat, rubbing the back of his neck. “There is one problem.”

“What is wrong?” Aleska flipped her hair over her shoulder, ensuring none remained within her collar.

“I have seemed to lose the ability to move.” Cullen looked down at his boots.

Aleska nodded, unsure of what to tell him. Without a single word, she walked out the door; heading toward the library. Not my responsibility to kick his arse toward Sophia; if he doesn’t go… he will have to deal with the consequences. Aleska cleared her throat, tightening the ribbon along her waist. He’d just better go, before it is too late.

###

Sophia paused before knocking on Cullen’s door; pressing her fingers to her mouth and taking two slow, deep, breaths to ease the sudden rush of nausea and the racing of her heart. With her other hand she reached into the pocket of her skirts and clasped the talisman that the Rivaini herbalist had given her; a pouch of herbs and stones supposed to ease the early symptoms of pregnancy. It was absolute superstition, of course, but her mother had insisted and somehow it did make her feel a little better.

The Commander got to his feet hurriedly as she entered. He hadn’t been with the welcoming party when she arrived, and she hadn’t expected him to be. That was Cullen’s way; to retreat and await her in private, knowing his presence at the reception would have been awkward for them both. Here, in the opulence of a chamber in the Guest Wing, he seemed even more ill-at-ease than she’d anticipated; perhaps missing the familiar disorder of his rooms in Skyhold.

“Lady Sophia; we… I mean… I wasn’t expecting you to return from Ostwick so soon. Is… everything alright?”

Sophia let out a quiet sigh. The circles beneath his eyes were dark and it was safe to assume he hadn’t been eating properly. She drew off her gloves and rested one hand on the back of a chair.

“It wasn’t my intention, but there is something I need to tell you; something that couldn’t be entrusted to a letter.”

Cullen nodded slowly, remaining on the far side of the table.

“I understand, but there is something I need to say first; if you will permit…” Without waiting for her response, he folded his hands behind his back as if addressing a superior officer; it was clear this was a speech he’d rehearsed many times in his head. “You were perfectly entitled, indeed justified, to question my actions in Kirkwall; and my response, regardless of the circumstances, was both cowardly and cruel. I convinced myself I was doing it to protect you; but, in truth, I was afraid of acknowledging my own responsibility and of how you would react to some of the details of my past. It was inexcusable and I neither request nor expect you to forgive…”

“Cullen…” Sophia interjected. He could be as bad as her father when his mind was fixed on an idea; it was like trying to stop a landslide. Cullen held up his hand.
“Lady Sophia; these things aren’t easy for me to say, please let me…”

“Cullen, I’m pregnant.” Sophia blurted; knowing that, if she didn’t cut to the chase, she wouldn’t get a word in edgewise.

Cullen stopped mid-sentence and stared at her with a vacant, idiotic, expression. After a second he staggered and Sophia stepped forward, afraid he was about to collapse, but he caught onto the edge of the table and held himself upright. His breath was fast and shallow, and he blinked several times before swallowing and taking a deep breath.

“For… forgive me; If I appear uncertain about how to respond, it’s because… out of everything I have been thinking of… this… this is the one thing I never considered to be possible.” He tightened his grip on the table - the only thing that appeared to be keeping him upright – and took two deep breaths before saying, in a voice heavy with disbelief and wonder. “We… we’re going to have a child?”

Sophia nodded, exhaling softly through her nose, and took a step closer to him. The open window behind them offered a cool breeze and his familiar scent wafted toward her; the soft earthiness of oakmoss, shot through with hints of elderflower and the sharp tang of sweat. Underneath it all, she could detect the faint ozone-traces of Lyrium, like the aftermath of a summer storm, so subtle that only a mage would notice. Nearly two years of abstinence and his former order still had him marked. Her hand reached towards him for a moment, before she drew it back; not yet ready to close the rift he’d opened.

“Yes…” she said, a hand placed against her stomach. “Yes, we are.”

Cullen took another deep breath, his eyes still wide with shock. Cullen’s stomach turned into knots, his grip on the table tightening as he fought to keep his balance.

“That time… in the Rose Garden…” Sophia nodded again. “But… I thought…”

Sophia shook her head with a faint smile, remembering Dr Janicus enthusiastically lecturing her on facts of life she knew full well.

“That’s an old wives’ tale. It can happen the first time together, especially if the man is… molto potente.”

“Molto…?” Cullen frowned. His Marcher had never been particularly good; the Trade Tongue served well enough in the Gallows and the markets of Lowtown, but then he flushed red with realisation. “Oh… I see…”

He shook his head, like a dog emerging from water, and straightened himself; pulling a chair back from the table.

“You should sit down.” He said firmly, his voice suddenly business-like; and mildly frantic. “Would you like tea? If… if it’s safe for you to drink tea… I mean.”

Sophia began to protest but changed her mind; taking the seat he offered and meekly folding her hands in her lap. She would need to get used to this sort of treatment.

“Tea is perfectly safe, but I don’t feel the need of a cup right now; thank you.” She assured him. “The doctor says I should avoid strong coffee and restrict myself to one glass of wine a day, but that I needn’t make too many changes to my diet for the time being.”

“How… how many people know?” He asked, taking his hand away from the bell rope.
“Only my parents, my doctor and my maid.” She said while Cullen paced the floor; looking stunned and disoriented. “It’s why I came back earlier than planned. I wanted you to hear the news from me, not second-hand or by letter.”

Cullen stopped at the fireplace with his back to her, resting his hands on the mantelpiece.

“I imagine your father expressed an opinion.”

Sophia nodded with a slight grimace; there was no point in trying to sugar coat it.

“He thinks I’m better off without you, and that our child should be raised in Ostwick as a Trevelyan. I told him you deserve the chance to be a father; if that is what you wish.”

Cullen leaned on the mantlepiece for a moment before turning slowly. His face was composed but Sophie could see in the intense tightness around his eyes.

“Is that what you want?” He asked quietly, as if fearful of her answer. Sophia took a deep, slow, breath, feeling her hands begin to shake.

“It’s not what you said that hurt me most; it’s how ready you were to push me away as soon as things became difficult. Perhaps we were both too quick to overlook how difficult any sort of intimate relationship would be…” She laid her hand on her stomach, her eyes beginning to sting. “I have to trust you will never do that again, that you’ll have the courage and honesty to endure the storms we must inevitably face; because if you cannot promise me that, I will walk away and you will never see me again.”

The crackle of the fire and the light breeze rattling the windows were the only sounds to be heard. Cullen felt his heart ache as he looked at her sitting there, so lovely and so proud; yet mantled about with hurt. The flickering light of the candles danced in the emeralds at her throat and caused golden highlights to shimmer in her hair; her formal elegance a silent rebuke for his unjust words in Kirkwall. This was the mother of his child; compassionate and fierce. He wanted to cross the room to her, to take her hands in his and beg her forgiveness, but he could read in her eyes that his foolishness denied him even that intimacy. He lowered his eyes, exhaling heavily.

“My Lady; I have no right to ask anything of you but, if you permit, I will endeavour to prove that I can be the man you once thought I was.”

She closed her eyes and took a slow, steady, breath; Cullen felt his mouth grow dry as he awaited her answer.

“That is all I can ask of you; although it’s not going to be easy, for either of us.” Her voice was little more than a whisper and Cullen nodded his agreement.

“I know, but this is a gift—is blessing from the Maker—we cannot let it go unheeded.” Cullen paused, scratching at the back of his neck. “When… when are you going to tell Aleska?”

Sophia dried her eyes and smiled at him; there was kindness in her voice, but not yet the forgiveness he knew he still had to earn. She stood, folding her hands demurely at her waist.

“I thought you might like to do that. It’s not often you get to be the bearer of good news. If you’ll excuse me, I need to go and see Olivia”

Cullen hesitated; the thought of telling Aleska himself was an appealing one and he was grateful for her consideration but, after that ill-advised conversation the previous night, it would be wise if he kept his interactions with the Inquisitor to the purely professional for the immediate future.
“That’s very kind of you,” He said as he opened the door. “But it might be better coming from you; she’s missed you deeply… as… as have I.”

Sophia paused at the door.

“Are you quite sure? I thought that…”

“Quite sure. I would only end up tripping over my own tongue and making a mess of it.” He gave an awkward half-smile. “I… I’ll speak with you again later.”

“After dinner.” Sophia assured him, taking her leave, and resisting the urge to look behind her as the door closed.

###

“What are we doing down here?” Aleska asked as they made their way past the stables and into a small courtyard at the rear of the old keep. “We should be getting ready for lunch.”

“There’s plenty of time for that.” Anselm grinned, slipping his arm through hers. “I’ve got a surprise for you.”

Aleska gave him a sidelong glance, under normal circumstances, he’d know how much she deeply despised surprises. She drew a deep breath, reminding herself that he was coming from a place of love and not trying to make her feel uncomfortable. Her eyes shifted to the haybales around the stable doors.

“If you’re hoping for a tumble in the hayloft, forget it! I’m not sitting down to lunch picking bits of straw out of my hair.” Aleska raised a brow.

Anselm chuckled and kissed her cheek, his arm resting along her shoulder, pulling her against him in a tight embrace. The thought had crossed his mind—but this was not his intent… this time.

“I was saving that for later, but I think you’ll like this almost as much.” Anselm reassured her, smiling down.

“We’ll see…” Aleska responded, Anselm pushed open a low, wooden door and an almost overpowering aroma of dog assailed her nostrils.

The building they entered was long and warm; with light streaming in through high windows along one wall. Both sides lined with stalls, each of which housed a Mabari. A few of the dogs started barking at the presence of strangers while others nosed at the gates or got up on their haunches to watch them with bright, intelligent eyes. A thick layer of fresh straw covered the cobbled floor, crunching quietly under their feet.

“These are the famous Cousland Kennels.” Anselm murmured in her ear as they walked along. “It’s the finest in Ferelden; this, and the Gwaren Kennels, were the only ones to survive the Blight intact, so half the Mabari in Thedas now come from one or another of them. It’s a pity Cuddles isn’t with us, most of these are his relatives.”

“A real family reunion.” Aleska smiled. “What did Joe say in his letter?”

Anselm gave her a wry smile. “He said, and I quote; ‘You and Cull are being a pair of bloody idiots and if you don’t sort things out before you get back, I’m gonna smack your skulls together till you both see some bloody sense.’”
Aleska laughed, giving his arm a squeeze.

“Be warned, I’m not going to stop him!”

Teryn Fergus was waiting for them at the end of the row; accompanied by a small, elderly, man in dun-coloured leathers.

“This is Master Kanning, the Master of Hounds.” The Teryn said with a broad smile. “And the only man who can keep some order in all this chaos.”

“Your Worship!” The old man gave her a deep bow, then turned to Anselm with his eyes glaring fiercely under thick white brows. “And I remember young Master Anselm all too well! We ain’t gonna be having any more shenanigans, are we?”

“Now this is something I have to hear.” Aleska laughed, turning to Anselm with a raised eyebrow, and Master Kanning grunted, distain laced within his tone.

“Oh, this here lad thought it would be a great joke to let all the dogs out right before old Arl Eamon and his Arlessa arrived for the Midsummer Feast; we had a devil of a job getting ‘em all rounded up again and the Arlessa had ‘palpitations’ for days.” He turned to Teryn Fergus who stood beside him chuckling. “And don’t think I’ve forgotten your part in it… My Lord… Teryn or no, you’re not too big for a clout round the ear if you mess with me hounds.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it, Master Kanning.” Fergus said with a wink in Aleska’s direction. “I’ve learned my lesson there. Perhaps you’d like to let the Inquisitor see Reba’s pups?”

Master Kanning beckoned her over and she looked over the stall gate to see a large, tawny-brown Mabari lying on her side with half a dozen pups clambering all over her. A couple had their mother’s brindled colouring, but the rest were a deep blueish-gray all over.

