We're Not Broken; Just Bent
by sootsprites

Summary

"Too many secrets can poison a well."
"What?"
"Something my mother used to say."
"Our mothers were very different."

Setting up an Inquisition would be twice as easy if the Herald of Andraste would let someone, anyone, refer to her that way. But Hestia Trevelyan is a rebel mage first, a sister second, and prophet a distant third. If she's going to save the world as they know it, she'll first have to learn to trust the ones around her. And it's been a long long time since Hestia has trusted a templar.

Cullen wants two things, a new life away from his past and for the Inquisition to succeed. Those are already difficult tasks without The Herald of Andraste getting in his face, reminding him of all the mistakes he'd made. Hestia Trevelyan is a good liar and even better rebel, and Cullen wishes she would give him a break, or at least a chance to get her out of his mind.

The world may be ending, but the story is just beginning. They'll have to find a way to work together, or die trying
When they dragged the woman from the rift, Cullen thought she was dead. Maybe she wasn’t like the charred and twisted bodies that littered the battlefield or the soldiers they had lost in the intervening days, but he’d not expected her to survive.

But somehow she had. They’d brought the unconscious woman to the chantry, put her in the dungeon and let the apostate elf Solas look at her. Her wounds were superficial, just bumps and bruises compared to the wounded being treated on the floor above. That she breathed at all was something close to a miracle.

To Solas, the most interesting thing about the prisoner was the mark that took up much of her left hand. The Breach and the mark were connected, that much was certain. How it had happened was anybody’s guess. Each time the Breach expanded, so did the mark. The only way Cullen knew she’d survived was her screaming each time the thing expanded.

His body ached from the protracted onslaught, his skin tight on his bones, his face covered in soot and dirt and blood. On the trudge back to Haven Cullen passed Rylen and he reached out to grab the man by the shoulder.

“If there’s anyone in Haven who can relieve the soldiers, we need them up here now.” Cullen tore his gloves off and wiped a hand across his dirty face. Rylen didn’t look much better; he had blood dripping from his nose and one eye was swollen shut. “We’ll need archers to flank to the left and…and…”

Rylen checked over his shoulder at the fighters staggering back from the edge of the valley. A few carried stretchers, still more were injured and coming up the path as best they could, and already the chantry sisters were starting to administer to the wounded.

“Knight Captain, when did you last sleep?” Rylen led Cullen over to the rudimentary wash basin someone had set at the edge of the bridge. He pressed a damp cloth into Cullen’s hand.

Cullen glared. “Rylen, that’s not my title, or yours.”

Rylen nodded. “Right, ser. Sorry, ser.” There was a moment of quiet, the first Cullen had heard all day. Rylen finally said, “The Right Hand was looking for you.”

Cullen turned to survey the valley again. His eyes stung at the smoke from the still smoldering trees. The crackling of the magic over his skin. The sky split in two. Maker, watch over us all.

“Yes, I’ll see Cassandra directly.”

“Commander?” Rylen raised his eyebrows and nodded to the washcloth. “Maybe have a wash first?”

Cullen wanted to protest, but after a day and night spent keeping demons at bay and fighting in ash and blood and viscera, he had to concede that his second in command probably had a point. He trudged off, washcloth in hand, wiping his face and neck as he went. He’d have to exchange this armor with some clothes that didn’t smell like smoke and pain and death.

Cullen stopped for a moment inside the gates, staring at the faces that passes him. Drawn faces of lay sisters in the chantry, panicked faces of the soldiers heading out, exhausted faces of the volunteers trooping back from the valley. Crying faces of young men and women too overwhelmed by the circumstances to bring themselves to do anything else. He realized he’d been looking,
unseeing, at a chanty mother reciting from Transfigurations. The hem of her robes was stained with mud and blood.

Maker hear my cry

Guide me through the blackest nights

Steel my heart against the temptations of the wicked.

He wiped the tears from his eyes and continued on.

The woman from the rift wasn’t dead, but after three days she still hadn’t woken up. Cullen had no idea where the rumor that she’d been saved by Andraste came from, but it made about as much sense as the idea that she was responsible for the explosion.

There was clearly a connection, though. The mark on her hand was a small echo of the breach and each time the breach expanded so did the mark. Cassandra was determined to get answers from her, but the elven apostate that had volunteered his services insisted that until the prisoner woke up on her own, there was nothing to be done.

Cullen was directing men in the valley when it all changed. There was shouting from the fields behind him and then Sister Leliana was there, grasping his arm.

“We need everyone moving towards the rift.” The Left Hand told him, and he could see her archers moving past them, dodging through rubble to reinforce the soldiers. “The prisoner has awoken, and Solas thinks she is the key to closing the Breach.”

Cullen felt his jaw drop. “Just Like that? And Cassandra let him do this?”

“Cassandra is escorting her there.”

“Leliana, if the prisoner is responsible-”

“She volunteered.”

Every word was like another blow to the head. The prisoner awake? Helping Cassandra willingly? The last time he’d seen her the prisoner had been a shivering woman on a dungeon floor. What had changed?

Cullen tried to think tactically, to clear his head of the exhaustion. “Alright, if the Right Hand vouches for her, I can go along with it for now.”

Leliana took the time to raise an eyebrow at him. “I’m sure that will make Cassandra’s day.”

Cullen grimaced and called Rylen to his side, and started issuing orders for the final push.
Her name was Hestia Trevelyan. And while they had barely exchanged words before she lost consciousness again, Leliana still seemed to know everything about her.

Cullen stared at the spread of papers in front of him before casting a baffled gaze up at the Left Hand. “You gathered all this information in two days?”

Leliana’s eyes glimmered. “Our agents were very successful.”

“But?” Cassandra leaned over Cullen’s shoulder, her dark eyes flitting over the documents, committing them to memory.

Leliana’s lips thinned. “There are gaps in her history that are… troubling.”

“Troubling how?” Cassandra asked. “We don’t need any more surprises Leliana.”

Cullen studied the documents with new eyes.

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**Hestia Trevelyan**

*Born 9:10 Dragon (Age 30)*

*Only daughter of Amelia Trevelyan and Gregoir Valrois*

*Second of three children*

*Sent to the Ostwick Circle 9:25 Dragon (Age 15)*

*Oldest Brother: Bartholomew Trevelyan, born 9:06 Dragon, (Age 34) currently in exile, Scribe to the Ferelden Crown, living in Denerim with wife Marissa Trevelyan nee Longborn (Age 29), and daughter Eloise (Age 3)*

*Younger Brother: August Trevelyan, born 9:18 Dragon, contracted blight sickness on trip to Amaranthine, deceased 9:30 Dragon*


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Her reports were varied. Her teachers in the Circle noted her talent in every basic school of magic, unusual for a mage with later developed magic; often those mages had troubles with the strength of their magic into adulthood. They also noted her insistent protection of her two young cousins who had entered the Ostwick Circle at the same time. Also of note is the fact that the three girls were the first of the Trevelyan noble line of Ostwick to enter the Circle; the family had been apparently without magic before the current generation. That the three girls had been allowed to stay in the same circle was noted especially by Cullen; it wasn’t the Orders policy to let family members stay together.

Leliana’s little birds had turned up rumors that Templars in Ostwick had been well paid by the Trevelyan family. Cassandra had scowled hard enough to light the torches.

Hestia’s education had been uneventful and she’d passed her Harrowing with no noted issues. But here the problems rose again. Her protective role over her younger cousins had caused several clashes with templars and enchanter alike, and only after both cousins passed their own
Harrowings did the incidents stop.

Leliana had somehow turned up notes that Hestia Trevelyan had written to the Grand Enchanter, apparently begging him to reconsider using the rite of tranquility on her youngest cousin Seraphina. There appeared to be teardrops on the page.

The Ostwick circle was reported to be sedate and it still maintained neutrality in the ongoing Mage and Templar War. But these documents painted a different picture. There was apparently enough discontent to lead to violence three years ago. Several mages were killed, as well as a number of Templars stationed in the circle.

And during the violence, Hestia Trevelyan and her cousins had fled the circle.

One of the Trevelyan girls, Elayna, had returned to her family in Ostwick. From what Leliana had uncovered, she remained there still; using her talents as a spirit healer to help soldiers and refugees wounded in the fighting.

Hestia and Seraphina had disappeared.

Cullen squinted at the page in his hands. “She entered the Ostwick Circle at fifteen? That’s on the late side for mages."

Lady Josephine Montilyet, the newest addition to their heretical little band, picked up another document in her manicured hands. “Perhaps she was a late bloomer? It’s not unheard of.”

“Yes, but in combination with some of these other reports…” Leliana sat down sharply, glaring at the papers as though she could burn a hole through the table. “Hopefully when she wakes, she can answer some of these questions. If not her, then somebody will.”

“And what questions would those be, exactly?” The door slammed open and Chancellor Roderick stormed in, puffed up in petulant anger.

“We will need to verify her past if we-” Josephine began, but a look from Leliana cut her words short.

Cullen could see Cassandra was already building up a head of steam, and he’d already been scolded for picking fights with the Chancellor once today, so he chose to make a quick retreat. A glance back saw that Josephine was hot on his heels.

He stopped just outside the Chantry doors, blinking in the frozen sunlight. The air was cold but bracing, just the thing he needed to fight off the headache building behind his eyes. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath in, clearing his mind of the pain and the ache that had been seeping into his bones since his trip across the Waking Sea.

This is the right choice. He told himself over and over in the night when the shaking kept him awake. This is the right choice.

This is the only choice.

“Excuse me, ser?”

Cullen started, his eyes snapping open. Before him stood a woman with blonde hair and a pale face covered in freckles. She peered at him curiously, and he took in the staff strapped to her back and the twisting of her hands. Was she a circle mage come to offer her services?
“I was told that Seeker Cassandra wanted to speak to me,” the mage said, tucking her hands behind her back and raising her chin to look him in the eye. “Could you tell me where she is?”

Cullen glanced back at the Chantry doors. “She’s in the middle of an argument right now, I’m sure she’d appreciate the reprieve.”

“Or her victim will, more likely.” the woman said. She had a scar cut through one eyebrow and another across one cheek.

He snickered and the mage gave him a half smile and did something pretty to her mouth. It puckered another scar that cut through her top lip. Had she been hunted by templars or ferelden villagers or the like?

“Is she in the Chantry?” The mage asked.

“Yes.” He nodded, stepping aside and holding the door open for her. A moment later, he wondered why. “At the back, past the door.”

“Thank you very much.” She flashed him a sunny smile and made to move past him, and he caught a whiff of some floral perfume that he couldn’t place.

Cullen blinked, his head clearing enough to remember something important. “Wait.”

The mage stopped, turned to look at him. Her blond hair curled just below her chin and the cold wind blew it back behind her shoulders. With the sun full on her face, Cullen realized that she wasn’t thin but gaunt, with dark circles under her eyes and cheeks hollowed from hard travel and little food. But she held herself straight and tall, no shaking or slumping of shoulders. She stood there, waiting.

“Any mages wishing to help have to be approved by myself or Seeker Cassandra before being allowed to move through the camp unchecked,” he told her.

She blinked, and her eyes flicked up and down. Cullen fought the urge to straighten. He got the distinct feeling that she was assessing him.

After a moment, she nodded. “Good to know,” she said, before turning on her heel and walking away.

Her hands, tucked behind her back, suddenly showed a strange green light. She tensed and shook out the left hand, which had begun to flare and sputter with a familiar radiance.

Well, shit. Cullen thought, watching her go. That’s the Herald of Andraste.
Once Cassandra had gotten Hestia to agree, everything seemed to move very fast. Letters were sent, people were assembled, signs were hammered to chantry doors. Soldiers started showing up and training on the shore, tents were lining up in neat rows, a smithee was quickly organized and soon there were hammers clanging against forged iron day and night. Just as the Right and Left Hands had decreed, the Inquisition of old was reborn.

Not that anybody really knew what that meant.

Hestia tried to skirt around the people in charge as best she could, but wasn’t always successful. Cassandra kept trying to have armor made for her and Hestia kept on telling her that what the Inquisition soldiers wore was good enough for her too. Still, Hestia woke one morning to find a padded vest and a pair of heavy boots waiting next to the door. Hestia shoved the vest under her bed for the mice to get at, but she kept the boots. It was cold up in the mountains and she was far far away from the seaside in Ostwick now.

She thought it would be easier if she knew exactly where she stood in the Inquisition. And the more people arrived at Haven, the more uncomfortable it became. Flissa jumped each time Hestia tried to speak to her, every other chantry sister was calling her ‘your worship’ and the few templars who had joined their ranks eyed her with open hostility. Getting a drink in the tavern was quickly turning into a proper minefield.

It was… frustrating to say the least. At least when she was with the free mages, Hestia knew which side she was on, knew what was expected of her. Anyone in a helmet was a danger; anyone in a robe was an ally. Here, she hadn’t a clue. The Inquisition needed her, or they at least needed the mark that was attached to her, but nobody seemed to quite know what to do with her now she was here. She was a piece of furniture left over from the last owner of a house, useful to have around but it definitely didn’t fit in with the other chairs at the dining table.

Hestia caught herself flinching when a soldier walked by, checking over her shoulder for a staff that had been lost to her; her heart would race when she couldn’t see a familiar blond head before remembering that he was somewhere in Redcliffe. She walked alone through Haven, and the lack of familiar footfalls muffled by old boots or friendly bickering or the tug on her hand from a child was something she couldn’t stop noticing. Solitude had never been Hestia’s friend.

Thankfully, Cassandra had the issue handled, in her own bullheaded way. “Where is the armor I had commissioned for you?” Cassandra demanded that afternoon, when Hestia came out of Adan’s hut with an armful of healing poultices ready for the chantry sisters.

“I don’t know, maybe those mabari statues came to life and ate it.” Hestia smiled at Cassandra and continued to the Chantry, trying her best to ignore the waves of indignation rolling of the seeker.

“Why do you have to make this so difficult?” Cassandra said, stomping after her.

“I’m not sure which difficulty you’re referring to Seeker.” Hestia smiled over her shoulder, but her usual charm and wit was defeated by the cloud of foul stubbornness that followed Cassandra wherever she went.
Cassandra made a disgusted noise and threw up her hands, making some kind of pleading face at Leliana when they stepped past her into the tent that had become the perch of Lady Nightingale and her agents.

“Maybe you can convince her.” Cassandra groused to Leliana.

Hestia rolled her eyes and placed her poultices on one of Leliana’s wooden tables.

“What seems to be the trouble?” Leliana hummed, her quick eyes skimming over documents strewn across her desk and faces that passed by towards the quartermaster or the chantry.

“The Herald objects to my giving her armor to wear in the event, the very likely event, that we are attacked again.” Cassandra snapped, crossing her arms.

“That’s definitely an oversimplification.” Hestia said, leaning against the wooden pole that was the only real support in this tent, crossing one ankle over the other.

“Then why don’t you explain it to us.” Leliana’s voice was mild, her eyes flitting over the notes and reports in front of her, looking to the casual observer as though she barely cared. The casual observer would be wrong. So very, very wrong.

Hestia took a breath, steeling herself for the scrutiny of both The Left and Right Hands of the Divine. After only seven days spent with them, Hestia was sure that the sheer force of willpower both of these women possessed could topple nations. She almost felt sorry for the rest of Thedas; they had no idea what was about to come crashing down on them. “If I’m a soldier of the Inquisition, then I should look like a soldier of the Inquisition.” Hestia told them, forcing her hands to keep still. “I’m uncomfortable with the impression that the higher ups are giving me special treatment.”

“But you’re not just a soldier Hestia.” Leliana turned to them now, pinning Hestia with that piercing gaze. “That is not your place here.”

Hestia raised an eyebrow. “That would be easier to believe if anyone could figure out what my place here actually is.”

Cassandra and Leliana exchanged a look. “There was to be… a discussion at the meeting this afternoon.” Cassandra said, gentler now than she’d been in days. “We will need to decide our next move.”

Hestia shrugged nonchalantly, though her insides squirmed. She fitted her hands into her pockets, the picture of ease. “Well, you let me know when you need a rift closed. That’s what I’m for, right?”

Hestia wasn’t even sure she meant it, but Cassandra didn’t know that. Her eyes blazed and her hands instantly curled into fists, already poised to attack a perceived threat. “That is not true,” she said emphatically. “Nobody here thinks of you as a tool, nor will they treat you that way. If they say otherwise-”

“Relax Cassandra.” Hestia laughed, reaching out to calm the warrior. “Please.”

“Getting back to the subject of the armor,” Leliana said, turning to pick up another document. “What type would be satisfactory to you Herald?”

“Hestia, please Sister Nightingale. I would not insult the name my parents gave me by trading it in for a title I haven’t earned.” Hestia told her. Cassandra seemed content to settle her anger without
help, so Hestia smiled and continued, “And I can’t exactly go afield in a Circle robe. It’ll get torn in the first briar patch I inevitably stumble into.”

“Perhaps something more stealthy?” Leliana suggested, her tone nonchalant. “You have been smuggling weapons and lyrium to the rebel mages for quite some time now.”

Hestia took a breath to cover her shock, trying to stop that shiver that ran over her. The woman was like a ghost. “I have.” She said carefully, keeping her voice even. “It would certainly be easier to move around in.”

“Very well.” Leliana said, matching the careful tone. “Then the matter is settled. Cassandra, would you alert Commander Cullen and Lady Josephine that the Herald will be joining us for the meeting this afternoon?”

Cassandra nodded and strode off. Hestia wasn’t sure if people scattered from her path because of her scowling face or the sheer force of her charisma. If she were honest, it could be both. Hestia lingered, not sure what she could say. Around Sister Nightingale, people walked on tenterhooks. Cassandra may be a force of nature but everyone could see that the Left Hand was infinitely more dangerous. But Hestia Trevelyan hadn’t ever been known for her restraint.

“So,” she began casually, moving over next to Leliana, leaning against the table just a shade closer than was polite. “Do you investigate all the women who fall out of fade rifts, or am I special?”

Leliana snorted, not even glancing at her. “Was the flirting how you supplied lyrium to rebel mages at less than the usual carta price?”

Hestia flashed a smile that went entirely ignored. “It certainly didn’t hurt.”

Now Leliana did turn to look at her with those sharp blue eyes, seeking the cracks in Hestia’s composure. It was utterly unnerving how still the Nightingale could become when she wanted to be. Not twitching, not moving; she didn’t even seem to be breathing. Leliana stood there, just... waiting.

Hestia broke, looking down and running a hand through her mop of blonde hair. “I wasn’t the one who got the discount, Ben had… the people I was working with had a relationship with the carta in Markham before I joined them. I mostly kept the cargo secure and patched people up if we got hurt or attacked on the roads.”

Leliana’s eyes flickered over Hestia’s features, searching for the lie. Hestia flattered herself that, when it came to lying, she was a talented amateur, but Sister Nightingale had become a professional twenty years ago. After a moment she nodded, apparently satisfied.

“There are some parts of your personal history my agents have yet to uncover,” she said, turning her back to Hestia and reaching for sheaf of blank parchment. “I was hoping you could help me fill in the blanks.”

Hestia blinked. That was quick. “I’m rather surprised that you have blanks at all.”

“It’s not something I relish, I assure you.” Leliana said, her smile humorless. “Do you have time now?”

Hestia crossed her arms, bit the inside of her lip. After a moment of consideration, she said, “Why should I tell you?”

“It’s in your best interest to.” Leliana said at once. “If I know your secrets now, it can help identify
potential problems down the road. Better it comes from you now then from a carta dwarf you’ve ripped off or some templar with a grudge.”

“Or someone from the Trevelyian line trying to score political points.” Hestia said archly.

“That too.”

Hestia mulled it over. “Some of those stories make me and mine look less than virtuous.” She said slowly. “If I tell you, you could turn around and sell them down the river.”

Leliana arched an eyebrow. “Are you so distrustful of the people who saved your life?”

“My life is one thing.” Hestia said, raising her chin. “Gambling the lives of those I love is something else altogether. If telling you these things puts them in danger, then I’d just as soon keep my own counsel.”

It was quiet in the tent. Distantly, Hestia could hear a Chantry sister administering the chant to someone, could hear the dwarf merchant arguing with Threnn over the price of ore, could even faintly hear soldiers clashing their swords together.

“If you tell the truth, I will do my best to look after your people.” Leliana stopped shuffling her papers and looked at her again, her gaze steady and disarming. “But only if you tell the truth.”

Hestia bit her lip. Years of instinct was screaming at her to deny, deflect, run in the other direction, do anything but have this conversation with Lady Nightingale. *Secrets keep us safe.* She had heard that every day for fifteen years. And yet…

*Secrets keep us safe.*

What was an Inquisition? When she’d left the Free Marches, Hestia had longed for a new life, a second chance. A second chance.

“Alright.” She said finally, leaning her hip against the table. “I can’t promise everything; some of these secrets aren’t mine to share. But I’ll tell you what I know.”

After the brutal and emotional conversation that followed, Hestia wasn’t even sure she was prepared to enter a meeting with the Inquisition leaders. But she’d fought to be there, so she’d show up and have a hand in deciding her own fate. It happened so rarely to her, Hestia felt out of step as she and Cassandra walked through the chantry.

Her mark flared and sputtered, and Cassandra looked concerned when Hestia sucked in a breathe through her teeth. “Does it trouble you?” Cassandra asked, nodding to the mark.

Hestia held up her hand, the dingy green glow evident even through her gloves. “I just wish I knew what it was,” She said, trying for nonchalance.

Cassandra shrugged, just as clueless as the rest of the camp. “What matters now is the mark is now stable, as is the Breach. And Solas believes a second attempt can be successful, provided we have enough power. The same amount of power it took to cause the Breach in the first place.”
Hestia looked at the warrior skeptically. “Is that really the plan? Turning me into a human conduit for huge amounts of magical energy?”

Cassandra returned the look. She was better at it. “You have a better idea?”

“Well… no. But I’ve only been at the task thirty seconds.” Hestia flashed Cassandra a grin.

“Hold on to that sense of humor.” Cassandra chuckled, pushing the door open and leading them both inside.

What had once been the Chantry Mothers office and sleeping chambers had been converted to a makeshift war room, with a map of Orlais and Ferelden spread across a solid wooden table. Already strewn across the table were little metal map markers, although what the markers signified Hestia hadn’t the faintest idea. More of Leliana’s papers were stacked at the edges of the table and on the bookshelves that lined the walls.

Hestia recognized the handsome soldier in the red and silver armor she’d met a few days ago before Cassandra had opened her mouth. “May I present Commander Cullen, leader of the Inquisitions forces.” She said, and Commander Cullen inclined his head in greeting to them both.

“Such as they are.” He responded, although his eyes never left Hestia’s face. “We lost many soldiers in the valley, and I fear many more before this is through.”

Hestia fought the urge to blush or curtsey, but Cassandra saved her from making any small talk by moving swiftly on with the introductions. “This is Lady Josephine Montilyet, our ambassador and chief diplomat.” She said next, and a lovely antivan woman in blue and gold stepped forward and smiled warmly.

“I’ve heard much. it’s a pleasure to meet you at last.” Josephine Montilyet said in a lilting accent that immediately sounded familiar. Hestia put that away for later, as Cassandra was already moving on.

“And of course you know Sister Leliana.”


Hestia waited, but Cassandra settled her hands on the table, apparently satisfied. Hestia waffled on what to say for a moment before awkwardly settling on, “That’s an impressive bunch of titles.”

Cassandra nodded at that and began again, although Leliana looked to be suppressing a smile. “I mentioned that your mark needs more power to close the breach.”

“Which is why we must approach the rebel mages for help.” Leliana added.

“And I still disagree.” Commander Cullen said. “The Templars could serve just as well.”

Hestia felt her brow furrow. Cassandra sighed and placed her hands on the table. “We need power commander. Enough magic poured into that mark-”

But the commander was adamant. “It could destroy us all. Templars could suppress the Breach, weaken it so-”

“Pure speculation.” Leliana’s voice was resigned, like she’d had this argument already.

“I was a templar.” Cullen said firmly. “I know what they’re capable of.”
Hestia felt her blood run cold. Her eyes snapped to the man across the table from her, taking in the set of his shoulders and the way his hands always came back to rest on the pommel of his sword. Why hadn’t she seen it sooner? He held himself just like the Knight Commander back in the Ostwick circle.

Hestia clenched her teeth and felt a muscle flex in her jaw. *Thank your lucky stars Leliana agreed to keep your secrets, or you would already be dead by his hand.*

Nobody seemed to notice her racing thoughts, and Josephine broke in to stop what was rapidly becoming a circular argument. “Unfortunately neither group will even speak to us yet. The chantry had denounced the Inquisition- and you specifically.” She pointed her quill at Hestia.

Hestia tore her eyes away from the templar to look at Josephine Montilyet. “Well that didn’t take long.”

Her bitterness must’ve colored her words, for the templar snorted and his question was equally as derisive. “Shouldn’t they be busy arguing about who is to become the next Divine?”

Josephine ignored him. “Some are calling you -a mage- the Herald of Andraste. That frightens the chantry. The remaining clerics have declared it blasphemy, and we heretics for harboring you.”

Cassandra scowled. “Chancellor Rodericks doing, no doubt.”

“It limits our options.” Josephine conceded. “Approaching the mages or templars for help is currently out of the question.”

Hestia sighed. “I’m already sick of this Herald of Andraste nonsense. Where did that rumor even come from?”

“People saw what you did at the temple, how you stopped the breach from growing.” Cassandra said. “They have also heard about the woman that stood behind you when you fell from the rift. They believe that was Andraste.”

Leliana shifted, tucking her hands behind her back. “Even if we tried to stop that view from spreading.”

“Which we have not.” Cassandra added.

“People are desperate for a sign of hope. For some, you’re that sign.” Leliana told her, and for a moment Hestia thought she could read sympathy in the spymaster’s gaze. A moment later it was gone.

“And to others, a symbol of everything that’s gone wrong.” Josephine countered, and there was most definitely sympathy there.

Hestia bit the inside of her lip, letting the silence help her think. If she wanted to be useful here, she’d definitely have to learn to speak faster. “Well, without the templars, the chantry doesn’t have the military strength to really hurt us.”