“Their sire is an Edgehill Blue,” Fergus explained, as the pups detached themselves from their mother and came flopping noisily over to the gate; eager to investigate this new face. “It’s one of the rarer breeds, almost extinct now; we’re lucky that so many of them take after him.”

“They’re beautiful!” Aleska exclaimed, getting down on her haunches and carefully holding out her hand for them to sniff and lick at her fingers. “May I pet one of them?”

“You can go in with them, if you like.” Master Kanning told her. “Reba’s friendly enough and she’ll be all right with me around.”

Aleska hesitated, glancing at Anselm who just nodded slightly. In the stall, Reba gave a low, huffing, snort and Teryn Fergus grinned. The thump of her large tail shifted the straw from side to side. Almost rhythmic within its pattern, Aleska couldn’t help but laugh.

“It sounds like she’s happy with the idea; we’d know if she wasn’t.”

Master Kanning eased the gate open and slipped through; followed by Aleska who sat down on the thick layer of straw as the pups swarmed over her, yipping and snuffling, under the watchful gaze of their mother. She looked up at Anselm who leaned against the gate, smiling down at her.

“Thank you,” she said, almost unable to form the words. “This is wonderful.”

“It was Alistair’s idea, if I’m being honest; but he’s right, who doesn’t love puppies?”

A faint cough behind them announced the presence of one of the castle footmen.
“Excuse me, your Lordship; Her Grace asked me to inform you that lunch is almost ready to be served—” He paused with a hint of embarrassment. “And His Grace asked me to inform you that ‘he’s bloody starving!’ The King’s words, not mine.”

Fergus shook his head ruefully. The Grey Warden appetite remained insatiable, despite the time which had passed since he and Liv both partook in the Joining ritual.

“We’d better get back before he decides to go down to the pantry and make himself a sandwich!” He turned to Aleska as she stood, brushing straw from her breeches. “If you ever entertain him at Skyhold, keep him away from the kitchens; unless you’re tired of your existing cooks!”

As Master Kanning opened the gate to let Aleska out, one of the puppies detached itself from the pile and began waddling after her. He picked it up to carry it back to its mother and it began crying plaintively, wriggling to get out of his grasp.

“What’s the matter with you, little lad?” He mused, putting the puppy back down. Instantly it made a beeline for Aleska, whining loudly. The old man glanced up at Teryn Fergus. “Well, looks like he already knows his mind!”

“What do you mean?” Aleska asked, looking from Master Kenning to the Teryn; crouching to scratch the puppy behind his ears while he tried to chew on the lacing of her boot.

“Mabari choose their master, not the other way around.” Fergus explained. “Cuddles was just the same with Jonas as I recall.”

“Aye, that he was.” Master Kanning agreed, glancing at Aleska. “You have yourself a dog, lass… I mean, Your Worship.”

Aleska instinctively picked the puppy up as she stood, and he nestled into the crook of her arm with a happy little snort.

“Teryn Fergus, I’m very grateful…” She exclaimed in astonishment. “But I couldn’t possibly.”

“It’s not my choice.” He said with a smile. “He’s decided he wants you.”

“Now there’s a dog with impeccable taste.” Anselm said, scratching the puppy’s belly. “What are you going to call him?”

“I… I’ve no idea…” She stammered, still finding the whole thing impossible to believe. “I’ve never had a dog of my own before. I mean… we had hounds with the clan, but they weren’t pets. I don’t even know where to begin his training.”

“Oh, but Mabari aren’t pets.” Fergus reminded her. “He’ll be you’re companion, friend and guardian but he’ll always be his own boss.”

“I… I suppose I have no choice…” She said with a half-laugh; looking down at the little bundle who was now beginning to snore gently.

“None at all…” Master Kanning chuckled “And don’t worry, la… Your Worship; I’ll give you some tips on how to take care of him, and I’m sure Master Jonas will be happy to help when you get back home.”

“Call me lass if you want.” Aleska smiled at the old man. “Having people ‘Worship’ me everywhere I go gets nerve-wracking after a while.”
“As you wish, lass.” He said, with an approving grin. “I think you’ll do fine with this little chap here; dogs have a better sense for people than most people do.”

There was another cough from the footman, still anxiously hovering.

“Erm… your Lordship… lunch?” He said nervously. “And Mistress Bertha did say that the next time the King shows his face unasked in the kitchens, she’ll be committing High Treason with a rolling pin!”

“We’d better hurry.” Fergus chuckled along with Aleska and Anselm. “The Landsmeet can always make a king, but a cook who can make a decent apple and pear tart is irreplaceable.”

“Will Lady Sophia be joining us for lunch?” Aleska asked the footman as they left, the puppy still cradled in her arms. The man shook his head.

“Her Ladyship will be resting till this afternoon.” He said, “But she asked if you could pay her a visit before lunch; she indicated it was quite important.”

“If she says it’s important then it must be.” Aleska adjusted her grip on the puppy and turned to Anselm. “I’d better go and speak to her; I’ll join you in a few minutes.”

###

“Oh, he’s adorable!” Sophia cooed as the puppy squirmed in her lap, chewing contently on the ribbon she dangled over his nose. “Have you got a name for him yet?”

“I was thinking about Fen; it’s Dalish for wolf.” Aleska said, and the puppy made happy growling noises as he continued to tug on the makeshift toy.

Aleska allowed the rope toy Alistair had given her to hover above Fen, forcing the young pup to jump for it, only to fail and land on his tummy. A growl of annoyance at the toy followed by him contemplating how he would begin to receive his new plaything.

“A fierce name for a fierce little chap, and he seems to like it…” Sophia paused and gave Aleska an embarrassed smile. “Oops, I think we’ve had a little… accident!”

“Creators! I’m sorry…” Aleska rushed to pick Fen up and winced at the dark wet patch on Sophia’s gown. “I’ll get you some towels.”

“Don’t worry!” Sophia waved her hand dismissively as she dabbed at the patch with her handkerchief. “I’ll be getting changed before I lie down anyway. He just got a little too excited, you’d better get used to that while he’s being trained.”

“Well we’d better start on that as soon as possible, hadn’t we? Or Auntie Josephine will have conniptions!” Aleska bopped her nose against Fen’s and he licked her in response. She turned to Sophia, still dabbing at her skirts. “You said you had something important to tell me; is it about you and Cullen?”

Sophia nodded, scrunching up her handkerchief and placing it to one side. Aleska tossed the toy against the far wall, watching Fen dart across the room faster than most hounds and returning to her side, nudging the rope toward her with his nose. His tail thumping against the carpets along the stone floor and he yelped impatiently; pawing at her boot.

“It is, but probably not the way you think. I’m pregnant.”
Aleska kept silent, never before had her hearing failed her; but she needed Sophia to repeat her statement. Fen gave a little squeak of protest as she moved him to one side and took Sophia’s hands; feeling how they trembled.

“Sophia! This is…” She wanted to say ‘wonderful news’ but wasn’t sure quite how wonderful it was in the circumstances. “How are you feeling? Had I known; I would have come after your lie down.”

Sophia took a deep breath and gripped Aleska’s hands tightly. She knew that Aleska would have helped her clannmates deliver babies and prepare for pregnancies. Aleska’s smile broadened as she pulled Sophia into a gentle hug, listening to the shuddered breath against her shoulder.

“Elated… and terrified at the same time; and I want to vomit every time I smell pickled herring. The doctors have given me a whole list of delightful symptoms I can look forward to, as well as dire warnings about the risks for a woman my age.”

“How are you feeling? Had I known; I would have come after your lie down.”

Sophia reshuffled against Aleska’s shoulder, feeling the warm body against her. “Elated… and terrified at the same time; and I want to vomit every time I smell pickled herring. The doctors have given me a whole list of delightful symptoms I can look forward to, as well as dire warnings about the risks for a woman my age.”

“My news?” Aleska snorted indignantly. “Sophia, you’re a young woman. You’re only as old as you allow yourself to be.”

“I don’t know how it is for elves,” Sophia said, letting go of Aleska’s hands “But it’s not recommended for human woman past their twenties. There can be complications.”

“Your age?” Aleska snorted indignantly. “Sophia, you’re a young woman. You’re only as old as you allow yourself to be.”

“I don’t know how it is for elves,” Sophia said, letting go of Aleska’s hands “But it’s not recommended for human woman past their twenties. There can be complications.”

Aleska laid a hand gently on Sophia’s stomach. “Elves are different, I have seen woman in their forties or older deliver healthy babies; I’ve heard it can be difficult for human women but we will not bring such unlucky thoughts to your child. He or she will be a healthy baby. You will be fine… I promise you that much.”

“How can you be so certain,” Sophia wiped the tears from her eyes before they ran down her cheeks.

“You’ll have the finest healers and midwives in all of Thedas at your disposal. That will probably be the only thing your father and I agree on.” Aleska laughed. “You and your baby will be fine; but you’ll have to get used to a lot of coddling, I’m afraid. Although, you’re welcome to call upon me to throw anyone out… Jonas as well, even Bull.”

Sophia shook her head with a quiet laugh. “Papa almost had me wrapped in cotton wool for the voyage, and I’m forbidden from travelling by anything other than carriage. Honestly, half the time I don’t know whether I want to laugh or cry; you know how much I hate feeling useless.”

Aleska put her arms around Sophia, resting her head against the older woman’s shoulder. Even though they’d been apart, within this moment, it felt like it had been mere minutes over weeks of being separated. *How did I not notice this?* Aleska cursed, she’d helped enough pregnant woman to have been aware of the early symptoms. *Have I been so trapped within my own thoughts that I neglected Sophia?*

“You’ll never be useless, Sophia, just having you back makes me feel better and I’ll be here for you all the way.” Aleska promised; hesitating before asking the next, obvious, question. “Does Cullen know?”

“He does; he looked like someone had hit him in the head with a log when I left him.” Sophia exhaled a breath, stroking Aleska’s hair, even she couldn’t deny how much she’d missed her friend. One of the few who saw her for herself, not merely a dynastic pawn or source of political advantage. “I don’t know how things are going to be between us, but I want him to have the chance to be a father to our child; and I think that’s what he wants as well.”
“It had better be.” Aleska stated with a stern look. “Or I’ll set Fen on him! After I drop kick him off my balcony. Listen Sophia,” A pause stopped her words. “I personally know Cullen feels dreadful for what happened between you, I am positive he will be working tirelessly to earn your trust—as I am sure your love he always will have. Just know it will be hard for both of you, but if you can weather any storm together, that is the moment you find our how strong you both are.”

“Nuzzled to death by a Mabari pup; how any Fereldan would want to go. However, being thrown from tremendous heights, even I had a chill down my spine.” Sophia laughed, then winced. Aleska sat up sharply.

“Was this a bad cramp? Might be a spot of trapped gas, perhaps have a warm bath before you retire? Shall I check on you later?”

Sophia nodded, rubbing her stomach.

“I think you’re right.” She huffed quietly and gave Aleska a wry look. “And I may I need to visit the closet, for the umpteenth time today, or I’ll have an ‘accident’ of my own. Less than two months, and that man’s child is already turning my life upside down!”

“I’ll call for your maid!” Aleska laughed, hearing a bell ring at the end of the hallway. “And, if I hurry, I’ll have just enough time to wash the dog-pee off my hands and get the last of the straw off my breeches before lunch.”

Sophia reached up and kissed her on both cheeks.

“After nearly ten years of marriage to Alistair; Liv has encountered far worse at the dining-table, believe me!”
Chapter Summary

Sophia's return to Skyhold forced Cullen to evaluate his priorities, but can he risk losing the friend who has been by his side since the beginning. Aleska makes a life altering choice, one which causes Sophia some distress. Is it too late for Cullen and Aleska to repair their friendship? Or can it weather this storm till the end?

There is an old tale which says that no choice should be left unresolved once the clock strikes midnight. The ticking of the ornate wall clock held Aleska’s attention, the minute hand edging the last fraction of an inch towards the twelve. Aleska’s finger tapped against the flat wooden surface of the dressing table, her nail mimicking the ticking of the clock. A soft breeze blew through the room, sending the hairs atop her arms prickling to life. It wasn’t the cold which caused this, but something she’d been meaning to do for a long while. Something that there was no turning back from.

The bed springs squeaked as Anselm shifted in his sleep and, with an incoherent mumble, he pushed the covers away from his shoulders, he hadn’t slept decently since arriving at Highever. He misses his bed too much, who can blame him? The mattresses here are too soft for him, and Josephine did ensure that every Trevelyan’s needs were met. Aleska mused, inhaling the crisp air deep into her lungs and running her free hand along the polished arm of the chair; with a rocking motion Aleska slumped as the clock began to chime the midnight hour.

I have to do this.

Closing her eyes, Aleska embraced the darkness which enveloped her. A serenity came over her, one she couldn’t explain—yet one she found comfort in. The caw of the ravens on their perch was the only thing she could hear as the chimes faded away. Even that seemed to flow over her head. For once, there had been no letters which required her immediate attention. Messengers with urgent requests from nobles and workers alike. No Josephine with her endless lectures about protocol. This won’t last long. Aleska straightened herself, opening her eyes; the only sight that greeted her was that of the empty ceiling.

“What is wrong?” the voice came from the bed, the tiredness clear within Anselm’s tone.

“You assume something is wrong,” Aleska glanced at him, a smile breaking out against her lips.

The way the moonlight illuminated his toned physique, the small beads of sweat caught within the light; even his scent which found its way toward her. Everything about him invited her in, from the velvet laced within his voice, the way his eyes could grab hold of her before his lips ushered a single word. The best part was—he was all hers. He raised himself up on one elbow, wiping the sleep from his eyes with his other hand. Whether by accident or design, the sheets had slipped lower around his hips, allowing her gaze to travel the thickening trail of hair that led down from his nave.
Sliding the chair back into place, Aleska’s hand combed the strands of hair across her one shoulder, sliding up her stiff neck; searching for the clasp of her necklace. Resting the chain on the dresser before her, Aleska watched as the silver shimmered in the moonlight. Next came the waistcoat, tightened to flaunt her slender physique; the release of pressure allowed her lungs to expand properly. Finally, she drew off her chemise, knowing Anselm’s gaze never left her, and loosened her hair so it spilled down her back.

Within a moment, his hands ran along her arms and his soft breath caressed her ear. “You’re not allowed to tease me like that,” Anselm growled, moving her hair to the side.

“Why not?” Aleska pressed against his bare chest; running her hand down his stomach to cup him between his legs, feeling him shudder against her.

His lips touched her skin, sending chills spasming through her spine, a soft breath left her parted lips, she couldn’t contain it even if she desired to. Anselm’s lips touched against her shoulder, with the tip of his tongue tracing along the Vallaslin upon her shoulder. The one thing that could break their entanglement came from the bed in the corner of the room.

Both turned around to see Fen sitting on the floor wagging his tail in anticipation. He gave a little bark and nudged the rope toy toward them with his nose. Eagerness beamed from his brown eyes.

“You have got to be kidding me?” Aleska laughed, slipping on one of her nightshirts and picking the pup up only to have an eager pink tongue lick her nose.

“You should be asleep Mr.” Aleska placed Fen within his bed, he snorted indignantly and began clambering out and waddling after her. “It would be rude to have that nice bed go to waste wouldn’t it?”

“He isn’t sleeping with us,” Anselm groaned, climbing back in bed. “Now do you care to finish what we started?”

“Anselm,” Aleska picked Fen up and held him so Anselm could look into his liquid brown eyes, they seemed to be getting wider by the moment. “How can you say no to that face?”

“No… no…” Anselm raised a finger, listening to Fen whimper. “Oh… fine! But if he pees the bed, you’re cleaning it up.”

***

The early morning sunshine working its way between the curtains finally reached Aleska’s face, forcing her to wake from her slumber. The space beside her remained empty and Fen was nowhere to be seen.

Aleska stretched, yawning as her body awoke. Beside her, rested a tray with a steaming pot of tea and a bowl of fruit and nuts. Something small for her to nibble on before she had a proper breakfast.

Throwing the covers off, the coolness of the morning breeze touched her bare legs. Steam drifted through from the bathroom, informing her that a warm bath would greet her the moment she found the will power to leave her bed. Aleska ran her hands through the knotted ends of her hair, trying to straighten the strands. Nibbling on a handful of nuts, it sated the hunger pangs twisting within her stomach. The saltiness forced her to down a cup of tea; a blend she knew too well from Sophia’s collection. A mixture of summer fruits both sweet and citrus hit her palate. The smallest drop of
honey to offset the bitterness.

Removing the night shirt, Aleska climbed into the warm bath; the waters helping to relax her muscles. A night of restlessness hadn’t done her good, the dark circles beneath her eyes now apparent even to her; she could no longer deny her own exhaustion. Impaired vision, speech and thought would follow. *I cannot allow that to happen, my advisers will let me have naps. I know in the field Anselm won’t mind… I don’t want to think of that right now.* Aleska sank lower into the waters. Her head almost submerged beneath, the sweet-scented oils wafting toward her. A scent of soft jasmine and honey fused with her skin.

The water was almost cold before Aleska felt relaxed enough to start drying off and dressing; changing into her breeches and waist coat. She ran a comb through her long hair, strands falling against her breast and rested on her stomach. Looking at her reflection, she bunched up her hair, bringing it up to her shoulders before allowing it to fall once more. Sighing, she pulled the velvet rope beside the vanity and, within minutes, one of the servants came to her aid.

“How may I be of service, my lady?” The maid curtsied before Aleska.

“I need you to deliver a message for me please. To the silver smith in town. Get a piece of paper from my desk.”

The instruction obeyed to the last detail, the maid wrote down what Aleska dictated to her, she folded the note and placed it within her apron; to give to the runner heading to town that morning. Aleska took a small purse of gold from the vanity. Despite Aleska not wanting it, Josephine insisted upon her having an allowance to use as she saw fit. This was the first of it she’d spent. *Keeps Josephine off my back.*

Aleska handed the coin purse to the maid, before putting some within her hand as a payment for her service.

“Tell me,” Aleska stopped the maid before she reached the door. “Where does the Queen stay? Her and the King have chambers here correct?”

“Y-yes, my lady. Queen Olivia resides down the hall from you, Your Worship. Shall I tell her you’re coming?”

“No need,” Aleska rose, leaving her hair undone. “I can announce myself.”

Aleska wandered the corridor, noting two guards dressed in Theirin armour standing outside two ornate oak doors. Had they not moved to straighten their shields or adjust their hands upon the spears, Aleska would assume they were part of the decorations. As she crossed their path, the spears prevented her from entry to the Queen’s chambers. Aleska took a calculated step back, glaring at them as they spoke.

“Her Grace is not to be disturbed,” one guard glanced at Aleska. “Her maids are to report to the King for instruction.”

“And which one of you brave soldiers are going to tell her Grace that they prevented the Inquisitor from speaking with her? When summoned no less.” Aleska rested her hands upon her hips, cocking them to the side.

The lie flowed easily from her lips, despite no formal invitation, Olivia mentioned that Aleska had special privilege to speak with her whenever needed. Both guards looked at one another, neither had seen the Inquisitor in person to know who she was, but they weren’t prepared to dispute their
Queens orders. The door opened, with a muffled apology, both guards closed it behind her.

“You liar,” Olivia laughed, soft enough that none heard except for them. “Although, I applaud your prowess. They normally ask for a letter; but I think they were too terrified.”

“Of who?” Aleska sat beside Olivia upon invitation. “You or myself?”

“Well,” Olivia placed a gentle hand upon Aleska’s wrist. “I am not the one being hailed as Andraste’s chosen; how can I help you today?”

“I need a favour,” Aleska glanced down, unsure of how to phrase such a question. “Normally I wouldn’t ask this of anyone, but I need something done.”

“Well, what can I do?” Olivia raised a questioning brow listening to Aleska’s request, she signalled for her handmaid to be relieved of her duties and report to her immediately. *This is it*, Aleska inhaled a deep breath, sitting at the Queen’s vanity as the instructions were relayed. *No turning back now.*

***

“No!” Sophia shrieked getting up from her chair, as Aleska walked into the breakfast room. “What have you done!!”

Sophia rose from her seat, rushing to Aleska’s side, running her fingers through her hair hoping to find pins or something to prove this had been a false image. None were found, Sophia gripped the edges of Aleska’s hair, they now barely touched her shoulder.

“What?” Aleska removed Sophia’s hands, knowing that Sophia would fuss if she didn’t put a stop to it. “I—”

“What have you done?” Cullen stated, clearing his throat at the realization of his own words. “I mean… uh… I don’t mean to pry—”

“Your beautiful black hair!” Sophia groaned, wondering how she’d even tie it up. “Why did you cut it off?”

“I felt like it,” Aleska grumbled. “Can we please leave it alone? It is my hair you know. I haven’t cut it in a while and thought I would be due another one.”

Sophia sat down again, placing the napkin along her lap and shaking her head with dismay as she stirred the milk and honey into her porridge. Aleska accepted a cup of tea offered by Fergus, unfolding the napkin from the silver ring and placing it across her lap. Cullen took a seat beside her, unsure if his usual place beside Sophia would be open to him still.

“I rather like it,” Fergus was the first to break the silence. “It will grow back Lady Sophia.”

“She hates change,” Aleska waved a spook in Sophia’s direction, with a cheek full of grapefruit. “I remember when I got my new tattoo, took her a week to even forgive me… she didn’t even see it.”

“You mean the one on your—” Aleska nudged Cullen in the rib, preventing him from finishing that statement.

“You know where it is?” Sophia folded her arms.

“One night when we were playing cards with Varric, I had a bit more wine than I should have… I
told everyone where it was. It isn’t that big a deal okay… it needed a touch up anyway.”

“Was that when Anselm—” Sophia began, recalling the hangover she nursed from both Aleska and Cullen that morning.

“Pretty much,” Aleska glanced over at Fergus, the confusion on his features gave him the appearance of a little boy. “Thinking about it makes my stomach turn.”

“I don’t think there is a way to convince me to drink that much again,” Cullen placed a hand against his stomach, accepting the jug of milk from Aleska.

“Although,” Aleska began, the conversation they had a day or so prior to Sophia’s return surfaced “Never mind.”

“Come on,” Sophia nudged her. “You cannot begin something like that and not finish it.”

“No… it doesn’t matter.” Aleska forced a smile.

Aleska pushed the food around her plate, unable to stomach the tantalizing food upon her plate. The smells made her feel sick, the harsh odour of the Ferelden sausage—which left her mouth-watering—was the worst. Aleska pushed the plate away from her, taking a sip of orange juice from the goblet before her. The taste left a trail of acid down her throat.

“So,” Fergus cleared his throat. “I have been meaning to ask your Ladyship something. Please don’t take offense to my question.”

“I cannot say if I will or won’t until I hear the question,” Aleska placed the goblet down.

“I hear the Dalish hunters’ instincts are unparalleled,” Fergus waved his fork around, bits of food darting along the table. “Would you object to joining us on a hunt this morning?”

“Who will be in attendance?” Aleska sat back within her seat, watching Fergus mentally count those joining.

“Well the King, myself, Lord Anselm… oh and the Commander… non-negotiable I am afraid, I apologize Cullen.”