Josephine nodded thoughtfully. “At the moment, they have only words. And yet they may bury with them.”

“Is there something we can do to fight back?” Hestia asked.

“I’m glad you asked.” Leliana said, passing a slip of paper across the table to Cassandra. “A
chantry cleric by the name of Mother Giselle has asked to speak with you. She is not far, and knows those involved far better than I. Her assistance could be invaluable.”

“Why would someone from the chantry help a declared heretic?” Hestia leaned over to read the letter over Cassandra’s shoulder.

Leliana shrugged. “I understand she’s a reasonable sort. Perhaps she doesn’t agree with her sisters.”

Cassandra stepped away when she realized Hestia was reading over her shoulder. She grunted and handed Hestia the note. While Hestia scanned it she said, “Well that’s two problems. Have you any plans for the third?”

“The third?” The templar echoed, sounding confused.

Hestia looked up from the note, flickering her eyes from him to Leliana. “If the chantry has declared us heretics, the ordinary people of Thedas will see us as villains.” She kept her tone reasonable, not wanting to offend anyone. They were intelligent people, they’d thought of this already, surely.

Leliana nodded sharply. She had. “That is also where you can help us, if you like. When you visit Mother Giselle, look for other opportunities to expand our influence.”

“Speak to people.” The templar said, “Make contacts, spread the idea that the Inquisition is here to help people and not to grab power.”

Hestia took a moment to look at him for real. The templar was handsome and clearly intelligent, with quick hazel eyes and a day or two of scruff across his face. Hopefully he would remember that she was a person and not a tool to be used. But she wasn’t going to hold her breath.

Still, she wasn’t going to stoop to childish name calling if he wasn’t. And more importantly, if he shared the opinions of his brothers, she had to be the example that proved him wrong. Oh, that thought brought a lifetime's worth of wearies down on her shoulders. Hestia was so tired of being the example that either proved a prejudice or stood against it for another day.

“I can do that.” Hestia said to the Inquisition leaders.

Chapter End Notes

As always, a big hug and thank you to Illyria_Lives for sharing your fucked up trevs with me.

I'm spookysootsprites on tumblr if you wanna shoot me a message, I love making new friends
Cullen had expected them to be gone for a few days, a week at most. After all, how long would it take a small group to speak to a chantry mother? Cassandra had consulted him on the best route to Redcliffe. It should’ve been a three days ride, four if they tried to spare the horses.

They’d been gone for almost a month.

Cassandra’s letters came in, day by day like clockwork. The herald was hunting rams so the refugees could eat. Varric was annoying her. The herald had convinced a cult into coming down from the hills and offer help. Solas was interested some strange keystones they had found. The herald had talked a mage, a nobleman, and a scout into joining the Inquisition. Cassandra had killed a bear. She sounded proud of herself.

The resources arrived as well, herbs and food and skins from dozens of animals. Barrels of cured meat donated by a hunter that Varric had befriended, bushel after bushel of elfroot, rings and necklaces taken off the bodies of dead maleficar, shields and weapons taken from dead templars. More blood lotus than anybody knew what to do with, enough embrium to cure a school full of sniffling children.

The people the herald had recruited arrived by the dozens, bringing their families and their capabilities but most importantly their willingness to help. More templars filtered in as well, with wary stares and shaking hands, Cullen tried to send them to Rylen but a good number knew him from the cleanup at Kirkwall. At least they had some veterans now. Not enough, but better two more sergeants who knew how to get a recruit to hold a longsword than none.

Corporal Vale remarked that Hestia can charm the bone from the mabari’s mouth. I don’t know if I agree with that, but I do know she needs to stay where I tell her to! Varric has started calling her Nomad, for her tendency to wander off course. A walking accident would be more accurate. A clumsier person I have never met. So far she’s sustained more injuries from tripping over her own feet than from actual combat.

Reports were coming in all the time, from everywhere. Fade rifts had been spotted all over Orlais and Ferelden, even further north into Nevarra. There were bandits on the roads, taking advantage of the chaos. Fighting had broken out between the templars and mages again, worse than before the peace talks. The worst was happening everywhere and nobody was stopping it.

And speaking of fighting…

He heard the shouting from outside Josephine’s office. The two of them exchanged a panicked look before Cullen was bolting through the chantry and out the heavy oak doors. A crowd of people, mages and templars sharply divided, with one of each camp screaming at each other.

One templar yelled across the divide, “Your kind killed the Most Holy!”

“Lies!” snarled the mage. “Your kind let her die!”

To his horror, the templar went for his blade. “Shut your mouth mage!”

No no no, this cannot be happening, Cullen thought frantically, shoving between them and pushing
both men back to arms length. From a place deep within him Cullen shouted, “Enough!”

The templar, Cullen couldn’t remember his name at the moment, stumbled back. “Knight Captain!”

Cullen’s heart was hammering, but he turned to the mages and told them emphatically, “That is not my title!” He rounded on the templars next and very nearly snarled, “We are not templars any longer! We are all part of the Inquisition!”

“And what does that mean, exactly?”

Cullen wanted to pinch the bridge of his nose. He knew that voice, and it only meant trouble. “Back again Chancellor? Haven’t you done enough?”

Chancellor Roderick stalked through the crowd, hands clasped behind his back, chin raised in defiance. “I’m curious Commander, how your Inquisition and its Herald will restore order as you’ve promised.”

Cullen tried very very hard not to roll his eyes. He might not have succeeded. “Of course you are.” He turned his face to the gathered crowd and gestured for them to go. “Back to your duties all of you.”

The mages and templars began to disperse. Some faces were relieved, some mutinous; he’d have to find some way for he and Rylen to calm the angrier templars. He couldn’t focus on that too long however, because at the back of the crowd he saw the Herald.

After a moment, she caught his eye and made her way toward them, raising one gloved hand in greeting. She’d gotten that new armor Cassandra had been talking about, white leathers and gloves with blue fabric wrapped around her waist and hips. It would certainly be easier to move around in than a typical mage’s robe.

“Your Worship.” He greeted.

“Commander.” She returned, coming to stand next to him. She flashed a smile to the Chancellor. “Chancellor Roderick.”

“Welcome back.” Cullen said, rolling right over whatever the Chancellor wanted to say. “When did your party return?”

“Just now in fact.” The herald did have that windswept and dusty look that the recent pilgrims to Haven had. “There wasn’t too much trouble, I hope?”

“No more than Sister Nightingale predicted. Mages and templars were already at war.” he told her, crossing his arms. “Now they’re blaming each other for the Divine’s death.”

“Which is why we require a proper authority to guide them back to order.” Chancellor Roderick finally cut in, looking quite red in the face.

“Who, you?” Cullen made a show of raising his eyebrows and exchanging looks with the herald. “Random clerics who weren’t important enough to be at the Conclave?”

“The rebel Inquisition and its so called Herald of Andraste?” the man scoffed, looking her up and down. “I think not.”

The herald raised her eyebrows at the scrutiny. “I don’t know,” She said pleasantly. “The
Inquisition seems about as functional as any young family.”

“How many families are on the verge of splitting into open warfare with themselves?” Chancellor Roderick demanded, unyielding against this two on one assault.

To Cullen’s surprise, she laughed. “You don’t have many relatives do you Chancellor? My brother always used to say that it wasn’t really a family gathering until your grandfather has threatened your uncle with death and three cousins are having a fistfight in the yard.”

Chancellor Roderick sneered at her tone. “Is all of this a joke to you young lady?”

Her eyes flashed, and when she spoke again, the heralds words were cold as ice. “No Chancellor. The prospect of the mage and templar war beginning anew is not something I take lightly.”

But the cleric would not be cowed. “Your organization flouting the Chantry’s authority will not help matters!” he yelled.

“The Inquisition claims only that we must close the breach or perish.” Cullen told him severely. He felt a pressure behind his eyes, the sign of a headache to come. They were always close at hand these days.

“You say that now Commander.” The Chancellor sneered. “We shall see if the sentiment remains true.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Cullen saw the herald curl her lip into a sneer. “Commander,” she said sweetly, crossing her arms now as well. “Remind me why you’re allowing the Chancellor to stay?”

“Clearly, your templar knows where to draw the line.” Chancellor Roderick said.

This time it wasn’t Cullen’s imagination, she definitely stiffened at the emphasis the chancellor chose to use. He sighed inwardly. He’d hoped what he’d saw in the last war meeting she attended had just been a trick of the light or his own paranoia about his past, but it wasn’t.

That’s something to deal with, he thought, but probably not today.

“He’s toothless,” he said now, drawing his thoughts back to the present confrontation. “There’s no point in turning him into a martyr just because he runs at the mouth.”

“I don’t mind that he runs his mouth.” The herald said, shifting her stance to speak directly to Cullen. “I just wish he’d run along.”

Cullen blinked and put a hand over his mouth to cover his snicker. It was gratifying to know other people shared your feelings, after all. He turned his head toward her, following her lead and effectively cutting the cleric out of the conversation. “The Chancellor’s a good indicator of what to expect in Val Royeaux, however.”

She raised her eyebrows. “Oh? So we’ve decided to go through with Mother Giselle’s suggestion then?”

Cullen tried not to scowl at the thought, to match her light and even tone. “We’ve discussed it at least. Lady Montilyet seems to think its a good idea. I have my doubts.”

“Well,” She said cheerfully, “Let’s hope we find solutions, and not a cathedral full of chancellors.”

Cullen did snicker openly this time. “The stuff of nightmares.”
Chancellor Roderick opened and closed his mouth several times, apparently dumbstruck by the blatant rudeness of these inquisition people. After a moment he threw up his hands and stormed away, muttering darkly. “Mock if you will,” he tossed over his shoulder, “I’m sure the Maker is less than amused.”

The Herald took a breath, probably to say something else scathing, but Cullen put a hand on her arm. “Don’t.” He said softly. “He’ll only come back and try to get the last word. We’ll die out here in the snow.”

She let out the breath and shrugged. He removed his hand, crossing his arms again. “You would know better than me, I suppose.” she told him.

She shifted a step back and he truly got to look at her. There was a warmth to her face and skin that hadn’t been there when she left. She’d lines her eyes with kohl, and now he could see that he’d been mistaken thinking her eyes were blue. They were grey and bright with knowing. Looking at her made him feel unbalanced somehow, as if she knew all his secrets without having to ask.

The herald bit her lip and looked again towards where the chancellor had retreated, her brow furrowed. “We’re probably going to get into trouble for that little show.”

“I get my dressing downs from Josephine almost daily now.” Cullen quipped.

She chuckled a bit at that. “I’ll apologize to her later. I just hate people like that.”

There was such heat in her tone that he almost fell back a step. “People like that?” he repeated softly.

Her eyes flickered back to him, and her mouth twisted in what he assumed was an apologetic manner. “People like him.” she gestured to the place Chancellor Roderick had been. “People who would rather look to an authority to fix their troubles. People who just shrug and think that ‘someone out there will fix things, so it's not really my problem.’”

Cullen felt her frustration, and he knew it well. He felt the same. “That’s why the Inquisition is here, why we’re needed.” He told her. She looked at him and he could swear there was relief in her eyes. “We can act where the Chantry cannot.”

“If only belief was enough.” The herald told him, reaching up to tuck a lock of hair behind her ear. “You’ve had your hands full here, but out in Ferelden it’s chaos.”

“I’ve seen the reports.” he said.

But she shook her head. “The reports can’t tell you everything. People are starving, dying of exposure, chased off the roads by templars and mages alike.”

His brow furrowed. “I thought the Order had been called back to Val Royeaux.”

The herald crossed her arms, and now Cullen was experiencing the full force of her glare. “It didn’t seem to matter to the templars in Ferelden. They nearly killed Cassandra. They’re attacking people on the Kings Road, and the refugees have nowhere to go.”

Perhaps she had cowed people in the past, but he’d dealt with Meredith for years. Cullen shook his head, getting frustrated. “You’re not telling me anything I haven’t been told Herald. And Cassandra seemed to think that the apostates were doing just as much damage.”

Her lip pulled back in a sneer and she flicked her eyes up and down. Cullen got that feeling again,
like she was taking his measure. A chilly wind was blowing and her blond hair cut across her face before she roughly shoved it back with a hand. “You and Cassandra seem awfully concerned with the plight of the templars, even though they’re the ones hurting people.” She snapped at him.

Now he was more than frustrated, now he was really and truly angry. “Oh yes, the templars are the ones killing their enchanter and summoning demons in the woods.”

He immediately regretted it, but there was no room to take it back. The Herald fell back a step and her hands balled into fists, color blooming in her cheeks. “So you’re just going to repeat dirty rumors, here and now?” she shouted. “Isn’t the Inquisition trying to stop the fighting?”

Cullen could hear his blood pounding in his ears, pain was beating a pulse in his temples. “The rebel mages go too far! It’s the truth even if you’d rather not hear it!”

“The templars swore an oath!” she swiped a hand through the air between them. “An oath that they abandoned! It’s the Order that has betrayed the people of Thedas, not mages!”

In the back of his mind, Cullen could hear a voice whispering she’s right you know. But all that fell from his mouth was, “The Order swore an oath to protect people from the dangers of magic! A mage killed hundreds in Kirkwall with a snap of his fingers.”

It was like he’d slapped her. The herald took a step back from him, then another. Her face filled slowly with color and he could see she was shaking with anger. After a moment of silence that felt nearly endless, she asked, “So you’ll blame every mage for the actions of one man?”

Her voice was cold steel.

He didn’t get a chance to respond because suddenly Cassandra was there in front of him. Cullen blinked and blinked again, and suddenly remembered where he was. Out in the courtyard, where anyone could see and hear the Commander of the Inquisition and the Herald of Andraste shouting at each other like children.

“Commander, what are you doing?” Cassandra demanded. She had placed herself bodily between him and the Herald, and over her shoulder he could see Leliana doing the same to press the Herald back.

Cullen didn’t have a chance to answer. The Herald was already backing away from Leliana, her face a mask of fury. She very nearly spat her words, “I don’t know what I expected. Bloody Templars, you’d rather close ranks and kill children than admit fault.”

It wasn’t only he who saw red, Cassandra rounded on the herald as well and now Leliana had the task of forcing them both back. Over her shoulder Leliana snapped, “Take a walk Hestia! Go!”

The herald stalked away as Cullen was urged, quietly but firmly, into the Chantry.

There had been… a discussion with Leliana. It hadn’t exactly been a row, not with the chantry sisters watching and Mother Giselle looking on with her calm and wise eyes. Some things about Hestia Trevelyan had been made clear to he and Cassandra, not that it made a difference at this point. Cassandra had been sent off to cool her own head and Cullen had promised both Leliana and Josephine that he would not get into a fistfight with the only person who could close the Breach.
Privately, Cassandra assured him that the heralds insubordination would not go without punishment.

At the time, Cullen had been glad of it. But now, two days later, all Cullen really felt was regret.

He couldn’t sleep, but that had simply become part of his life since leaving Kirkwall. The soldiers had been skittish around him since the argument, as if they expected him to take out his frustration with extra drills or laps. Rylen had been walking gingerly around him too, perhaps he expected Cullen to punish the other templars in their stead. Cullen wasn’t sure how to explain that he wouldn’t dream of it without it sounding like an excuse.

Cullen left his tent somewhere after midnight, clad in leathers and a thin surcoat. Maybe a drill or two would lay rest to his mind and let him get to sleep sometime before the sun came up. He grabbed up a practice sword and a wooden shield and started through a simple exercise. The steps came back to him with little prompting, the motions settling into his bones like an old blanket.

You’ll blame every mage for the actions of one man

The worst part was, the worst part… Cullen groaned and rolled his shoulders, trying to get back into the rhythm of the exercise, wanting nothing more than a cold bucket of water to dunk his head in.

The worst part was that she might be right. About him. About all of it. He felt the fear, the crushing weight of it pressing down on him every moment of every day. He felt that loyalty tugging at him still, the deference he’d shown to Meredith sitting in his chest like a well worn path. If he’d thought, for a second, that she was wrong, that she had gone too far…

Would Meredith have killed him? Or worse, killed more people?

This was a new thought but it was so similar to the others that had passed through his head in recent months that it folded seamlessly into the unending river of other thoughts that flooded through him in every quiet moment. Why hadn’t he listened to the Champion, why didn’t they apprehend Anders sooner, why hadn’t he seen, why hadn’t he acted-

Cullen dropped the wooden sword and it thumped to the frozen ground. His hand was shaking too hard to grip it. He bit back a growl of frustration and moved away from the practice dummies, pressing his hands to his face, willing them to stop shaking. He could endure this. He would endure this. He had to. Cullen just wished Cassandra wasn’t leaving again tomorrow; she was the only one he could really talk to about this.

He heard footsteps, light and even, and then crunch of snow underfoot.

Cullen moved backwards in the shadows, reaching for a sword that wasn’t there. A cloaked figure was disappearing down the path next to the smithy; Cullen hastened to follow as quietly as possible, hoping the distance between them was enough to obscure his footsteps. It could’ve been anyone trying to desert but Cullen had a sneaking suspicion.

When the hood fell back to expose blond hair spun silver in the moonlight, he was certain. Although Hestia Trevelyan had expressed her belief in their cause, Leliana had told each of them to expect the herald to run at one point or another.

“She’s been on the run for years Commander.” The Nightingale had said with an enigmatic smile. “And I’m sure she’s uncomfortable trusting any of us with her life. It will take her some time to break bad habits.”
Clearly those habits weren’t broken yet. Cullen didn’t have a weapon but he wasn’t bad at hand to hand combat, it had just been a while since he’d had a chance to practice. He was just creeping up to the gate on the bridge when the clouds shifted. The light from the two moons bathed the bridge in blue and silver light and Cullen finally registered what his eyes had been telling him.

The herald was crying; no that wasn’t right. She was weeping, streaks of silver running down her freckled face, body wracked with sobs. She had knelt near the line of bodies his men had dragged from the valley, each one wrapped in a shroud and tied for the funeral pyres that burned every evening. What he’d thought was a cloak was really a blanket wrapped tightly around her shoulders.

Cullen moved closer. He knew this was a private moment but he could not bring himself to leave. As he did he could hear her singing softly, some marcher song he had never learned, her voice choked with grief. She reached out to close her hand around the ankle of one shrouded corpse.

Sleep pretty darling, do not cry
And I will sing a lullaby

When the Breach had opened, thousands had been lost. He knew Leliana had taken the death of the Divine hard, and Cassandra had too lost someone dear to her. Still others were overwhelmed by the shock of the event; thousands of lives snuffed out in one heartstopping instant. Who had Hestia Trevelyan lost?

Cullen ducked back behind the gates when she shifted and stood up. The last person the herald would want to see was him, this he knew. He hid in the shadow of the gate until she’d passed and headed back to the camp.

Cullen rubbed a hand across the back of his neck, glancing up at the Breach. “Maker, was this part of the plan?” he murmured, half to himself. “Or must we do this alone?”

He’d stood with Josephine to see of Cassandra and the Herald. The journey to Val Royeaux wasn’t long but there had to be a show of solidarity, especially after The Fight. Each time Varric said the words Cullen it made him cringe in embarrassment, but that only seemed to egg the stupid dwarf on.

But now they were out of sight and Cullen was back to running the drills. Most of the recruits still didn’t know what to do with a shield, and in a real battle you could end up with a dislocated shoulder if your enemy took advantage of that.

“Come on now, find your feet!” he barked at one boy, probably no older than twenty. “Get up before he comes after you!”

“He cheated Commander!” The boy gasped, a hand clutching his stomach. “That was a dirty trick!”

“No dirty tricks in a war recruit.” Cullen told him, reaching down and hauling the boy to his feet. “No rules on a battlefield. There’s only alive and not. Again!”

He stepped back, nodding to the sergeant watching the skirmish. They’d have to have more endurance training this afternoon, he made a note for Lysette and Rylen.

“Excuse me, ser?”
Cullen turned and found himself face to face with a thin man with close cropped blond hair dressed in dark blue and black. His face was vaguely familiar but Cullen couldn’t place why.

“Yes, can I help you?” Cullen asked, trying not to grimace.

“I’m afraid I’m a bit turned around and I can’t get anyone’s attention.” The man said, clasping his hands behind him. “This is Haven, yes? The camp for the Inquisition?”

“You’ve found the right place.” Cullen told him, looking him up and down. He was rather skinny for a soldier, perhaps he was a noble come to see what all the fuss was about?

“Wonderful!” the man said, nodding sharply. “Now, this is perhaps an imposition, but could I be permitted to speak to the Herald of Andraste?”

A pilgrim then. Now Cullen did grimace. “You’ve just missed her, she left for Val Royeaux this morning. She should return in a few days. Though I should warn you, the Herald doesn’t spend much time speaking to the pilgrims to Haven.”

“Oh I’m not a pilgrim ser, I’m her brother.” The man said, a smile breaking over his face. He offered Cullen his hand. “Shay Borchard, a pleasure to meet you.”

Chapter End Notes

Well, we all have to start somewhere.
Many thanks to Illyria_Lives, for sharing this effed up family with me
Thanks to Viceity for being the best cheerleader a fic writer could ask for.
I am sootspiteswinterwonderland on tumblr, drop me a message!
I'm becoming tolerant in my old age, Hestia thought.

Hestia turned slowly around and around, trying to see everything at once. Gleaming white columns, golden statues of lions and falcons, long silks that stretched across the market, a canopy of wine red and cornflower blue. Val Royeaux was so much more than she'd ever tried to dream about.

Varric looked up at her, apparently amused. “See anything you like Nomad?”

“This could be the most beautiful place in the world.” She murmured, utterly dazzled.

Varric chuckled. “It’s certainly something, I’ll give it that.”

“My father always said he’d bring me here someday.” She heard herself saying. She shielded her eyes from the sunlight.

“Why didn’t he?”

*Auggie died.* Hestia closed her eyes and pressed those memories back to where they belonged. “Went into the circle before he could.” She told Varric. His keen eyes watched her for a moment longer before he looked back to the square. “You’ve been here before right?”

“Yeah, once or twice.”

“So you’ll tell me where the shops with the tacky knick knacks are?”

That got a laugh out of him. “Yeah Nomad, I can help you out.”

“Good. I’ve got a niece in Denerim that’s overdue for some spoiling.”

Cassandra snorted. “Shopping can wait until later.” The warrior nodded to the crowd of people at the other end of the market. “Come on, let’s meet with the mothers.”

They let Varric and Solas hang back but Cassandra’s pace took them straight into the crowd of Orlesian gawkers, all clustered around a small stage. On it stood a Chantry mother, poised to give a sermon or spread a lie.

And as if on cue, as soon as Hestia and Cassandra were within earshot, the sermon began. “Good people of Val Royeaux,” The chantry mother declared, raising her voice to be heard above the crowd. “Hear me! Together we mourn our Divine, her naive and beautiful heart silenced by treachery.”

They were already getting glances and outright stares from the people in a crowd, but Hestia had delivered enough history lessons to see the chantry mother was clearing ramping up to something
bigger. Hestia fought back the impulse to hide behind Cassandra.

“You wonder what will become of her murderer,” the cleric continued. Hestia had an awful feeling that this was going to go badly. “Well, wonder no more.”

“Oh no.” Hestia muttered. “Please don’t let this be happening.”

“Behold!” The cleric found Hestia’s face unerringly in the crowd, and pointed to her with one thin finger. “The so called Herald of Andraste! Claiming to rise where our beloved fell.” The chantry mother curled her lip in a sneer. “We say this is a false prophet. The Maker would send no mage in our hour of need.”

_They hate us little one, they lock us up in cages and tell us our power is a curse. And it’s because they’re afraid._

Hestia swallowed that back as fast as she could, feeling the burn behind her eyes. “I am not the enemy here!” She shouted, fighting to keep her voice clear. “The Breach in the sky is our true enemy. We have to come together to stop it!”

“It’s true!” Cassandra stepped forward, sounding much more confident than Hestia felt. “The Inquisition only seeks to stop this madness before it is too late!”

The murmurs of the crowd were growing louder now, and movement in the corner of her eye drew Hestia’s gaze. The sight of more than a dozen templars advancing on the crowd made her heart race. That many templars in one place was never a good sign.

“Cassandra,” Hestia murmured, tugging on the seekers armor to try and get her attention. “Look.”

“It is already too late!” The chantry mother snapped. A greying gentlemen in ceremonial templar armor mounted the steps to the stage and the cleric smiled in grim satisfaction. “The templars have returned to the chantry and the people will be safe once-”

Before the cleric could finish, a templar came up behind her and with a single punch sent her sprawling to the floor. The screams from the crowd only added to the confusion as the templars swarmed the stage.

One templar seemed as horrified as the rest of them. He started toward the cleric before another held him back. “Still yourself,” the graying man said, his eyes cold and unfeeling. “She is beneath us.”

“Lord Seeker Lucius!” Cassandra said, blinking at the man in charge.

Hestia’s mouth was hanging open. “What, in Andraste’s holy name, do you think you’re doing?”

“Her claim to authority is an insult,” the Lord Seeker said, glancing her up and down. “As is your own.”

He crossed the stage and Cassandra moved to follow. “Lord Seeker,” she said, matching his pace with clear agitation. “It is imperative that we speak with-”

But the Lord Seeker cut her off. “You will not address me.” He said, derision very nearly dripping off his words. He turned to look at Cassandra with a sneer. “Creating a heretical movement, raising up a puppet as Andraste’s herald, you should be ashamed.”

Cassandra looked stricken, but the Lord Seeker wasn’t finished quite yet. He turned to the crowd
at large and continued. “You should all be ashamed. The templars failed no one when they left the Chantry to purge the mages. You are the ones who have failed! You who would leash our righteous swords with doubt and fear! If you came to appeal to the Chantry, you are too late. The only destiny here that demands respect is mine.”

Hestia felt her blood run cold. This was like a child’s nightmare, the realization of her greatest fears come true. Nothing she could’ve imagined was worse than this. Lord Seeker Lucius's eyes were wide, mad, rimmed in red. In her experience, there was nothing more terrifying than someone who truly believed that the world was better off with you dead. But showing any fear right now would make it clear to the templars and to the people watching who had the upper hand here. When in doubt, feign confidence.