“I have a thousand and one—”

“No compromises,” Sophia glared. “The fresh air will do you good. Plus being with people who aren’t Aleska or Rylen… I didn’t mean that how it—”

“It’s fine,” Aleska’s jaw clenched. “I will be ready within the hour. I suggest you all do the same. No hounds.”

“But—” Fergus began.

“My Lord, we do this my way or not at all, kindly pick before I return.” Aleska excused herself from the table, heading toward her chambers as Anselm returned with Fen.

“Is she always this assertive?” Fergus asked Sophia.

“Not like that,” Sophia responded. “She is exhausted, I wouldn’t take it personally.”

“You assumed I did,” Fergus laughed. “I rather like a woman who isn’t afraid to speak her mind.”
“Be warned Fergus,” Anselm chuckled. “Wars have been started for less.”

***

Aleska stood before the mirror, adjusting the last buckle in place around her thigh, the knives would be a last resort. In the glass, she noted Anselm fix his boots and place a dagger within his sheath, his shirt lay beside him; as if to tantalize her further.

_He hates the haircut,_

Aleska caught her lower lip between her teeth, nibbling on the skin as she ran her hand ran through her curls, still not used to the shortness of her hair.

_He didn’t say anything about it._

Aleska turned around, adjusting the short leather bodice she wore. If felt like forever since she last wore Dalish armour and the feeling of having her midriff exposed was refreshing and yet somehow un-nerving. She ran her finger along the leather edging, ensuring that it didn’t curl in on itself and become uncomfortable.

“So… what do you think?” Aleska spun around, the shortness of her hair proved challenging to convey into a traditional Dalish style.

Anselm looked up lazily, hooking his fingers into the waistband of her breeches and pulling her closer. His lips pressed against the bare skin of her toned stomach, his tongue tracing her navel and sending all too welcome shivers running through her body. She closed her eyes, letting out a soft moan as his warm hands wandered up her body. She laughed as he began to surreptitiously tug on the lacings she’d just carefully fastened.

She removed his hands, pushing him back onto the bed

“Later, as much as I want it now, I shouldn’t keep Fergus waiting.” She kissed his bare chest, lips lingering for a moment to taste the salt and musk of his skin. “I was rather short with him this morning and I don’t want to risk offending him.”

“This is like those six months—which turned into a year—all over again,” Anselm ran his fingers through her hair as her lips travelled lower. “It is more torturous now.”

“How so?” Aleska’s moved onto the bed and straddled him, knees on either side of his chest.

“Because now I am not left wondering if you desire it,” Anselm’s hand ran along her stomach, moving up to trace the outline of her breast through the leather. “I now know, there is only one thing stopping me from ripping that armour off and having my way with you.”

“What would that be?” Aleska took his hand, placing a kiss against each finger.

“It would be far more fun to do it in the forests,” Anselm smirked up at her.

“You scoundrel!” Aleska laughed, pinning his hand above him, lowering herself to meet his lips.

“I don’t see you saying you wouldn’t want me to.” Anselm returned her kiss with an eagerness of his own.

Aleska sensed his hands travelling along her waist, down her thigh and resting behind her knees; pulling her body closer against his. A forcefulness collided with the gentle touch she’d come to
know and love. A soft moan left her lips as Anselm’s hands rand through her hair. A knock at the
door disrupted them, Aleska drew a long breath, unable to control her mood any longer.

“Give us a minute,” Aleska called.

“Maybe ten,” Anselm retaliated.

With a single swift movement, Aleska rested against the plump pillows upon the bed, Anselm’s
body against hers, his lips claiming hers in a heated kiss. Aleska’s hands fiddled with his belt,
sliding it out of the loops and throwing it to the floor with a thud. Her hands wandered the
musculature of his body, wanting nothing more than his bare torso pressed against his.

Anselm’s lips trailed along her neck, nibbling at the exposed skin sending Aleska into a shiver;
each time his teeth contacted her neck, a louder moan escaped her. His lips trailed down
unbuckling the belts which prevented him from his desires.

“I want to try something,” Anselm growled against her skin. “A little trick I heard of.”

“Oh,” Aleska ran her fingernails through his close-trimmed beard. “Well, we only have thirty
minutes before someone comes looking for us.”

“Hmm,” Anselm looked up at her, mischief gleamed within his eyes. “That will be more than
adequate time.”

***

Clothing lay scattered around the room, the curtains drawn close to prevent even the sun from
intruding on their privacy. Aleska rested her head against Anselm’s shoulder, catching her breath as
beads of sweat glistened upon her body; she was still trembling slightly, even her legs felt
weakened by what Anselm had just done. Their fingers intertwined and his other hand rested upon
her stomach, lazily tracing the tattoo surrounding her navel.

“W-where did you say you learned that?” Aleska breathed, placing a tender kiss against his cheek.

Anselm laughed, sitting up and stretching.

“I may have been expelled from university after only six weeks, but I did pick up a few things
while I was there!”

“Well, somehow I doubt that was on the curriculum; unless the University of Orlais is even more
advanced than I’ve been led to believe.” She leaned over and kissed him. “But it was well worth
the distraction.”

Aleska got up and poured water into the brass bowl on the washstand. Soaking a flannel, she ran
the cloth along her arms and neck, wiping away any trace of sweat from her skin. The warmth of
the water surprised her, until the rune carved within the ceramic glowed a faint orange, reminded
Aleska of the special magic used to ensure the water never dropped below a certain temperature.
Anselm came up behind her, taking the cloth from her grasp and running it along her back; his
hands—out of instinct or habit—attempted to move her hair across the one shoulder, only to realize
that it wouldn’t stay there.

“I like it,” Anselm held her body against his, whispering within her ear. “Just promise me to grow
it back, nothing soothes me more than running my fingers through your hair.”

“It will grow back,” Aleska teased, slipping on her undergarments, “well unless I cut it again.”
“Well—” Anselm ran a hand along his beard. “I am due for a shave.”

“Don’t you dare!” Aleska tossed the washcloth at him, buckling the last belt along her waist.

“Then we have an accord?” Anselm slipped his breeches on, lacing the strings tightly.

“Are all Trevelyans’s born stubborn?” Aleska tucked her bow across her shoulder.

Anselm chuckled softly, brushing his lips against her ear.

“It is somewhat of a family trait. You should meet my Great-Aunt Lucille; she’s almost 90 and still treats Uncle Boniface like he’s a naughty toddler. It’s really quite funny to watch.”

Aleska shook her head with a smile.

*He is as incorrigible as ever, but I wouldn’t be with him if I didn’t enjoy the challenge.*

The thought played over in her mind as she sauntered down to the hallway where she’d meet Fergus and the hunting party.

*Wonder why he wanted me to teach him our ways of hunting, I doubt they would pay tribute to Andruil.*

Aleska crossed the threshold into the hall, seeing the hunting party eagerly waiting for her.

Her gaze met Cullen’s and time slowed to a crawl. Instead of the heavy armour he normally wore, the Commander was dressed in plain leather breeches and a close-fitting waistcoat; the characteristic dress of a Fereldan countryman. The sleeves of his linen shirt were rolled back to his elbows; revealing powerful forearms, corded with muscle and dusted with golden hair. One hand rested idly on the sword strapped to his side and, for a moment, it seemed as if his fingers tightened on the hilt as he caught sight of her.

Aleska stopped, closing her eyes and pushing all memory of that night from her mind. The dryness of her throat almost proving too much to bear, had it not been for Alistair calling her, she would have turned around and headed back upstairs.

A soft hand touched her shoulder, she looked into the violet eyes of Sophia. Aleska barely heard her friend’s best wishes for the hunt.

*We can only ever be friends and we both know it, no matter how difficult that is, Aleska reminded herself. She doesn’t deserve the pain; Anselm doesn’t deserve the pain. We are doing it for them; perhaps in another life… but not this one…*

Aleska forced a smile upon her lips as Sophia’s arms wrapped around her shoulders, a whisper of a safe hunt reached her ears as Aleska returned the hug. Her hand brushing past Sophia’s hair.

“You be careful while I am gone,” Aleska took Sophia’s hands, giving them a gentle squeeze. “If you feel tired, rest.”

“You sound worse than my father,” Sophia laughed. “Now go, have fun and try to be back before dark.”

*Would she trust Cullen to come had she known what he’d said to me?* Aleska pondered, a nod her only response. *She must never know; it would destroy any trust she has left in Cullen.*

Aleska straightened herself, Anselm’s firm grip on her shoulder bringing her back to reality. An
eager Fergus and Alistair ensured they were dressed in the simplest clothing they could muster. It suited them all.

“I now feel rather underdressed.” Alistair pulled down his waistcoat.

Aleska laughed softly. “Perhaps, but it does suit you, your Grace.”

“So, we find the ample hunting grounds to be here,” Fergus lay a map upon the table, a finger circling a large woodland area not far off the castle. “We should have enough bounty to feed a castle… well—”

“I understand what you mean,” Aleska folded the map, placing it within Anselm’s coat pocket. “If all goes well, we should have enough time to get back and enjoy a nice hot meal before we head back to Skyhold.”

“Awe,” Alistair groaned. “Does that mean we have to go back to Denerim.”

“It does, my love.” Olivia kissed his cheek. “As much as Eamon enjoys the throne, I wouldn’t leave my beloved Ferelden within his care for too long. Plus our boys miss us. Helga wrote to me this morning.”

Aleska glanced toward Anselm, meeting those captivating green eyes of his. “You want to know what?”

“What?” Anselm dropped his voice to a whisper, placing his thumb against her cheek, leaving a sweet kiss upon her lips.

“Our kids will be way cuter.” Aleska smiled, resting her head against his chest, having his arm around her shoulder.

Aleska closed her eyes, enjoying the thudding of his heart beating, the warmth of his body touching her own. A deep sigh of content as she nuzzled deeper into his hold. I never wanted children before, not after what happened to Mae, but when I think of my future… all I see is Anselm and our family. Aleska looked up at him, his face beaming down toward her as his hand rested against her slender stomach. Her own hand against his chest, moving up to his cheek.

Anselm cleared his throat. “My Lady, we have company.”

Aleska smiled softly, realizing they weren’t entirely alone.

“Don’t stop on our account,” Fergus nudged Alistair in the ribs.

“We should get going.” Aleska felt the warmth rush to her cheeks, unable to keep the smile from her lips. “Deer tend to move quickly. We must move quicker. No horses either, it will frighten the animals.”

***

The sunshine dappled through the leaves of the trees, small rays illuminated the forest floor before them, flowers blossomed within these rays, giving off their sweet perfumes as they passed. Anselm knelt down, picking a stalk of jasmine from a near by hanging tree and handing it to Aleska, watching the smile on her face as she inhaled the intoxicating scent. It seemed to be the little things he loved about her, how she appreciated even the smallest gestures even more than the grandeurs he could have offered her.
Before them, a small squirrel scampered along the forest floor, scavenging for a nut to nibble on, Aleska took a handful from her satchel, kneeling lower and resting her hand upon the moist earth beneath their boots. A small little nose sniffed the air before her, taking one step, then two and finally a third step toward her. Small paws extended to her hand, no larger than her fingernail, accepting the nut from her palm. Anselm knelt beside her, watching the little animal feed from her palm.

“Incredible,” Fergus whispered, coming up behind her. “It let you feed it?”

“No,” Aleska watched as the squirrel took the last nut, scampering into a tree before them. “It let me do nothing, I let it do everything. My lord, one cannot hunt if one doesn’t respect the creatures of the forest. From the smallest little squirrel to the greatest bear.”

“I don’t think I understand what you mean—” Fergus scratched the back of his head.

“Let me put it plainly,” Aleska dusted her hands off. “We are in their home, much as guests show you respect in yours; we should do the same to them. This is their home; it demands equal respect as the halls of the King. This is what it means to be a Dalish hunter, my lord. Not simply killing for the entertainment value of it.”