So Hestia channeled her very best Enchanter Lydia impression, curled her lip and said, “If you’re not here to help the Chantry, did you just come by to run your mouth?”

“I came to see what frightens old women so,” The Lord Seeker returned, “And to laugh.”

A younger templar, handsome with dark skin and brilliant green eyes, came to stand at the Lord Seekers shoulder. He’d been standing by the clerics since the beginning, he had objected when the chantry mother had been assaulted. Now he looked pained, his eyes never leaving Hestia’s face. “But Lord Seeker, what if she really was sent by the Maker?” he asked. “What if?”

“You are called to a higher purpose,” Another templar chastised him. “Do not question.”

Hestia tried to hold the man's gaze, silently pleading with him, but it was a losing battle. Already the other templars were forming up into marching lines, and she had a sinking feeling in her stomach. This couldn’t be happening, this was unthinkable, this was...

“I will make the Templar Order a power that stands alone against the void.” The Lord Seeker declared, moving to the head of his troops. “We deserve recognition. Independence!”

He glanced one last time at Cassandra and Hestia, his opinion clear on his face. “You have shown me nothing, and the Inquisition… less than nothing.” He turned away from them, addressing his order. “Templars, Val Royeaux is unworthy of our protection! We march!”

The templars marched out of the city.

Cassandra was left speechless and Hestia could only follow her example as she watched the retreating backs of the soldiers that had been the background noise of every person in Thedas for centuries.

Of all the things Hestia had expected from this meeting, the actual outcome had not been on the list. Templars were a fixture in every city, every town, every place in Thedas where a Chantry stood. People relied on them. People trusted them. People believed in them. To see that trust and belief so blatantly spat upon was so strange as to be unnerving.

And the absence of templars was… strange. More than most, Hestia had been aware of templars from a very young age. As soon as she’d gone into the circle, she’d balked at the presence of them, chafing at the walls surrounding her. She’d hated them for fifteen years. Where was the relief she’d expected to feel?

Varric walked up and interrupted her racing thoughts. “So, that went well.” he raised his eyebrows as he and Solas joined them.

“Has Lord Seeker Lucius gone mad?” Cassandra crossed her arms.
“Well, it looks as though the templars will not be supporting the Inquisition.” Hestia said quietly.

“I would not write them off so easily.” Cassandra returned at once, almost without thinking about it. “There must be some among the order who object to what the Lord Seeker is doing.”

Hestia and Solas shared a look. “Well, what should we do then?” Hestia asked, looking around at the square, at the absence of templars.

The crowd was dispersing but nobody seemed happy about it. The city guards seemed stunned, there were women openly weeping. Nearby, a chanter faltered in his words and then burst into tears. Several clerics had gathered around the chantry mother and were helping her up from the ground. Nobody seemed to know what to do, and the familiar sound of whimpering could be heard no matter where you were.

Maybe the relief was nowhere to be found, but the anger was there, ready and willing to fill the place Hestia knew the relief ought to live. Hestia felt her hands curl into fists, felt the scream building in her throat. The same anger that had filled her in the circle, kept her feet moving in the war, kept her alive when she’d been starving and cold and afraid for the lives of her family freezing along with her.

Why are they your heroes? Why am I your villain?

Solas touched her sleeve, and Hestia startled, looking up from the golden statue she’d been staring at. It was a lion covered in gilt and sparkled in the sun; she wanted to melt it with her mind. “Still your mind, Hestia.” Solas murmured. “Before you injure yourself.”

Her eyes snapped to him and then down; her clenched fists had slowly become covered in delicate frost. That’s the problem with magic, she thought bitterly, taking a deep breath and allowing the ice to melt off her fingers. If you aren’t careful with it, it could give you away.

Cassandra had moved to speak to the clerics, apparently always ready to squabble with the mothers. No wonder she worked so well with the divine. Varric had found an arrow with a message tied to it and was puzzling over the clues.

Solas stood with Hestia, watching until she had taken a few deep breaths and calmed down. After a moment, Hestia looked back up and smiled at him. “Alright now, no danger.” She told him.

“That sort of outburst is unusual for a mage of your… age.” Solas said, coolly skirting around what he wanted to say. “Does it happen often?”

“Only when people patronize me.” She said, smiling wider when he held her gaze.

“Forgive me,” He said mildly. He wasn’t backing off at all, because he followed that with, “But it is unusual for a mage that has passed the… Harrowing, that’s what its called?”

“Yes, the Harrowing. It’s a test of your strength against demons. If you pass, you’re an enchanter.” She said, hoping that sharing this would stop his probing. “I came into my magic late, so I’ve always been less disciplined than others my age.”

Solas nodded thoughtfully. “Was it not frustrating, to see those your own age advancing ahead of you?”

Oh you have no idea. Hestia thought. But she hitched a smile on her face anyhow. “I suppose, but what could I really do? There was nowhere we could go.” After a moment of quiet, she added, “If you’d like to share that shield technique, I’m sure there’s something the circle taught us that would
be of interest to you.” Hestia met his unconvinced look with a wink.

“The offer is appreciated.” Solas told her, a smile playing around his mouth. “Who is us?”

*I’m coming with you Hestia. Don’t try to change my mind.*

Solas nodded solemnly, and slowly released her arm.

She took a shaky breath, looked down at the bench that Solas had shifted her to, then up at the beautiful red fabric draping across the Val Royeaux market. Suddenly, the only thing Hestia wanted was to be far far away from here.

“Solas, what did you do to the girl?” Varric’s scratchy voice drew her gaze. The dwarf’s eyes were full of concern. “What happened Nomad?”

“Nothing to worry about Varric.” Hestia reached out and patted Varric’s hand. The sooner everyone stopped fussing, the better. Her eyes drifted away from him, across the square and lit on the devastated face of a chanter. “The same problem everyone here has. Sometimes, grief hurts too much.”

Varric kept his eyes on her a bit longer before nodding. “Come on Nomad,” he said, gesturing down the market. “Let’s buy your niece a toy.”

Hestia knew the moment the enchanter entered the room that she would die to be half the mage Vivienne was. The woman had a house, a title, a place of honor in the court of the most powerful woman in the world, freedom to use her power whenever and however she wished, influence and power over her life and the lives of others? It was everything Hestia had longed for as long as she’d been a mage.

*Vivienne is better off having it though,* Hestia thought. *I’d lose my head in weeks.*

They were traveling back to Haven slowly, having caught up with Madame De Fer’s retinue early the first day. Cassandra made the decision but made Hestia ride up and suggest joining their parties on the road back to Haven. The offer was accepted, so she and Cassandra had found their way to the front of the baggage train, while Solas and Varric had preferred to stay at the back. The baggage train was a sight to behold; it boasted three carts, one filled with books and another full of alchemical equipment and supplies. Both were generous donations from the White Spire.

Even if Solas suspected that the enchanters motives were not entirely altruistic, Hestia could only admit that right now the Inquisition needed all the help it could get.

“Hestia dear, come sit with me.” Vivienne said, beckoning Hestia over. They were stopped in a
clearing somewhere between Montsimmard and Jader. “We didn’t get much time to talk at the party.”

Without a glance back, the enchanter turned on her heel and disappeared into her large and lavishly appointed tent. Hestia exchanged a glance with Varric, but she hopped down off the back of the cart they’d been sitting on and followed the enchanter.

Hestia couldn’t have held back the gasp if she wanted to. Stepping through the entryway to the enchanters tent was like slipping into another world, one filled with warmth and soft fabric and the spicy sweet smell of incense.

“Well, you certainly travel in style.” Hestia said, when she noticed Vivienne's eyes on her.

The enchanter smiled and nodded to a fold out chair next to hers. “Do sit down my dear. We didn’t get much chance to talk before you rushed off to your secret appointment.”

Hestia tried to smile mysteriously but she wasn’t sure she could manage it as well as the woman before her. “That was a busy night for us.” she said.

She sat and took the tea Vivienne offered her with grateful hands. It was warm and smooth with a slightly sweet after taste, and after the last few days of sneaking around and pretending to be confident, Hestia appreciated the warmth it spread through her.

“I want to thank you Vivienne,” Hestia said, after a moment of contemplative silence, “for pulling me out of that disastrous duel.”

Madame De Fer arched a brow. “Oh?” She hummed, looking over the brim of her cup.

Hestia nodded, hoping she looked as sincere as her thanks were. “If I’d gone through with it, there were no options that would reflect well on our cause.”

“Oh I’m sure Josephine Montilyet could do something to fix the situation.”

Hestia grinned into her cup, she should’ve known Madame De Fer would check up on them before she even offered to join the Inquisition. And from the look in her eyes, Vivienne knew what she was doing too.

“I’m sure she could. As far as I can tell Josephine is the best at what she does. But look at it logically.” Hestia began to tick the outcomes off on her fingers. “If I win the duel, the man is dead, The Herald of Andraste is a bloodthirsty criminal. The family will bay for my blood and the Inquisition is suddenly a monstrosity. If I lose, I’m dead.”

“And the Inquisition loses a rather valuable asset.” Vivienne agreed, her quick eyes flashing to the mark and back again.

Hestia nodded. “I was more worried about my continued survival, but I concede your point.” She took another sip of tea and ticked off a third finger. “If I defeat him and show him mercy, I’m too arrogant to perceive my own flaws, or a coward. And if I refuse the duel entirely, I’m an unwashed idiot from a backwater country.”

Vivienne set her cup down with a gentle tinkling noise. Was that surprise in her expression? Approval? Neither? It was difficult to tell. Hestia took another sip of tea to get her breath back, and to stop herself from filling the blooming silence with chatter.

“I must admit, I didn’t expect a mage from Ostwick to have such a grasp of politics.” Vivienne said
finally.

Hestia laughed lightly. “While we may not have the wealth and beauty of Orlais, the noble houses in the Free Marches can be quite cutthroat. My brothers and I spent every afternoon learning politics and etiquette.”

Vivienne’s delicately groomed eyebrows rose. “Really? You'll have to forgive me, I had always had the impression that Ostwick was rather… agrarian.”

“The farmers are proud and plenty,” Hestia agreed. “But the port city where we grew up is a different matter.”

“Political enough to require intensive study?” Vivienne arched one finely manicured eyebrow.

Hestia nodded. “Well, if my grandfather had just declared an heir when he ought to, I doubt my education would’ve been quite so intensive.” She set down her own cup with decidedly less grace than Vivienne; she suddenly didn’t trust herself with the fine porcelain.

“He didn’t choose an heir?” Vivienne raised a hand to her mouth, perhaps to cover a smile. “That seems remarkably irresponsible of him.”

“Didn’t choose an heir until he was on his deathbed, according to legend. He was famously a tricksy bastard, forever hanging the title of Bann over the heads of his children, encouraging them to compete for it. So all of his children were vying for the seat well into adulthood, which of course meant that his grandchildren were groomed from an extraordinarily young age to become the… heir apparent as it were.”

“And how did your magic interfere with those calculations?”

Hestia offered a half smile, prepared with the lie she’d been telling for years. “Actually, not at all. He had passed on by the time my magic made itself known. He passed the title to his most sensible son, thankfully. Although,” She added after a moments thought, “there has been more of that jockeying recently, since Armand joined the Grey Wardens and nobody has a proper heir anymore.”

“Oh dear why not?” Vivienne asked, her voice filled with concern that was almost entirely sincere.

Hestia leveled her a skeptical look. Why had she even let them get to this subject? “Surely you don’t want to hear about a family squabble taking place hundreds of miles away. It will seem pitiful compared to some of the things you’ve experienced in the Orlesian court.”

Vivienne waved the protestation away. “Oh you’re undoubtedly right, but indulge me. Perhaps my expertise could help with the issue.”

It was so arrogant, so self satisfied, but all Hestia felt was tickled by Vivienne’s sheer audacity. She was vividly reminded of an old enchanter who had been in Ostwick longer than anyone, even the First Enchanter. He had ruled the alchemical and enchanting rooms with an iron fist, and answered any question posed to him with a condescending sneer that could only be worn by the exceptionally gifted or the incredibly ignorant. Neither that old enchanter or Madame De Fer could possibly be accused of being ignorant.

I’m becoming tolerant in my old age. Hestia thought. Well, it had to happen sometime. She shifted in her seat, crossing one long leg over the other and biting back a grin. “I would love your expert opinion.”
Hestia found Cassandra in the midst of her morning warm up routine when she crawled out of her tent. It had become a familiar habit in the past weeks and Hestia paid her no mind at first. Only when Hestia had finished her mug of bitter coffee and had gotten most of her armor back on did Cassandra block her path.

“How much combat magic do you know?” Cassandra asked, her voice rough from the exertion.

Hestia tried not to stare openly at the sight of the seeker covered in sweat and panting for breath. It was difficult. “I uh… not as much as I’d like.” She said, gathering her thoughts. Not that she had any idea where Cassandra was going with this.

The seeker nodded sharply. “Come then,” Cassandra said, stepping back and gesturing with the scabbard of her sword. “Spar with me.”

Hestia arched an eyebrow. “What?”