Aleska kept to her path, looking at the ground for any sign of deer tracks that she could sense. Only the sounds the forests gave reached her ears, the chattering of the others faded into mumbles and became almost silent against the loud beating of the forest’s drums within her ears. A broken twig caught her eye. The clear imprint of a hoof embedded within the soil before them. A hand raised to tell the others to stop following, they seemed to silence themselves at her request.

With a delicate finger, Aleska traced the hoof print, _it cannot be more than a few hours old._ Heading west. Aleska vaguely remembered the map she looked at with Fergus in the Hall, remembering a large meadow marked within the paper. _Not young, not quite an adult either._ Aleska glanced toward the treeline, noting a long neck of white fur bending toward the lush grass beneath it. The bow unhinged, with a single step; Aleska’s boot snapped a twig, alerting her prey to her whereabouts.

In that moment, the deer charged for the tree lining opposite the meadow, Aleska gave chase, despite the calls from her party. Bow within her hand, Aleska surprised herself by the speed which she’d been able to travel at, she could hear the footsteps behind her barely able to keep up. _Noble lords not used to the run._ Aleska hooked her bow across her shoulder, jumping onto a bolder and using the trunk of a large tree to propel her to the nearest branch.

Hands gripped the firm branch, she hoisted herself up onto it; the trees grew close enough together for her to be able to jump from tree to tree without too much difficulty. Soon, they came across another meadow; her prey now eagerly enjoying the meal which she’d interrupted. Ears lifted to listen to the sound of predators, but Aleska had slowed her heartbeat to a near standstill. A notched arrow pulled back, the bow string creaking beneath the pressure. Drawing a deep breath, Aleska’s chest expanded till it couldn’t move any further.

_Thwack_, the arrow soared toward the deer, another followed and finally a third arrow embedded itself with in the creatures’ neck. Aleska climbed down from her perch, kneeling before the wheezing beast. A hand placed within its fur; blood stained her hands nail beds. Eyes looked up at her, turning glassy from the loss of blood. _I thank you for your sacrifice._ Aleska closed her eyes, lowering her head. _It will not be forgotten._

“Is everything all right?” Fergus stepped out of the treeline, his chest heaving from the running.
“Don’t.” Anselm warned, pulling Fergus back a little. “She won’t respond.”

“What is she doing?” Fergus furrowed his brows, unsure of which custom this was.

Aleska rose, pulling out each arrow which brought the beast closer to its end. “I am thanking the animal for its sacrifice, to give one’s life to ensure another’s survival is no easy task. It is an act of selflessness.”

“But it didn’t choose to die,” Fergus folded his arms. “You hunted it down, quite magnificently I might add.”

“I don’t expect you to understand Teryn Fergus.” Aleska smiled, “much like you believe the Maker sets things in motion for a reason—our Gods to the same thing. Because of the hunt, your table will be filled with meat for the day or so to come. That is what it means to truly hunt. We call it the Vir Tanadhal, the Way of the Three Trees; fly straight and do not waver, bend but never break, and receive the gifts of the hunt with mindfulness. Every Dalish hunter is taught this from infancy.”

“Your culture is a fascinating one,” Fergus nodded, sheathing his sword. “I wish you had the time to delve further into it.”

Aleska smiled softly, knowing the heart attack her father would have if she’d given more of their culture away to humans, though—much like his sister—Fergus seemed different, appreciative of her time and explanations to things. Aleska looked around the meadow, small flocks of birds erupted from the green foliage before them; her gaze shifted to the skies above, the sun sank lower than she’d anticipated, the carriage would arrive for Sophia shortly.

“Where are we?” Cullen finally emerged, kicking the vines off his boot. “I don’t recall this being on the maps.”

“Highever is that way?” Aleska pointed with the tip of a bloodied arrow. “I think…”

“You think?” Cullen folded his arms. “I thought you were supposed to be certain.”

“What are you trying to say?” Aleska narrowed her eyes. “I deliberately did this?”

“Had you not raced ahead without a plan,” Cullen retaliated. “We might not be in this mess.”

“A plan?” Aleska raised a brow. “There is no planning in a hunt, you don’t need to strategize every mundane detail of a hunt… well maybe you do, but normally you rely on your instincts. If you cannot do that, you have no business hunting.”

Their voices raised for hours, even Fergus, Alistair and Anselm relaxed by a fire, listening to their bickering. The underlying point long lost in the heat of their argument. The end nowhere in sight, Anselm tossed a stick into the flame; forcing the fire to roar to life again.

“Can I say something?” Alistair interrupted them.

“NO!” Cullen and Aleska shouted in unison.

Aleska stopped to catch her breath, the rage burning within her had long set her blood alight. She could barely stand to look at Cullen let alone be in his presence, not once had he ever questioned her. A hand rested within the crook of her arm, Aleska turned to meet the gaze of Anselm; a piece of paper between his fingers.

“We have a map,” Anselm tried to ease the tensions between them. “It is a simple case of finding
where we are, then we can find our way back home.”

“The sooner, the better.” Aleska stated through gritted teeth.

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The last of the chests fastened to the carriage with a large thud, Aleska perched upon a horse beside Anselm overseeing everything. The King and Queen left earlier that morning, before breakfast even. Anselm joked to have a few moments to themselves before their duties overtook their lives. Cullen hadn’t spoken a word to her since their argument, nor even glanced—not that she paid attention—in her direction.

“Thank you, my lord, for your very generous hospitality.” Aleska lowered her head, as Fergus took her hand and placed a tender kiss upon her knuckle.

“May our paths cross again, my lady.” Fergus stepped back, allowing them to lead first while he said a final goodbye to Sophia.

_We have a long road ahead of us back home, I am bathing for a week when I get back._ Aleska watched Fen stick his head out the carriage window, his tongue flapping in the wind as the pup attempted to bite the wind which brushed his fur. Aleska laughed, pulling her horse beside the window and running her fingers through her Mabari’s fur, lapping her hand in approval.

“How long to Skyhold?” Sophia asked, peeking her head out.

“I am not certain,” Aleska looked at Sophia, smiling down. “If you need to… you know, we may be at a disadvantage. We women aren’t like men in that respect; sometimes I envy that.”

“I don’t,” Sophia laughed, “despite our complications, I rather enjoy wearing frilly dresses.”

“Get some rest Sophia,” Aleska gently nudged Fen back inside the carriage, knowing the pup wouldn’t listen. “Perhaps you’ll awaken back at Skyhold.”

Hours seemed to pass, dusk fell upon Ferelden, the skies turned in the blink of an eye; streams of purple and pink ran along the skies—like an artist’s paint brush against a canvas. Aleska glanced up for a moment to marvel at the creation she lived within. The leaves greener than she remembered in a long white, but they would need to make camp; the horses weren’t made to ride further then they were already being pushed.

An uneasy chill resonated through Aleska’s spine, she looked around her and spotted no disturbances through the treelines. Her horse even refused to move at times, as if someone had been watching them. Aleska looked at Anselm, he shared her sentiment. Aleska stopped the carriage, dismounting her horse and walking forward. The only sound to travel to her ears was the crunching of her boots against the dried grass.

Cullen joined her and soon Anselm stood beside her; a hand flexed along his dagger in preparation. Aleska caught the glimmer of something hurled toward them, the glass flask ruptured at their feet, sending a wave of smoke toward them. Aleska clenched her head, unable to keep her eyes open for longer than a few moments. With a thud, her body collided with the floor and darkness enveloped her, the last thing she felt was another body falling beside her; in a deathlike sleep.

###

The breath rushed back into Aleska’s lungs with a painful gasp and she sat up with a jerk, instinctively reaching for her bow. A gentle hand restrained her and she realised Sophia was
bending over her; drawn and exhausted-looking, with her hair in disarray.

“You do insist on lacing your stays too tightly.” She said, trying to sound lighthearted but with a fragile edge to her voice. “But it stopped you breathing in too much of the gas.”

“What happened?” Aleska asked, rubbing her head to clear the fog in her thoughts.

“Red Templars…” Cullen muttered between gritted teeth. His face almost white and he cradled his left arm. “Must have been a small raiding party. I doubt they knew who we were, or they would have sent more. They clearly thought a couple of sleeping-gas grenades would be sufficient”

“I did try to put up a barrier, but you and Anselm were outside it’s range and you caught the full effect…”

A sudden cold fear twisted Aleska’s stomach.

“Anselm… where is he?”

Sophia took her hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze.

“He’s still groggy so I got the coachman to put him in the carriage to sleep it off. He’ll have nothing worse than a bad hangover when he wakes.”

“Something I’m sure he’s used to…” Cullen grumbled, wincing and gritting his teeth as he adjusted the position of his arm.

“What’s wrong with your arm?” Aleska asked, still trying to make sense of everything.

“It’s nothing, I’ll be fine.” He insisted. Sophia shook her head with an exasperated sigh.

“A broken arm is not nothing, you should let me tend to it.” She turned to look at Aleska. “He took the full force of a war-axe on his shield.”

“I ordered you to stay in the carriage.” He growled as Sophia got to her feet, helping Aleska to rise.

“You were being flanked, and I didn’t have a clear line of fire.” She said firmly, still trying to keep her tone matter of fact. “The coachmen were barely able to keep the horses reined in; and I am not one of your soldiers to be told what I can and cannot to…”

“Don’t I just know it.” Cullen muttered under his breath and Aleska didn’t know whether to laugh or cry.

*They’re bickering, we must be safe.*

She looked around the roadside clearing, trying to get a sense of what had happened. Four bodies, unmistakably Red Templars – although two of the bodies were charred beyond recognition, lay on the trampled glass. The two coachmen, having calmed the horses, were now keeping careful watch, crossbows cocked and ready in their arms. From inside the carriage, Aleska could hear a frantic yelping and the sound of paws scrabbling on the door. Fen jumped into her arms the moment she opened it, eagerly licking at her face. Anselm lay sprawled across the seats, still under the effects of the sleeping gas. At the sound of the door opening he raised his head, eyes foggy and unfocussed.

“Beau’ful bandit…” he slurred. “’m at your mercy m’lady…”

“He’ll be like this for hours.” Sophia said, sitting on the carriage step and wiping her face with a
handkerchief. “Even with a lungful of gas he’s still a scoundrel.”

Aleska could see her friend’s hands beginning to shake as the immediate urgency of the situation wore off.

_This isn’t the first time she’s been attacked on the road._ She remembered. _And the last time, the man she loved was killed in front of her._

“You should rest, and that is an order.” She said firmly as Fen wriggled in her arms. “I’ll send one of the coachmen ahead to the next outpost to fetch an added escort, and I’ll get Cullen’s arm splinted.”

Sophia nodded, still dabbing the sweat from her forehead.

“For once, I’m in no mood to argue.”

Aleska helped her into the carriage, settling her on the other bank of seats and convincer Fen to stay put with a handful of bacon-scraps. As she got up to leave, Sophia took hold of her hand, squeezing it tightly.

“I couldn’t let it happen again.” She whispered. Aleska bent over and kissed her friend’s forehead.

“I know.”

Cullen was sitting with his back against a tree as she walked over to him, a bundle of first aid supplies in her hands. His face was still white as snow and sweat beaded his forehead. It was clear he was still numb with shock and didn’t yet fully register the pain of his broken arm. She handed him a flask of elfroot infusion and a small leather strap.

“Drink all of it, and bite down on this.” She ordered. “No matter how gentle I try to be, this is going to hurt.”

It was a clean break, and a couple of dagger-sheaths would make workable splints until they could get him to a doctor. It wasn’t the first time she’d had to set a broken limb, and within a few minutes she had it strapped up and began pinning his coat to act as a makeshift sling.

“How does that feel.” She asked. “Not too tight?”