Cassandra was already grabbing the staff Hestia had been forced to use and tossing it to her. Hestia fumbled the staff as was her custom and nearly pitched herself and the staff into the mud. When she got her feet under her, Hestia looked up to see the seeker had already settled into a stance, scabbard discarded and her sword up.

But Hestia Trevelyan had never been known for her restraint. She heaved a sigh and hefted the staff. “It’s too early in the morning for this.” She said, but settled into her own defensive stance. “Don’t hit me too hard seeker.”

“Don’t give me a reason to.” Cassandra replied.

The seeker rolled her shoulders before rushing forward, much slower than Hestia knew she could move. Cassandra swiped left and Hestia ducked out of the way, taking a few steps to flank the warrior.

Cassandra spun on her heel, anticipating an offense on her right but all Hestia did was back away, snapping up a shield that shimmered over the both of them. At the annoyed look, Hestia threw Cassandra a smile.

“Part of combat is attacking your opponent.” Cassandra told her sternly, shifting into a more defensive stance. “Come on, attack me.”

“You’re the one who’s holding back. And I don’t know how personally you’re gonna take it when I set your hair on fire.” Hestia said.

“I promise not to hold it against you.” Cassandra replied dryly.

“As you wish.” Hestia bit her lip. Watching the woman closely, Hestia began to weave a quick frost spell. It wouldn’t do to actually set Cassandra on fire.

But no sooner than Hestia raised her arm to release the fistful of ice, Cassandra planted her feet and sent out a spell purge. The strength of the purge knocked the breath out of her, and Hestia saw
spots dancing in her vision. Cassandra pressed the advantage, bringing her sword up in a flurry of blows that Hestia just barely blocked. She was losing ground quickly, backing up over her feet. Cassandra swiped at her head and Hestia turned her duck into a tumble, and ended up once again on the seekers flank.

Her magic was gone, so Hestia did the next best thing and swung the staff like a club, hitting Cassandra in the stomach with a satisfying smack. The seeker doubled over and Hestia took the chance to kick her hip and send Cassandra sprawling into the mud.

Cassandra looked up, mud smeared across her grinning face to see the metal tip of Hestia’s commandeered staff at her neck, already beginning to glow faintly.

“That was a dirty trick.” Hestia said, before reaching out and tugging the seeker to her feet.

“At least you know to defend yourself without magic.” Cassandra said, gratefully accepting the hand up. “Some mages just begin to cower without their spells.”

“Well those mages haven’t ever had the templars turn on them.” Hestia said wryly. “Should I stand there and let you attack me again?”

“I’m not going to apologise for using all the powers at my disposal.” Cassandra said, rolling her shoulder again.

“Neither am I.” Hestia said. She probably sounded defensive. “And I don’t understand why I’m asked to if templars can do things like that!”

Cassandra raised her eyebrows, and stepped back up to her full height. “Is that why you don’t want to approach the templars for help?” She asked, though her tone was skeptical.

“I don’t have a problem with Templars!” Hestia snapped. Cassandra’s answering look and the snort from Varric from a way away was probably the best response she could reasonably ask for. Hestia took a moment to compose herself and push her hair back from her face. “I don’t.” She repeated in a calmer tone.

“Clearly.” Cassandra said, settling into her stance again. “Come on, see if you can recover yourself faster this time.”

Hestia glowered but once again snapped up her shield, not even bothering to summon a spell. The spell purge hit her again, but she was ready this time and managed to keep her footing long enough to skirt around Cassandra’s initial assault. But Cassandra was a seasoned warrior and was ready for Hestia’s answering blows. In short order, Hestia had her feet knocked out from under her and was flat on her back in the mud.

Cassandra wasn’t stupid enough to gloat, so she leaned out of the way of the first fist of ice Hestia summoned and threw at her head. The second caught Cassandra in the knee, which put her off balance enough that Hestia could shove herself up and bear the seeker bodily to the ground.

Cassandra was strong enough to shove Hestia away, but took a moment to let them both gather their breath, flat on the ground in the mud with the dawn gathering above them. “So,” The seeker panted, her arms thrown out to either side of her. “What is your problem with templars?”

“I don’t have a problem with templars.” Hestia panted. The lavender sky of dawn was being swallowed by the cornflower blue of a full and cloudless sky. If Haven wasn’t on the slope of a mountain, the day might’ve even been warm. “Templars have a problem with me.”
Cassandra blinked. She sat up and looked over to Hestia, who kept her eyes on the sky. “I know you must have had many dealings with templars while you were working for the rebel mages.”

Hestia rolled her eyes. “Define dealings.”

“You have fought templars for the rebel mages before.” Cassandra persisted. “But not everyone in the Order-”

“Cassandra, please.” Hestia cut her off, slowly sitting up and rubbing a hand over her face. It was always this way, eventually. Everyone always wanted to make her forgive, like she hadn’t been trying her whole life. The only ones who had ever understood were her cousins, and even they were out of reach now. “I know you’re only trying to help but please. Just stop.”

Cassandra shoved herself to her feet, looking cross again. “You cannot avoid the subject forever.”

“I can bloody well try.” Hestia muttered, carefully getting to her feet.

“Let me put it this way,” Cassandra said, retrieving the staff and holding it out to Hestia. “If it were down to you, which of them would you pick? The rebel mages or the Templar Order?”

“The mages.” Hestia answered without a seconds thought.

“Why?”

Hestia shrugged, trying to formulate the answer she’d been struggling with since Val Royeaux. She’d gone from no choice to too many choices, and now she was doubting herself. Doubting the choice that, in theory, was the easiest one in the world.

Fuck , she thought, looking at Cassandra, who was gazing at her in a puddle of mud with that look the seeker got when she was trying hard to be patient. *I’m going to have to apologize to Commander Cullen aren’t I?*

“I would pick the mages because I know them.” Hestia finally said. “I trust them. I know their motives, I know what they want, and I know how desperately they need us. But,” She added, waving away the somber tone with a hand, “I wouldn’t trust me with this decision anyway. Thank Andraste you and Leliana are the ones in charge.”

Hestia walked away towards the tent, trying to keep the unspoken words from bubbling up out of her throat.

*The last time I was in charge I got my family killed.*

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Varric had sworn to them that he could ride a horse. They’d found him a pony, which he’d decided was just a shorter horse. At first it had seemed that the pony, who was called Buck, was just mean. Hestia had met mean ponies before, once or twice. But after hanging out with Varric and Buck for four days it was clear. Buck was not mean. It was Varric’s fault, because he couldn’t ride a horse.

“Don’t pull so hard, you’ll hurt him!” Hestia scolded for the fifth time that day, leaning down precariously and snatching the reins out of Varric’s hands.

“Hey, he’s the one who wanted to go stumbling into the ditch!” Varric complained.
“You’re digging your heels in too much, he thinks you want him to go faster.” Hestia rolled her eyes and quickly knotted the reins to her own saddle. “There, now you two can make it back to Haven without coming to blows.”

“Do I really look like the type to hit a horse?” Varric asked, arching an eyebrow at her.

“I think the horse is gonna hit you.” Hestia replied, tossing the dwarf a lazy grin. “How did you end up in Ferelden without ever learning to ride?”

“Well,” Varric, finding nothing to do with his hands, decided to lean back and rest them on the ponies rump, stretching out his neck. “First there was the unnecessary kidnapping.”

“Let it go!” Cassandra yelled from ahead of them.

“-And then there was a cart, then there was a boat, then there was some walking, then there was an explosion that ripped a hole in the fabric of reality,” Varric spread his hands and smiled, “Then I finally met this horse.”

Hestia laughed delightedly. “Varric, I mean this with complete sincerity, you could read a grocery list and make it sound compelling.”

“Why thank you Nomad, that’s the nicest compliment I’ve had all day.” Varric said. He glanced up at the sky, then to the breach again, before shivering and bringing his eyes back to more earthly matters. “What about you? Where did a marcher mage learn how to ride a horse?”

“My father’s little hobby.” Hestia leaned in and lowered her voice. “He runs the marcher and antivan wing of his families textiles company, but his true passion has always been the breeding and racing of horseflesh. It’s all he’d talk about. He taught each of us when we were…”

She trailed off, all the air leaving her like she’d been punched in the stomach. A man stood just beyond the gates to Haven, speaking with a chantry sister.

It can’t be.

“When you were…” Varric repeated, staring at her. “Nomad? You just stopped in the middle of your...”

A close shaven head, blond hair the color of corn silk, a lay brother robe with sleeves tucked just so, body thin as a reed with whipcord strength, eyes like ice than crinkled at the corners as he smiled in relief.

It just can’t be.

“Shay.” Hestia breathed, not trusting herself to believe it.

“Hey, are you okay?” Varric asked again but Hestia could barely hear him.

Please be real, please be here, please please please.

The man lifted his hand and called to her, in a voice she barely knew. “Hestia!”

“Shay!” Hestia nearly screamed his name, throwing herself off the horse and sprinting towards him, tears already clouding her eyes. She hurtled into him with all her strength, almost knocking them both to the ground, and she could hear him crying too.

“Big sister,” Shay murmured to her, hugging her tight as he could. “You’re alive.”
Many thanks to Illyria_Lives for sharing this trashfam with me. Two Trevs down, seventeen billion to go!
(okay, maybe not that many, but it certainly feels like it at times)
I'm sootpriteswinterwonderland on tumblr, give me a shout if you want to talk!
“So it’s come to my attention that I’ve been treating you badly.” said the Herald, by way of greeting.

Cullen turned, blinking at her. “Pardon?”

She rolled her eyes. “You heard me.”

“No I actually couldn’t hear you, could you repeat that?” Cullen said.

Hestia Trevelyan glanced around at the training yard, filled with shouting voices and clanking of steel against steel. After a second, she shrugged and made a face, as if she didn’t quite believe what he’d said but she was willing to accept the plausibility. She wove her way closer to him, giving a half smile to Rylen when Cullen sent him on his way.

She looked profoundly uncomfortable, but the herald still took her place in front of him, raised her chin and said, “I’ve come to apologize.”

“What for?”

She bit her lip and looked at him with those assessing eyes. “Are you mocking me?”

“Why would I ever do that?” Cullen didn’t mean to smile or look like he was enjoying this in any way, but honestly. It was like she’d walked into her own execution. She could see his badly hidden grin too, she crossed her arms and arched an eyebrow at him. Cullen allowed himself another moment before he schooled his features. “I’m sorry, I realize this is difficult for you.”

The Herald rolled her eyes. “And here I was told you had no sense of humor.”

Cullen took in the set of her shoulders, the stillness of her body. She was prepared for another confrontation, even expecting one. She wasn’t even blinking. But a confrontation was the last thing he had in mind.

“Would you walk with me?” He said, gesturing with a hand to the path just behind him.

That took her by surprise. “Pardon?”

“You heard me.”

Cullen thought she’d snarl, but he’s gotten too used to Cassandra's short temper. Instead, the Herald blinked silently before she broke into a laugh. “Very well Commander. Lead the way.”

Cullen nodded and turned down the path that wound its way away from Haven and into the hills, all dotted with trees and rocky outcrops. Squeaking pink nugs scampered through the underbrush and snowflakes fluttered silently in the air, muffling footsteps and cloaking the sound that filtered from the little village. The mountains rose all around them, like a hand cupping the lake and the town against its breast.

It was almost idyllic, if not for the sickly green light that pulsed, night and day, just over the ridge.
The Herald had fallen in at his side, and when they rounded the bend that led to the old alchemy masters abandoned house, she spoke. “Alright, what’s you game Commander?”

“Maker’s breath,” Cullen pinched the bridge of his nose. “No games, no tricks. Are you this suspicious of everyone or have you focused it entirely on me?”

She opened her mouth, presumably to snap something caustic at him, and then closed it again. A thoughtful look crossed her face and they passed another moment in the crisp mountain silence.

Finally, the Herald said, a touch defensively, “I’m not only suspicious of you.”

“No?”

She shot him a look, still looking for the joke. When she couldn’t find one, her shoulders seemed to relax and she took a breath before a crooked smile spread across her face. It did something to her mouth and her eyes, seemed to fill her face with mirth even when there was nothing funny.

“Apologies,” She said, tucking her hands behind her back. “For this and for the… other unpleasantness. I didn’t mean it.”

“Which parts?” Cullen asked.

“Any of it.” She said, and turned to arch an eyebrow at him. He wondered idly how long it had taken her to learn to do it. He’d practiced each morning in the mirror when he’s been training to become a templar, something he’d never spoken of to anyone. The Herald cleared her throat before continuing. “According to my brother, you’ve been taking this unpleasantness rather personally?”

“I should’ve known he’d tell you.” he said to the Herald, wanting to kick himself. Shay Borchard was pleasant and unassuming, and apparently he remembered every passing comment made to him with pinpoint accuracy. Cullen had told himself their argument didn't mean anything, but it had clearly upset him enough to be noted by this total stranger.

The Herald laughed lightly. “Quite like a Chantry sister at times, isn’t he?” She said fondly. “He won’t tell anyone else, don’t you worry. He’s just always been a smoother.”

“She does have that manner.” Cullen agreed, looking at her out of the corner of his eye. She was smiling to herself fondly, as she’d been doing ever since her rather public reunion with her brother the day before yesterday. “He’s clearly very fond of you.”