Cullen shook his head, taking the strap of leather out of his mouth. She could see he’d bitten in almost clean through.

“Thank you.” He croaked, taking the water-flask she offered him and draining it in three long swallows. “I doubt I’ll be riding a horse any time soon though.”

“You’ll just have to put up with riding in the carriage.” Aleska said with a nervous smile. “At least that way, you and Sophia can argue happily all the way back to Skyhold.”

Cullen glanced towards the carriage and back at Aleska.

“I can’t lose her, especially not now.” He said quietly.

Aleska nodded as she helped him to stand. “I know, what ever we may think we feel, it isn’t worth the cost. We were both tired, under stress and neither of us were thinking clearly. Those mistakes are ones we can either learn from or regret when things crumble. Your friendship, and that of Sophia, is far too valuable to me to waste on some fleeting moment.”
“I agree, for what it is worth, I am in agreement.” Cullen smiled down at her. “Perhaps pushing you away wasn’t the best way to handle that.”

“Perhaps not,” Aleska agreed. “As angry as I was, I know why you did it… I would have done the same in your position.”

“Could we perhaps go back to before?”

“I’d like that,” Aleska smiled. “Now get inside the carriage, and if both of you must argue… do it now. It is probably better that you still argue.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Trust me Cullen, when a woman no longer cares for you as she once did, she won’t even bother to argue. If she still gets mad over the little things, it means she still cares. Don’t lose sight of that, nothing and no one else is worth it.”

“Thank you,” Cullen cleared his throat. “For everything.”

“Don’t thank me just yet,” Aleska sauntered toward the carriage. “You still have a long road ahead to earn her forgiveness and if you hurt her again, I will personally kick you off my balcony.”

“I don’t deserve you, either of you.”

“Oh, trust me, we know.”
The final leg of the journey to Skyhold brings choices and decisions for all concerned. Aleska finally has a moment to pause and take stock before yet another surprise, this time a welcome one, claims her attention.

Dorian shook his head to rouse himself from the doze he was slipping into; realising that he’d been reading the same sentence repeatedly without it making an ounce of sense. Perhaps he ought to give up on his reading and take a nap instead. The library was stuffy, the wine with lunch had been excellent, and Fulgencio’s *Trembling of the Veil; A Phenomenology of Desire Demons* a trifle heavy going despite the erotic subtext. He set the book aside and stretched, feeling a series of satisfying little ‘cracks’ in his spine.

He’d claimed this alcove of the library as his personal study during their first week at Skyhold. The tall window let in excellent light for much of the day, and had an uninterrupted view over the sparring ring in the courtyard, while its position near the head of the stairs allowed him to observe the comings and goings in the library without ever leaving the comfort of his armchair. He was rarely bothered here and, apart from the odd cough or sneeze from other patrons, there was an agreeable silence to the place which made a pleasant contrast to the normal bustle of the castle.

He couldn’t avoid admitting that the place was singularly dull in the Inquisitor’s absence; teasing Cullen over chess, verbally sparring with Sophia and sharing titbits of gossip with Aleska was such a recurrent part of his day that he felt a little lost without them. Normally he’d have recourse to the tavern and a mug or two of the execrable stuff they called ‘ale’ here in the south, but he’d been doing that too much recently and had caught Varric giving him worried looks. Besides, everyone seemed to be in a bit of a grump just now; especially Jonas. If he knew the truth of why his sister had chosen to return to Ostwick he wasn’t saying; spending his time chopping the training dummies into small pieces with precise blows from his Greatsword. *It’s all very peculiar…* he thought with a small sigh, resting his hands in his lap and settling back against the cushions.

He couldn’t have closed his eyes for more than five minutes before he was woken by a gently aggressive prodding at his shoulder. He looked up to see Jonas looming over him, dressed for travelling and with a determined look on his face.

“Hsst… Dor… wake up. We gotta get going.”

It was the closest Jonas could get to a whisper but still provoked an aggrieved *Sshhh!* from the neighbouring alcove.

“Get going where?” Dorian asked, pushing himself upright. “Whatever is the matter?”

Jonas glanced around furtively and leaned in, dropping his voice as low as he could manage.
“Heard Lelly talking to Mother G. in the cloister; ‘Leska’s on her way back… and Soph’s with her.’

Dorian sat forward with a frown as Jonas fidgeted with the buckle of his sword belt and shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

“What exactly is going on?” He asked. “I thought Sophia was staying in Ostwick indefinitely?”

“All I know is Cull and Ansie really upset her; and I wanna have words with them that I don’t want anyone else to hear… and…” Jonas leaned in so close that Dorian could tell he’d had cheese dumplings for lunch… again… “Lelly said they gotta have a doctor ready. Something’s wrong and I wanna know what; I’m gonna ride down to meet ‘em before they get here, and I want you to come with me.”

He took a step back, with an expectant look. Dorian hesitated for a moment. He could point out that Sister Leliana would doubtless tell Jonas everything if he asked; but it was plain that Jonas was worried and wanted to find out for himself, and perhaps didn’t want to admit he’d been eavesdropping on her conversation. No sensible man would.

Dorian shrugged and got to his feet.

“Give me a little time to collect my things and I’ll meet you down in the stables.” He said. Jonas’ worried expression immediately transformed into a grateful grin.

“Thanks’ Dor. You’re a real friend. Knew I could count on you!”

Dorian laughed quietly to himself as Jonas raced off; thundering down the stairs two at a time. It was an unexpected break from the monotony, and—to be honest—he was keen to find out what was happening as well.

###

Jonas had two horses saddled and ready by the time Dorian reached the stables. As he walked through the door, Cuddles looked up from nosing through the straw in search of any errant rats and greeted him with a low growl.

“Charmed to see you as well.” Dorian responded, shoving a satchel full of potions and a couple of bottles of wine into one of the saddlebags.

“That weren’t a nice way to say hello.” Jonas said to the dog with a hint of reproach. Cuddles simply huffed and went back to hunting for a fresh scent. Jonas turned back to Dorian with an apologetic smile. “Sorry, he’s been in a funny mood for days. Think he’s still mad at me for leaving him here when we went to Orlais, and he’s missing Soph.”

“Fewer scraps smuggled under the dinner table I suppose.” Dorian muttered to himself as he checked the straps on his saddle were secure. “I’m sure we’ll get along fine; just so long as he doesn’t shit right outside my tent like last time.”

It might have been his imagination, but Dorian was sure the infuriating beast sniggered as he continued his investigation of the stable.

Jonas swung himself up into the saddle and whistled to Cuddles who replied with an impatient whine.

“The bloody rats’ll still be here when we get back.” Jonas reminded him. “And maybe Soph’s
bringing back a treat for you. Might be some of that spicy duck sausage, you wanna miss that?”

The mention of Ansberger Sausage evoked a gleeful bark and Cuddles raced out of the stables ahead of them, trailing a cloud of straw and sawdust. Jonas’ laugh rumbled deep in his chest as he nudged his horse forward.

“At that rate, he’ll be there before we will.” He gave Dorian a wink “Wanna race?”

###

“Feeling better?” Aleska handed Sophia a cup of water as she sat beside her on the big boulder by the side of the stream. Sophia nodded as she took the cup, wiping the sweat from her forehead with a folded handkerchief. The older woman had removed her shoes and stockings, dabbling her feet in the cool water.

“It was a false alarm this time; probably the rocking of the coach.” She took a sip and put the cup to one side. “I’m sorry to be holding us up like this. I know you’re eager to be back at Skyhold.”

Aleska took Sophia’s hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze. “Don’t be silly; Skyhold will still be there whether we take five days or fifty. I can ask the coachmen to go slower, if you like?”

Sophia shook her head with a quiet laugh.

“If we go any slower it would be faster walking, and I’ll still be feeling sick every couple of hours; besides, I don’t think Cullen can cope with being cooped up in a carriage much longer.” She took another sip of water and sighed. “If only he’d let me do something about his arm.”

Aleska gave her a reproachful look. Even on horseback, Cullen couldn’t stand the rocking for too long without the sensation of nausea overtaking him. She could only imagine what the small confines of the carriage would do to him.

“We’ve discussed this, Sophia; healing work exhausts you at the best of times. We can get Ellandra or one of the others to fix it when we get back.”

“Ellandra is competent enough, I suppose.” She laughed and patted Aleska’s arm. “Don’t worry, I’m not going to be a pain about it. I just hate feeling useless.”

“You’ll never be useless.” Aleska replied with a smile and a shake of her head. “I must admit to feeling somewhat lost without you; you’re my compass in the poison sea of politics, and my most trusted friend. Having to navigate those last few negotiations was rather tiresome without someone to gossip to about the Marquis’ mismatched stockings.”

Sophia giggled softly behind her hand, a welcome glint of merriment in her eyes.

“Maker, no. Don’t tell me he hadn’t realized? Such a think in the Ostwick Court would have never been allowed.”

“I think he realized,” Aleska dipped the tip of her boot into the stream, kicking up small droplets of water further into the waters. “He was hoping we wouldn’t.”

Both women turned at the sound of leaves crunching underfoot and a familiar, awkward cough. Cullen edged carefully down the bank, clutching a steaming mug in his good hand.

“I thought Lady Sophia might like some tea before we get back on the road.” He said, pausing before taking his next step on the muddy slope. Aleska got to her feet, giving Sophia an almost
imperceptible wink.

“I’ll see how the horses are doing. I’ll let you know when we’re about ready to get moving again.”

Cullen gave her a look of thanks as he took another, well-judged, step. Sophia stood and held out her hand.

“Here; give me that before you go head over heels, and I have to explain to Cassandra why we’re delivering you back to her with two broken arms and a fractured skull.” Sophia’s eyes scanned the ground at her feet, noticing the smaller rock formations beneath. “That’s a conversation I really don’t want to have.”

The corners of his mouth twitched in a wry smile as he handed her the mug.

“I suspect Cassandra will have a great deal to say to me when we get back, all of which I deserve.” He nodded towards the mug. “It’s ginger and mint. I’m believe it helps with the… erm… nausea.”

She lowered her head and sniffed at the fragrant steam. “It does indeed.” Sophia placed the rim to her lips, taking in a small sip before sitting back down. “You know the most surprising things.”

“I remember my mother drinking it, when she was pregnant with Branson and Rosalie.” He stood beside her, digging at the pebbles with the toe of his boot. “Pa had to ride all the way to Redcliffe to buy ginger from the apothecary. He used to take me with him, and I’d pester the Templars at the Chantry with all sorts of questions while he did his business.”

Sophia stifled a laugh, tucking a stray lock of hair behind her ear. “I can just imagine you as an eager ten-year-old; chasing after the Knight-Captain.”

Cullen chuckled quietly, his boot still digging at the stones.

“I suspect his heart sank whenever he saw me come through the doors, but he was always very patient.” He took a slow breath, his eyes scanning the far side of the river. “I’m afraid I’ve not been the best of company today, riding in a carriage isn’t exactly to my liking.”

Sophia took another sip of tea and smiled up at him. “I haven’t exactly been a bundle of sunshine and kittens myself.” She shook her head with a gentle sigh. “What a fine pair we make; two intelligent, articulate, adults who barely know how to talk to each other.”

Cullen sat down on the rock beside her, adjusting his sling again.

“I’ve never been good at articulating the things that matter to me. Sometimes I understand how it must feel for Jonas, the thoughts are there but the words refuse to co-operate.” He let go of the sling and scratched at the back of his neck, turning his head to look at her. “I may not always say the right thing, but I promise you I will always try to do what is right for you and for our child.”

Sophia smiled quietly at him, resisting the urge to touch him. “I know you will, Cullen, but I can tell that something’s bothering you. You have that little furrow between your eyebrows that tells me you’re even more worried than usual.”

Cullen flushed slightly and gave her a sheepish glance. “Am I that obvious?”