“I’m fond of him.” She replied easily. “It’s been nearly four years since I saw him last. I hadn’t quite realized how much I’d missed him until…”

A shadow passed over her face, a cloud that faded all emotion away until the only thing left was dullness behind her moon grey eyes. It was a shadow all of them had become intimately familiar with over the past two months or so. Cullen knew better than to intrude on somebody else’s grief. He left the silence go unbroken until the herald chose to break it.

They continued along the path, passing the empty house and wood piles that the scouts had all but pillaged for the funeral pyres and heating the campfires. The wind was colder here, with nothing but trees and the occasional rocky outcropping to protect you. Cullen noted the places where iron ore could be taken from the rocks, where the sprigs of elfroot curled up beneath the carpet of snow, and tried not to step on a nug that burst from the undergrowth and skittered across their path.

Finally, the herald spoke again. “Why did you want to be a templar?”

Now that was unexpected. Cullen blinked once, twice. “Why do you ask?”
She looked pained, like she’d rather discuss anything else, but pressed on. “I just… I’ve been smuggling and fighting for the free mages for years now. And I suppose I got used to thinking of all templars as the enemy. And I’m aware that they aren’t all out to kill us,” She said this quickly, as if sensing the rebuttal that had been forming on his lips. “But it felt that way. I just want to understand.”

Cullen felt a pounding in his head. It had been difficult for him to reconcile the boy he’d been, with all the hope and promise and longing to protect the innocent, with the reality of what the Order had been. The reality of what he’d become under their influence. He opted for the simplest truth. “I could think of no finer calling than protecting those in need.” Cullen hoped that was enough, but the Herald gestured for him to continue, so continue he did. “I used to beg the templars at our local Chantry to train me. At first they merely humored me, but I must’ve shown promise, or at least a willingness to learn. The Knight-Captain spoke to my parents on my behalf. They agreed to send me for training. I was thirteen when I left home.”

He wasn’t sure when his hands had begun shaking.

“Thirteen.” She said, her voice so very far away. “That’s still so young.”

“I wasn’t the youngest there. Some children are promised to the Order at infancy.” Cullen hastened to add, utterly unsure of why he was bothering. “Still, I didn’t take on the full responsibilities until I was eighteen. The Order sees you trained and educated first.”

“What sort of training?”

“Well, there is weapon and combat training.” Cullen began, casting his mind back to those early days. It had been a long time since he’d thought about his life before Kirkwall. Before… He shook himself out of that thought quickly. “Initiates must also memorize portions of the Chant of Light, study history, and improve their mental focus.”

“And did you enjoy it?”

“I suppose so.” A memory from his past that didn’t fill Cullen with regret was a rarity; he almost didn’t believe it was real. “I wanted to learn everything. If I was giving my life to this, I would be the best templar I could.”

She was starting to smile now. “A model student, were you?”

He chuckled. “I wanted to be. I wasn’t always successful. Watching a candle burn down while reciting the Canticle of Transfigurations wasn’t the most exciting task. I admit, my mind sometimes wandered.”

“And are there vows?” she tucked a lock of hair behind her ear; he was so sure that this would be boring but she was nodding along with him, keeping pace with him as they walked along the path, snow crunching beneath their boots. “I never got the impression that being a templar was a lifetime commitment.”

Cullen almost laughed, but caught himself in time. “It absolutely is. Templars give their lives to the Order and the Maker, one way or another.” He cleared his throat and carried on quickly, hoping that she wouldn’t notice the bitterness in his tone. “There is a vigil first. When it’s over, you give yourself to a life of service. That’s where you’re given a philter- your first draft of lyrium- and its power. As templars, we are not to seek wealth or acknowledgement. Our lives belong to the Maker and the path we had chosen.”
The words were rote and over with quickly, though they tasted like ash in his mouth. How many years had he given to the Order, to the Chantry, to the Maker? And how many years of penance would it take to wash away the horrors he’d been subject to, the horrors he’d subjected on others? There was a pounding in his head, a parched dryness at the back of his throat that he could not slake no matter how he tried.

The herald stopped walking, but it took him a few moments to notice that she was no longer with him. When Cullen turned back to look at her, she was stock still on the path, arms crossed and her head cocked to one side, blond hair falling almost to her shoulder. She had that assessing look in her eyes again, like she was seeing right through him. He hoped it wasn’t true.

Finally she spoke. “I can’t make you out at all Commander.”

He hadn’t been expecting that. “I thought I was easy.”

“So did I,” She said faintly. “But you’re not.”

Hestia reached up slowly to card her fingers through her hair, pulling it out of her face. She really did have more freckles than Cullen had ever seen on a person before. He thought the guard captain in Kirkwall had been freckly but the Herald put Aveline to shame.

“I think the problem was,” she said, her words slow and measured, her mouth pursing around them, “I decided who you were, before we really got a chance to have a conversation. Clearly.” She gestured toward him, somewhat helplessly, “It was a mistake. I…”

She stopped. Swallowed. And for the first time all day, she met his eyes.

Cullen swallowed. Her gaze was… it wasn’t ashamed but there was certainly no pride. She was really struggling to apologize. And he shouldn’t have been, but he was touched. It would’ve been easier if she had ignored this, had continued to blame the templars, had continued to blame him. He’d seen people make that choice before, to invest in their anger instead of admitting fault. He’d done it himself.

So, he took the step she couldn’t, and held out his hand to shake. “Shall we start again?” He asked, trying for a smile. “Cullen Rutherford, Commander of the Inquisitions forces.”

Hestia blinked, and then her face broke into a dazzling smile, white teeth flashing against her skin. She reached out, took his proffered hand and shook it. “Hestia Trevelyan, former smuggler for the free mages.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you Herald.”

“Hestia, please.” She said. “I’m not much fond of ‘Herald’ or ‘your worship’ really.”

“I’m not very fond of Knight Commander.” Cullen returned, but he was smiling while he said it.

“Commander Rutherford it is then.”

“Cullen, please.” He echoed.

“I can call you Cullen?” She raised her eyebrows.

“If I can call you Hestia.” He said, grinning.
Lord Seeker Lucius was still ignoring the letters Josephine had sent him, but Cassandra was certain that he could be reached. Accordingly, Cullen and Rylen had asked every templar that had joined their ranks thus far to send birds to all the templars they knew, at least the ones that were still fighting. It hadn’t been an order, Cullen had been very clear that this wasn’t required of them, but a fair few of them had already handed in their notes. Lysette had been writing furiously for days.

Cullen hadn’t anticipated this being so difficult. When Cassandra had offered him a place in the Inquisition, he’d jumped at the chance. He’d wanted to leave it all behind him, Kirkwall, Meredith Stannard, The Order, the whole bloody mess. He hadn’t really considered what had happened to the friends he’d made. But after the first few letters, Cullen was rapidly running out of ideas. He’d even considered writing to Samson, but eventually decided against it. Cullen didn’t anticipate a positive response from the man, or any response for that matter.

When his stomach growled audibly, Cullen gave up. He shoved away from the war table and ran his fingers through his hair, resolving to discuss this further with Cassandra when he saw her next. Time to duck into Flissas tavern and hope that she still had some of that heavenly smelling stew that she’d been cooking all afternoon.

The tavern was always packed, and Cullen didn’t usually get dinner this early, so he was almost overwhelmed by the wash of noise and warmth that rolled over him as soon as he stepped through the door. He tried to stay away when the soldiers were relaxing, let them enjoy themselves without worrying about the officers judging them. Rylen had already (anonymously) donated a pair of boots towards the fermentation of anything that could be made into alcohol that inevitably cropped up whenever soldiers made camp.

He collected his stew and a warm coffee and was just heading back for the door when a hand reached out to tug at his arm. “Hey Curly,” Varric said, two flagons of ale in his other fist. “Sit with us, yeah? I’m teaching Buttercup how to cheat at Wicked Grace.”

“No, Varric.” Cullen started to protest. “I’m just going to-”

“Come on.” Varric cajoled, already dragging Cullen towards the table in the corner. “It’ll be good for you.”

Cullen probably could’ve walked away if he really wanted to, but he allowed the dwarf to drag him over to the table out of the way of the back door to the tavern. Rylen was there, as well as that elf Sera and the her- er, Hestia.

“Ah, Cullen.” Rylen said shortly, putting her cards back down on the table and nodding to him. “Good, perhaps now I don’t have to lose this game for the rest of the evening.”

“If it makes you feel better Starkhaven, Sera has been stealing your good cards for the last few hours.” Varric said. He dropped on of the flagons in front of Rylen and the other in front of Sera, who attacked the ale with gusto.

“It doesn’t make me feel better, but it also doesn’t surprise me.” Rylen said cheerfully, raising his ale in toast. After wiping his mouth he said, “And Starkhaven? Really? That’s the best you can come up with? I would’ve expected better from the Nicknamer of Kirkwall.”

“Hey,” Varric spread his hands. “I call them like I see them.”

Hestia, who had seemed mostly occupied with spreading some soft orleasian cheese on a cracker,
looked up and said, “I would have suggested Dead Man.”

Cullen swallowed his soup fast, too fast. With the hot broth and mushrooms burning down his throat, all he could do was cough and sputter, “What?”

Sera was having similar trouble, having been drinking her ale and consequently shot a good bit of it out her nose. Rylen slapped the elfs back and laughed loudly. But Varric, now Varric had that crafty look in his eyes when he sensed a story he could borrow.

So the dwarf carefully passed his napkin to Sera and Rylen and said, quite calmly, “Explain.”

Hestia bit down on her cracker, completely nonchalant, but in the torchlight Cullen could see her eyes sparkling with mirth. The cracker immediately broke into pieces in her fingers, and after thoroughly clearing the crumbs from her face, she smiled and said, “I was referring to the tattoos. You’re aware of the Chasind origin?”

Rylen took a drink from his ale and shrugged. “I’ve heard something about them,” he said. “But that was years after I’d gotten the tattoo done. I was just being a rebellious kid before I took my vows to the Templar Order.”

Cullen remembered Rylen saying something like that once. He hadn’t bothered to pry, the situation in Kirkwall had been so dire that it didn’t matter what type of ink somebody wore on their face. If you had two hands and two feet and were willing to help, you were put to work, no questions asked. Details hadn’t been important.

But it made a certain sense. There had been many initiates that did the same as Rylen, just before their vigil. The older templars encouraged it, told them to get that recklessness out of their systems now, before they took their vows. Cullen hadn’t seen the point, but he’d snuck out with some other boys to help a friend get an ear pierced, try some strong Rivani liquor or… find some other way to become a man. Something to show they were still individuals, that giving their lives to the Maker didn’t mean giving up who you were. The less he thought about the night three of them had gone out so Gerald could see his sweetheart one last time and then he and Alistair had been caught by a Chantry sister the next morning, the better Cullens life would be.

Hestia nodded slowly at Rylan's words. “Well, there is Chasind tradition behind those. According to a reputable source, the Avvar people don’t use tattoos for simple decoration. May I?” She asked. When Rylen shrugged and nodded, Hestia reached out her hand and lightly brushed her fingertips across Rylan's chin. Cullen thought he saw his second blush. “The four lines down the chin, and the outline of the nose.” she said softly. “This is what is inked into the skin of fallen warriors before they are set on a pyre.”

“Well, um,” Rylen cleared his throat and took another quick swallow of his drink. “I, uh, I don’t know what I expected really.”

“Hold on, not so fast.” Varric said, while Cullen got busy looking anywhere but Rylan's face. If they made eye contact right now, it was very possible his second in command would never speak to him again. Varric pointed an accusing finger across the table at Hestia. “I can smell bullshit a mile away. Who is this reputable source of yours?”

“I have... a relation.” Hestia said, batting her lashes innocently at the dwarf. At Varric's unconvinced look, she smiled and said, “My cousin Ben, his mother grew up in an Avaar village. While we were… traveling around Ferelden-”

“Smuggling in Ferelden.” Varric supplied, cheeky grin fixed in place.
Hestia nodded and raised her mug of what looked like tea but could’ve been ale in acknowledgment of his point. “While we were traveling, Ben kept us all entertained with all the ways his mother’s people were superior to his father’s noble family.”

Sera was chewing on her lip during this, and as soon as Hestia had finished the girl asked, “So he’s a bastard then?”

Hestia laughed out loud, a bright and delighted sound, before immediately clapping a hand over her mouth. “As always, you’re completely right Sera.” she said, voice muffled from behind her fingers. “Pretty easy to figure out. You said ‘my cousin’ but you called the mum ‘his mother’ instead of ‘my aunt’.” Sera said, shrugging. After a second, she blinked and said, “Wait, were you keeping that a secret?”

Hestia laughed a bit more but shook her head. “No, it’s no secret. Ben has made it clear he has no interest in claiming the title and place as oldest male heir offered to him by my Uncle Kevain. He’s much happier making trouble in the outer reaches of Ostwick and occasionally helping out some free mages.”

“What does this have to do with our Starker friends tattoos?” Varric asked.

Rylen groaned reached out to cuff Varric around the head, but missed. “Don’t say Starker, that’s even worse.” he protested. “I still need the soldiers to respect me in the morning.”