“Only to me.” She said with a quiet sigh, relinquishing enough of the distance she’d been maintaining to pat the back of his hand. “Now, why don’t you tell me what’s the matter?”

Cullen took a deep breath, rubbing his palm on his knee.
“Nothing’s the matter, I’ve just been thinking, something I tend to overdo at times, or so everyone
 tells me. Our child will be a Trevelyman, that is their birth right, but… I have been asking myself
 if…” He exhaled slowly, looking out across the river. “If you would be willing to consider…”

Cullen’s voice dried and he ran his fingers through his hair, turning its rigid order into a messy
tangle of curls.

“I like your hair that way, I wish you’d leave it like that.” Sophia laid her hand on his arm; she
 could tell he was anxious and struggling for words. It was impossible not to give him a little more
 encouragement. “Just take another breath and relax, we have plenty of time.”

She offered him her half empty cup of tea. He took it, nodding gratefully, and taking a mouthful.

“Thank you.” He handed the cup back to her and scratched the stubble forming at his throat; he
 lowered his head for a moment then turned to look at her. “Lady Sophia, would you be willing to
 consider that our child be a Rutherford as well?”

Sophia caught her breath in an astonished gasp. “Cullen, are you… are you asking what I think you
 are?”

He nodded again, rubbing his hand across his face.

“I always believed there would only ever be duty in my life. The thought I might have a family
 never occurred to me. The idea that I might lose that, and you, through my own stubborn stupidity
 fills me with dread. I don’t expect an answer, I have no right to; but, if you are willing, it would be
 my honour if you would accept me as your husband.”

Sophia clasped her hand to her mouth, her stomach turning in knots.

“Cullen, I… I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t need to say anything, you don’t even need to say yes. I just want you to know that I am
 willing to be yours, now and forever; if… if that is what you desire. Whatever you decide, know
 that I will always be with you.”

She raised her hand to his face opening her mouth to say something, but was cut off by a loud,
familiar, barking.

“Is that?” Sophia looked at Cullen, her eyes widening. “No, it can’t be.”

There was the sound of paws thundering on turf, coming to an abrupt halt as Cuddles appeared at
 the crest of the bank, barking joyfully, and running down to them. He stopped suddenly as he
 reached Sophia and sniffed at her with a bemused expression.

“Urff?”

Cullen laughed, crouching down and scratching Cuddles behind the ears with his good hand.

“Looks like someone can tell already.” He glanced up at Sophie. “If Cuddle’s is here, that must
 mean…”

“Soph!” Jonas was down the bank in two long strides, taking his sisters hands with a worried frown
 on his face. “You all right? They were saying stuff about doctors and I was worried.”

Sophia raised herself on tiptoe to kiss Jonas’ cheek.
“I’m fine, Jo-Jo, I promise; but there is something I have to tell you.”

“I’ll go back and join the others,” Cullen said, uncomfortably aware of Jonas glaring at him. “I’ll… erm… make sure that they’re getting the horses ready.”

Cullen walked up the bank and across the short stretch of scrubby grass to the roadside. Cuddles trotted alongside him, sniffing at his pockets in the hope there might be treats hidden there. Cullen glanced down at the Mabari with a wry grin.

“You have Varric’s sense of timing.”

###

“You’re being incredibly quiet. Is everything all right?”

Aleska stroked the neck of Anselm’s horse as he made some adjustments to his saddle. He tightened the last of the buckles and turned to her with a tired smile.

“I’m fine, just exhausted with all this travelling.” He assured her. “I’ll be glad once we’re all home.”

“You think of Skyhold as home?” She asked, running her fingers along the braided mane. Anselm looked at her with surprise.

“Of course, everyone I care about is there.” He paused for a moment. “Don’t you?”

Home was an elusive concept for the Dalish; something they’d had and lost and might have again someday. They might stay at a campsite for weeks, even an entire season, returning to it repeatedly over the course of years, but they never thought of it as home; only a stopping point on a journey without a destination. Haven had felt like one of those sites, a place where they’d rested in the absence of anything permanent. A part of her missed that shabby, ramshackle village clustered around its ancient chantry, but it had never been home.

Skyhold was different. Some magic in its ancient stones had reached out and enfolded her the moment she’d set foot in the overgrown, echoing courtyard; as if it had been waiting for her to bring it back to life. It was more than just a place to rest, it was somewhere she belonged and felt safe. The way she felt safe in Anselm’s arms. Aleska realised she’d been silent for some time and that he was looking at her with perplexed amusement, one hand still resting on the saddle. She slid her hand over and wrapped her fingers around his.

“Yes… yes, I do, and it feels strange.”

Aleska could see in his eyes that he understood. The Trevelyans might own palaces, estates, and castles from Antiva City to Cumberland but she doubted he’d ever been able to think of any of them as home. He’d been a wanderer, just as she had, until they’d both found a place they belonged.

He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed her fingers in silence; he glanced over to the small group beside the carriage and laughed softly.

“Speaking of home, we ought to get moving soon. I think Joe has almost finished lecturing the Old Man on parental responsibility and Cuddles is going to start crying if Fen doesn’t leave him alone.”

She looked across to see the big Mabari frantically trying to keep his precious ball away from Fen, only to have the puppy redouble his efforts to try and snatch it from him; yelping with glee at this
new game. She smiled, stroking Anselm’s chin with her thumb.

“You’re just worried that once Jonas finishes with Cullen, he’s going to dunk you in the river.”

###

Aleska put the last of the letters into the portfolio and pushed it to the side of her desk. One of Josephine’s messengers could pick it up in the morning. She leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes with a quiet, satisfied, sigh. Leliana and Josephine had done a good job of handling the Inquisition’s daily business in her absence, and the storm of excitement over the news of Sophia’s pregnancy allowed her the peace to catch up with what remained, undisturbed by the normal crowd of the curious and predatory who would normally besiege her on her return.

Aleska knew that for the afternoon, at least, Josephine and the others would be too preoccupied with Sophia’s pregnancy to even give her a second glance. It allowed Aleska a small opportunity to breathe and absorb the events of the last few days and weeks, without the stress of having someone haul her away before her mind had an opportunity to figure everything out. Selfish as it sounded, she was happy that it brought her some semblance of peace.

She smiled, letting out a slow breath as she felt herself slipping into a pleasant doze. Despite Sophia’s protestations it was obvious she was enjoying being the centre of attention—not that Aleska cared about that sort of thing—while Cullen appeared utterly bemused by the congratulations descending on him from all sides. It was a surprise to him to discover that he was regarded with genuine affection by the men and women under his command in the Inquisition. That might help him find the confidence he needed to face down his demons and be the father she was sure he could be.

For Sophia’s sake, I hope he can. Aleska’s finger tapped against the wooden knob of her desk chair. Knowing full well that children can either bring out the best in people, or the worst.

She held back a giggle at the little yips and snorts coming from Fen’s basket as he dreamed happily in front of the fire. He’d worn himself out racing around the cloister garden, exploring every new sight and smell he could find and getting into the most impossible corners. Aleska roused herself and picked up her pen, making a brief note for Ser Morris to have strong netting put around the balcony first thing in the morning. She put the pen down again and leaned her elbows on the desk, resting her head in her hands. She hadn’t seen Anselm all day, Leliana had wasted no time in whisking him away for some ‘special mission’, and she realised this was the longest they’d been out of each other’s company for weeks—perhaps months. It was odd not to see him sprawled out on the bed, biting into a fig with his shirt half open and plying her with sly, teasing, comments to distract her from her work.

I let him distract me a bit too much at times… she reasoned, settling back in her chair again… but I wish he was here right now. No, I can’t think like that, this is how the mess began in the first place. My judgement as Inquisitor cannot be impaired by personal feelings.

Aleska realised she was giving herself the lecture she had been expecting from Josephine for months; but even the Lady Ambassador appeared delighted with the events at Halamshiral, plying her for every detail of her dance with Count Boniface. The Count of Ostwick’s tacit approval and Empress Celene’s favour were opening doors for the Inquisition far beyond the borders of Ferelden and Orlais. Tentative enquiries had been received from the courts of Nevarra and Anderfels; even a carefully worded letter from the Archon of Tevinter, in purple ink on gold-flecked paper, lay amongst the correspondence awaiting her attention.

The faint shuffle of a footstep outside the doors to the balcony had her reaching for her knife as
Fen jumped up in his basket, letting out a barrage of angry yelps. The sudden tension in her muscles relaxed into relief as she realised the figure leaning against the doorframe, arms crossed over his chest, was Anselm; clad from head to foot in midnight blue, he blended almost seamlessly into the shadows of the night.

“Creators! How long have you been there?” She gasped as he stepped into the room, kicking the balcony doors shut with his heel.

“Long enough to see you’ve been working far too hard.” He chuckled, picking up Fen who squirmed in his arms and tried to clamber onto his shoulder. He turned to Aleska; his expression unusually sombre. “If I had been an assassin…”

He left the sentence hanging and Aleska sheathed her knife with a nod.

“So, this was Leliana’s ‘special mission’?”

He threw a cloth hood, dyed to the same shade of blue, onto her desk.

“After everything that’s happened recently, she wanted me to find out just how vulnerable Skyhold would be to a determined assailant.” He crouched down and gently disengaged Fen from his shoulders, looking up at Aleska with a mischievous grin. “And I may have had a bet with certain persons that I could climb to your chambers without being noticed. Guards don’t look up as often as they should.”

Aleska shook her head with a laugh. “I shouldn’t be surprised, not after you told me about your chimney climbing exploits with Bann Feargall’s daughter. Though you should know the drop had you failed… would have resulted in a funeral over a congratulatory round of drinks.”

Anselm chuckled deep in his throat. Getting to his feet he took her face in his hands and kissed her slowly. She leaned against him, running her hands up his arms; they felt like warm rock under her fingers after the exertion of the climb. He rested his forehead against hers with a long, contented, sigh then suddenly laughed again.

“I forgot to tell you that Bann Feargall caught me the first time.” He said, running his fingers along her cheek with a wicked smile. “I had to think fast and pretend to be a chimney sweep from Amaranthine. I spent the entire day tawkin’ loike vis.”

Aleska stepped back, swatting his chin playfully. “Oh really? And is that how Amaranthine chimney sweeps talk?”

Anselm shrugged and kissed her again. “I have no idea; fortunately, neither did Bann Feargall, although I did have to clean the chimney in the Great Hall before he completely believed me.”

“So, we can add chimney-sweep to your list of skills?” Aleska asked, crossing over to the table to pour them both a drink. Fen toddled after her, whimpering for attention. She looked down at the puppy with a shake of her head. “You do know he won’t go to sleep again for ages?”

Anselm reached into his pocket and pulled out a shiny red leather ball which he threw into a corner. Fen chased after it and began attacking it with happy growls.

“That might distract him and stop him from trying to steal Cuddle’s ball; although there are few things funnier than a paranoid Mabari.” He took the glass of wine that Aleska offered. “And I wouldn’t be too quick to employ me as a sweep. The chimney breast in the Great Hall caught fire a week later.”
“So, you’re not flawless after all?” Aleksa smirked, taking a sip of wine. “I’m relieved to hear that.”

Anselm sighed heavily, “I’m far from flawless, as I think I’ve proved recently.” He unhooked the satchel from his back and placed it on her desk. “It’s given me a lot to think about.”

Aleska took his hand, feeling a sudden clench of anxiety. “Anselm, it was a joke. I didn’t mean anything.”

He nodded, lifting her hand to his lips, and kissing her fingers. “I know; but I also know I failed you in Kirkwall, badly, and there’s only one way I can think to try and make it up to you, and show you how much you mean to me.”

Aleska shook her head as he let go of her hand and slid a flat, worn, velvet-covered case out of his satchel. “You’ve proven yourself repeatedly. There’s nothing you need to do.”

Anselm placed the case on her desk and unlocked it. “I wanted to give you this at Halamshiral, after the ball, but then Kirkwall happened and…” He paused, resting his hands on the case for a second before taking a deep breath and opening it. “I don’t know if there’s ever going to be a perfect place of time for me to give you this, but I want you to have it with all my heart.”

Aleska was unable to find words, almost unable to breathe, as she looked down at the necklace; the rubies in their diamond and emerald settings bright against the faded black velvet lining of the case. If everything Clan Lavellan possessed was converted into coin it wouldn’t be worth a fraction of this, but it wasn’t the material value that dried her throat. This wasn’t some expensive bauble from a Val Royeaux jeweller; it carried meaning and that frightened her.

“My mother left it to me.” Anselm said, his voice quiet in the half-dark. “She wore it at her wedding, as did my grandmother, and her mother before her. She left me a message as well, that I was to give it to the woman I loved.”

“Aleska…” Aleska forced out, the words catching in her throat. “It… it’s beautiful, but… but I can’t…”

Anselm shrugged slightly, toying at the clasps of his tunic with the fingers of his left hand while his right scratched at the side of his neck.

“It probably doesn’t have the happiest history. My grandmother was forced into marriage with Francis Pentaghast, after Nevarra conquered Hasmal, and as for my mother…” He glanced across at Aleska with a faint, sad, smile. “She found cholera preferable to my father; I can’t say I disagree with her.”

Aleska walked over to him; taking his hands in hers and holding them tightly.

“It’s not about that, or about what it’s worth or anything like that…” She looked up at him, still holding his hands tightly and searching for the right words. “This… this isn’t like some Satinalia or Ardent Day gift. I’m afraid of what it implies, for both of us, if I accept it.”

Anselm rested his forehead against hers, sighing heavily.

“I heard the same whispers you did at the Winter Palace. Everyone wondering when I was going to tire of my latest obsession and find a new mistress, or if I’m just waiting for my Uncle to find the right compliant princess to dangle in front of my nose. I know you wonder the same sometimes and I can’t blame you. I don’t have a reputation for making smart decisions.”
Aleska nodded, swallowing hard.

“You’re right. I do wonder at times; you’ve changed so much since we first met but I can’t help asking myself if this is still one of your games. If, someday, you’ll wake up and realise you’re bored of me. I can’t help it; no matter how many titles they throw at me, at the end of the day I’m still just a Dalish elf. A common savage in the eyes of most, though they are too terrified to say it to my face.”

Anselm gently took her chin and raised her face so he could kiss her, slow and deep. As their lips parted, he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close.

“You’ll never be ‘just’ anything to me.” He said softly, his breath warm against the side of her face. “It was a game for me once, but not now; not now that I know your fire, your passion, the way you seize life by the throat and make it yours. I’ve never met a woman like you before and there’s no other woman I want in my life. I know you doubt me, and I’ve given you plenty of reason, but I can’t think of any other way to show you how much you mean to me. Even if you cannot accept the necklace, can you at least accept that I want to spend the rest of my life with you?”

Aleska rested her head against his shoulder and inhaled slowly. The musky tang of his sweat, still fresh from the climb, was intoxicating. She ran her hand along his arm and took hold of his hand.

“If I accept, there will be consequences. I am not talking about a mild reprimand, or some scorn for a few years and then all will be well. I am talking about your uncle disowning you. I don’t even think Sophia could talk him out of such a—”

“Damn the consequences.” He murmured, burying his face in her hair. “It’s mine to give, and I want you to have it.”

“It was meant for royalty—” Aleska began, her voice a whisper, but Anselm placed a finger to her lips.

“It was meant for the woman I love, and you are greater than any royalty in this world. You are Ghi’lan ‘ma vhen’an… the guide of my heart.”

“And you are the rogue who stole mine.” She smiled, taking his finger, and kissing the tip. She looked up at him with surprise in her eyes. “Wait. I never taught you that phrase.”

He traced his finger slowly around her mouth, causing her to shudder with the lightness of his touch.

“I’ve been taking some lessons from Charter.” He admitted. “I wanted it to be a surprise.”

Aleska pressed herself closer to him.

“You know I hate surprises; I’m going to have to punish you for that.”

Anselm ran the tip of his tongue along his upper lip, hungry desire burning in his eyes.

“And what do you intend my punishment to be, My Lady?” He asked, his voice deep and hoarse.

Aleska drew his head down and whispered in his ear.

“Jupalan ma sule tel mar sul’edin.”
“That may take some time, My Lady.” Anselm’s lips traced along her cheek and down her neck, his tongue flickering against her skin. “I hope Josephine hasn’t scheduled any early morning appointments.”

Something knocked against Aleska’s foot. She looked down and laughed to see the red leather ball, and Fen gazing up at them expectantly.

“That’s your fault for getting him a new toy.” She said, kissing him on the cheek and disengaging herself from his arms. “Your punishment will have to wait until he’s asleep again.”

“Now that is true torture.” Anselm chuckled, crouching down and picking up the ball. “Come on boy; let’s exhaust you so Aleska can do the same to me!”

Aleska turned to look at the necklace again, still laughing as Fen jumped up to try and snatch the ball from Anselm’s hands.

“This is uniquely beautiful, Anselm, thank you. I will keep it safe.”

“It was made to be worn.” He reminded her, keeping the ball just out of Fen’s reach as the puppy raced around him, growling happily. “And it’s been hidden away for far too long. Some treasures shouldn’t be kept secret.”

“You’re right, they shouldn’t.” She lifted the necklace carefully from its case, feeling the weight. “I need to think about the right occasion to wear it.”

“How about tonight?” He gave her a sly, sidelong glance. “The thought of you in nothing but candlelight and rubies is rather enticing. It would give an extra edge to my punishment.”

“Anselm, that’s…” Aleska exclaimed in shock, then shook her head with an exasperated sigh. “You really are a rascal, what am I going to do with you?”

“Hopefully, what you suggested earlier.” Anselm laughed. “Once I’ve got this fuzzy little monster to sleep!”

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Cullen flexed his hand slowly, spreading his fingers wide before carefully balling them into a fist. A few twinges still shot up his forearm, but the healers had done a good job. There was still some tenderness, but he would be fit for combat before the end of the week. A couple of sessions in the sparring ring would easily confirm that. He disliked resorting to healing magic, but Leliana’s reports suggested they were close to pinpointing the location of Samson’s base of operations. He had no intention of remaining on the side lines for that operation.

He put down his pen and rubbed his hands together, trying to restore some circulation. Despite the fire that had been burning all day, he felt cold and that indicated he could expect a spike in his withdrawal symptoms over the next couple of days. He picked up his pen and made a brief note to have Knight-Captain Sidony oversee tomorrow’s training sessions. It was annoying that Rylen was still handling mopping-up operations in the Western Approach, he missed the presence of his most reliable subordinate, but he’d promised Cassandra and Aleska that he wouldn’t over-exert himself during the difficult patches, and now he also had pressing personal reasons to avoid another breakdown.

Cullen recognised the knock immediately. He’d been anticipating and dreading it all evening; he took a deep breath to steady his nerves before crossing over to the door and opening it.
“Lady Sophia. Please, come in.” He closed the door behind her and removed a pile of books from the armchair. “May I offer you some tea?”

Sophia shook her head as she sat down and smoothed out the creases in her skirts.

“I doubt I’ll sleep if I drink any more tea, but if you have any of that Gwaren port left I’ll happily take a glass of that. The doctors have graciously permitted me one glass a day to fortify my liver.”

Cullen hesitated for a moment longer that he realised, then noticed Sophia looking questioningly at him and snapped himself out of his daze.

“Of course.” he said, taking the bottle down from the top shelf of the bookcase beside his desk and wiping the dust off it. He set it down and took out two glasses; feeling his heart pound within his chest and a sour ball of anxiety coagulating in his stomach. His hand shook as he poured the wine and the lip of the bottle rattled against the edge of the glass. Catching Sophia’s concerned glance he gave the slightest nod of his head.

“The next few days may be difficult.” He said, handing her the wine. “I’ve asked someone to take over most of my routine duties until the worst has passed.”

“The past weeks haven’t been easy ones.” Sophia cradled the glass in her hands as Cullen cleared the other chair and sat down. “Being back at Skyhold, it’s all starting to feel like a fever-dream.”

Cullen took a sip of the port; feeling it warm and fruity on his tongue. He fought the urge to swallow the entire glass in a single gulp. Alcohol dulled the edge of withdrawal, it was true, but that risked him replacing one addiction with another and he’d had more than enough drink forced on him by well-wishers since his return.

“I only wish it were.” He muttered. “Then we could let it dissolve with the morning sun.”

Sophia looked down at the heavy silverite ring on her left thumb. The red enamel inlay of the Templar insignia it bore was almost worn away.

“I knew what I was giving up when I went to the Circle. When my magic manifested, father engaged the most discreet and talented mages he could find to teach me how to conceal and control it. No-one ever needed to know. I could have played the game the way he wanted it, married Seamus Dumar to unite Ostwick and Kirkwall and created a kingdom to rival Nevarra.” She sighed and took a sip of her wine. “Poor Seamus, he had a generous soul and a gentle heart. I think we could have been happy together.”

“What…” Cullen cleared his throat and took another sip of wine. “What changed?”

“I woke up one morning and realised there was so much more that I could do with my life; that playing the Game and wearing a crown wasn’t what I was meant for. I think that’s something you can understand.”

“Blessed are the peacekeepers, champions of the just…” Cullen exhaled slowly. “Every time I heard that verse, I would imagine the knights in silverite and purple who flanked the priest while she raised the holy censer. I’d think about the dedication it took to stand so close to the Mysteries, defending the innocent and upholding the Maker’s will. Now… I sometimes wonder if I just knew there was more to life than being a farmer in the Hinterlands and wanted to have a taste of it. If my dedication was… impure.”

Sophia shook her head, blinking away tears.
“We both gave up more than we knew; a normal life, home, a family…” Her hand strayed, unconsciously, to her stomach. “I cared deeply about Seamus and Guenther and both were murdered by fanatics, I’ve lost too many people I love; I can’t put myself through that again—"

“I… I think I understand.” Cullen said, a dull sense of resignation numbing the sick notes of anxiety. Sophia got up and came to stand beside him.”

“No, I don’t think you do. I’m saying yes.” She rested her hand on his shoulder and he looked up at her, his eyes beginning to sting. “We can’t change what happened and it won’t be an easy task to rebuild things to the way they were, but I care for you enough to want to make that journey with you; and I want our child to know what it means to be a Rutherford as well as a Trevelyan.”

“Soph…” Cullen began but his voice choked off, his mind barely able to process what his ears heard. Sophia knelt beside him, her skirts rustling on the stone floor, and took his hands in hers.

“I still love you Cullen, and I know you still love me; but we need to remember this isn’t a solution, we’re making a promise that neither of us will let anything or anyone come between us again.”

Cullen swallowed hard and nodded, squeezing her hands gently and letting them go.

“I will never fail you again, My Lady, you have my solemn oath.”

He stood, helping Sophia to her feet and brushing a few crumbs of straw and sawdust from her skirts.

“I should let you rest.” She said, picking up her glass and draining it. “Once you feel better, we should speak to Mother Giselle and make arrangements. Mia will be here in the next day or so.”

“Are you sure you want to do it soon?” He asked and saw how her eyes flickered towards the battle plans on his desk. “Of course, I understand.”

She gave him a resigned smile but, for the first time in days, he saw a glimmer of happiness in her eyes.

“Remember to take the decoction of Elfroot before you go bed.” She said, picking up her gloves. “And I think we should wait until we’ve spoken to Giselle before announcing anything. I don’t think either of us could cope with any more congratulations right now.”

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