“Starkers. Like he’s running around in his knickers.” Sera cackled into her flagon of ale, which was already almost empty. Cullen snickered, hiding the smile with a drink from his coffee.

“Well, he knows the tradition because he has the same tattoos.” Hestia said, nodding in Rylan’s direction. “He ran off once when he was about eighteen, just after my Uncle tried to legitimize him. Came back a year later with his tail between his legs. His father shouted for weeks, not that it made a difference to Ben. Apparently his teenage rebellion was more important to him than whether or not his family has to hand its lands and titles to a jumped up half son who has no idea how to control his children, let alone a city.”

The words were harsh and bitter, and she didn’t even seem to recognize that she was saying them until the words were out in the air. Over the rim of her cup, Sera’s eyes narrowed.

“Well now, Nomad, that smacks of bitterness.” Varric said, his shit eating grin fading a bit but not much. “Would you care to give us some context?”

Hestia tried to cover it with a weak laugh and a drink from her cup, but Cullen could tell she was shaken. “Come on Varric we’re eating. You don’t want me to unroll a family tree on the table just so you can make sense of my petty grievances.”

Cullen had nearly finished all of his soup by this point, having inhaled it while the others were talking. He’d had no idea that he’d been this hungry, and was just lifting the bowl to his mouth to sip the rest of the broth when the sound of a slammed cup made him jump. Sera had gotten to her feet, kicking back her chair with a scraping noise.

“Knew it.” The girl snapped. All traces of drunken mirth were suddenly gone from her face. “Knew. It.” She pointed an accusing finger in Hestia’s face, and if steam could shoot from pointed elfin ears, it would be doing so. “You can talk like you’re little and walk like you’re little, but you’re still just another nob.”

Sera burst out of the tavern at a run, checking a scout in the shoulder as she passed. Hestia was up
out of her seat and after her a moment later, checking the same scout and nearly knocking him to
the ground.

“Herald!” Rylen called, half rising from his seat.

Cullen was on his feet as well, extending a hand to the scout to help him to his feet. “You alright?”
He asked the young man.

“What was that about?” The scout groused, more boy than young man really.

“Search me.” Cullen said, patting his shoulder before releasing him and making to follow after
Hestia.

“Leave it Curly.” Varric called, although he looked as worried as Cullen felt. “She can handle
Buttercup just fine.”

“Sera isn’t like me.” Cullen retorted over his shoulder. “She may very well punch the Herald in the
face.”

He left the warmth and noise of the tavern behind and was met with bracing winds and another
flurry of snow. Clouds covered the moons but could do nothing against the light of the breach,
which cast long eerie green shadows and crackled soundlessly in the distance. Haven was too small
to get lost in but at night the shadows would have hidden a qunari with ease. If Sera didn’t want to
be found, he doubted the Herald could coax her from her hiding place.

But Cullen was underestimating the Herald it seems. He found her and Sera out near the half built
trebuchets, mostly by following the cursing. Somehow Hestia had caught hold of Seras knobbly
elbow and the elf was cursing a blue streak loud enough to wake the dead.

Cullen hung back in the shadows, one hand on his sword. It seemed like she had things under
control. If she really needed help, Hestia would probably shout.

She would shout, wouldn’t she?

“Let go you pissant bitch!” Sera shouted, struggling and twisting.

“Listen to me,” Hestia hissed, even though it was quiet enough out in this area that even a whisper
would carry. “Sera, listen. There’s friends of Red Jenny out in Markham right?”

“Who bloody cares!”?

“Have you heard of Eugene Trevelyan?”

Sera stopped moving, and looked at Hestia again. They were in shadow but he could hear the
scowl in her voice when Sera asked, “Why?”

“If Ben doesn’t accept his legitimacy as a noble son, Eugene is the only one with a proper male
heir.” Hestia said quickly. “His son will get everything, and if you know anything about Uncle
Eugene-”

“He’s a right arse!” Sera burst out suddenly, and Cullen fell back a step at the heat of it. “He grabs
at the maids, and beats up his elves when nobody’s looking. Friends in Markham have hit his
storeroom twice.”

“No less than he deserves.” Hestia agreed vehemently. “Now tell me, any friends complained
about Percy Trevelyan? Dark hair, beaky nose, templar with a mean streak?"

Cullen started, shocked at hearing a name he hoped never to think of again.

Percy Trevelyan. Even if Sera hadn’t heard of him, Cullen certainly had. He’d been stationed in Kirkwall for a few years, before some kind of misconduct had seen the man transferred elsewhere. Cullen had never had cause to complain about Percy’s performance of his duties, but that was the best he could say about him. The man had taken a certain amount of pleasure in bullying the tranquil. It should’ve been a warning sign, but Cullen had ignored it until an apprentice had turned up dead. Percy had been paying him special attention, and since nobody really wanted to involve Grand Cleric Elthina…

Another of Cullen’s regrets back to haunt him.

In the light of the moons, Sera shook her head. “Nobody’s gone after him, but I heard some things.”

“He’s worse than the rumors.” Hestia’s voice was flint and tinder. “If I’m too big to be a friend then let me at least say that he deserves anything your people throw at him. He’s worse than you know.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Sera asked suspiciously. “I thought family loyalty was the whole point for Marchers.”

Hestia shook her head. “Loyalty is only important if it matters to both of you. Percy proved a long time ago that he's not worthy of my protection.”

“What did he do to you?”

“Not my story to tell.” Hestia finally moved away from Sera, brushing her hair back from her face. Both women had blond hair, in the moonlight both heads were spun silver. “But if my family doesn’t find an heir, Percy gets everything. Nobody wants that prevented more than me. It’s not about being highborn or lowborn. I don’t have a problem with bastards, or little people or even orleasians. I have a problem with arseholes.”

Sera nodded, her face in shadow. “Right. Well. Good.” She said, seeming confused. After an uncomfortable moment, she broke into another run, pelting down the path and passing Cullen in a streak of movement.

After a moment Cullen stepped out of the shadow of the wall. He tried to be quiet but the snow crunched under his boots and Hestia’s head whipped around when he took a few steps. “Commander!” She said, pressing a hand to her chest. “You startled me.”

“Yeah, glad I caught her.” Hestia said, carding her hair back from her face with one hand. “The Inquisition does not want to be on Red Jenny’s shit list. I-”

Whatever she was going to say was cut off with a yelp as she fell, her foot caught on a pile of discarded timbers. Cullen rushed forward almost without thinking to catch her before she tumbled into the snow. She threw up an arm that hooked around his shoulders, swung around as all her weight settled into his arms.

For one breathless moment they stayed like that, a facsimile of a dip at the end of an Antivan dance, faces inches away. Her arm was thrown across his shoulders while the other was up against
his breastplate. Cullens hands were splayed against her back; he could feel the hitch in her breathing, the thrum of her heart. Her face was so close he could've counted her eyelashes.

He didn’t know the last time Hestia had been this close to someone, but for Cullen it had been a very long time indeed.

That thought broke whatever spell they had been cast under. Cullen got control of himself and settled her back on her feet. Hestia’s hand slid across his shoulders and down his arm, leaving goosebumps everywhere her fingers brushed.

“Everything all in order?” he asked, voice gruffer than he’d meant it to be.

Hestia’s face was flushed with color and she shot him a winning smile. “You’re quicker than you look. That must-ah shit!”

She buckled, folding into his hip and grabbing at his arm almost as soon as she let him go. She grit her teeth against the pain, and a quick glance saw her favoring her right foot.

“Is it your foot?” Cullen asked. He put his arm around her waist to support her weight, shoving down the shivering teenager inside him that thrilled at any contact with the fairer sex. He was a grown man, he could help Hestia without blushing and stuttering.

“My ankle.” Hestia hissed through her teeth, brows drawn together. She glanced up, apparently unphased by how close their faces were. “I just- don’t move, okay?” She asked, almost plaintively.

Cullen could only nod, could only watch while she reached for her foot, one hand enveloped in the misty white glow of a healing spell.

He could feel the magic from here, feel how she was pulling energy from the fade to knit the muscles and tendons back into position. It took longer than he expected to feel the tingling sensation on his skin, the tugging at the back of his mind, the sudden ache in his fingers and toes. It took longer each time for the lyrium to react within his blood. But now it was and the craving was worse than ever. Any plans he might have had for the rest of the night had flown out the window and now all Cullen needed to do was get away from her before he started shaking.

Hestia was barely finished before he set her back on her feet and all but jumped away from her, taking a deep breath and sending a prayer to Andraste that he could keep it together. “Is it-” he gestured at her foot.

“Not broken, just sprained.” She said, testing the joint for a moment before looking back up at him. Her brow was still furrowed. “Is something wrong?”

The headache was hitting him with the force of a summer storm, he pinched the bridge of his nose and willed the breach to stop existing, or at least stop spitting malevolent magical energy directly towards him. “If you say so.” He told her. “If you have things under control, I’ll bid you goodnight, Herald.”

“Are you alright, Cullen?” She asked, eyes concerned.

“Fine.” He said, gritting his teeth against a wave of nausea. That had been very good soup, but perhaps he’d wolfed it down faster than was wise. “It’s just been a very long day. The tavern was louder than I expected, my head…”

“Are you in pain?” Hestia took a step forward, and with a lurch of his stomach, he saw that wispy white glow of healing magic begin to swallow her hand once again. “If you like, I could-“
“No!” He hadn’t meant to shout. But if she used magic on him right now, even to help, he would certainly unravel.

In the shadows, he thought he saw hurt flash across her face. A moment later, it was gone, replaced by a civil mask. “Very well then.” She said, her tone carefully neutral. “Shall I fetch a sister? Mother Giselle?”

“It’s only a headache.” He told her, told himself, as if saying the words he might make it so. As it was, all the words did was make it worse. “It’ll go away on it’s own.”

She nodded, once. “Fine then. Goodnight, Commander.” She said, turning on her heel and picking her way back towards the house they had given her.

The long eerie shadows were suddenly broken by a parting of the clouds, letting shafts of silvery blue moonlights bathe Haven. The frozen lake and slanted hills that cupped Haven were all of a sudden painted a pristine white. Snow that had been gathering all evening was suddenly glittering and fluttering in a breeze; the same breeze tousled the Heralds mop of blond hair, spun silver under the lunar glow.

Cullen was in no shape to enjoy this night. He stumbled back to his tent and hoped and prayed that the tremors would pass before sunrise.

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He had gotten some sleep, but only after a long while. Cullen tried to be awake and collected by the time the soldiers were getting their boots on, but this morning he was late, emerging from the officers tent still buckling his armor when the recruits were nearly finished lining up for breakfast. For once, he let Rylen take the lead.

He and the sergeants had to bark to get them in line anyway, because the Herald and her party were leaving for Ferelden again. Cassandra, scowling at her horse and still looking like some painting of Andraste. Sera, grumbling and mad enough to spit and looking at nobody. Lady Vivienne decked out in silver and deep purple, looking unearthly beautiful and completely unsuited for rescuing soldiers from a bog filled with Avvar and undead skeletons.

Hestia arrived last, her brother by her side, tugging her long white gloves on and letting Shay strap her staff more securely to her saddlebags. She gave her brother a tight hug and a kiss on the cheek before he stepped back to stand among the chantry folk. She stopped to chat with Harritt, stretching out a leg to let him examine the greaves for a moment.

Cullen could feel the change in the watching crowd where before he only had sensed it. The scouts moved quicker with her around, the soldiers stood up straighter. Even the mothers seemed to speak with deference when she passed them now. As much as she tried to fit in with the scouts, drink with the soldiers, blend into the surrounding crowds and become one of the whole, the more they noticed her. Why did Hestia bother to resist? Cullen couldn’t understand it.

The Herald of Andraste couldn’t ever be a face in the crowd, not when she was the one the crowd looked to for strength.

Cullen wasn’t sure what possessed him to do it, perhaps he wanted to make some sort of amends for being so terse with her the night before. But when her horse was brought forward for her to mount, he reached out to lend Hestia a steadying hand before she tripped off the mounting block.
Hestia looked at him for a moment before taking his hand, using the other to take the reins and mount her horse. The warmth of her hand in his was there for the briefest moment, but Cullen knew even then that he’d be thinking about it all day.

Hestia swung her leg over. A cheer went up. She smiled.

Cullen blinked. He had never seen someone more alone.

Chapter End Notes

As always, a big hug and thanks to Illyria_Lives, for sharing her big family of trevs with me.
It had been a good day until they walked into the fade rift.

The road to Redcliffe was mostly deserted at this point. Hestia ought to have been more vigilant, but Cassandra was the one who knew where the fade rifts were on the map and she wasn’t even there when Hestia and Sera walked through an old stone archway and bumped into a demon.

It really had been for all of them an incredibly irritating few days. The Fallow Mire was the most apt name Hestia had ever heard, that awful bog had been nothing but undead and sucking mud and always the heavy thick stick of plague and mold and death. Wraiths had dotted the gloom with their glow, there were demons popping up out of the trail markers, a fucking bear had wandered into a campsite, Sera and Vivienne were arguing about nothing night and day… it was a wonder any of them had made it out alive, and that was before they’d had to fight that Avaar warrior for the Inquisition soldiers. Sera was right, he had been twice the size of an ordinary man and fell twice as hard.

But they had made it out of there with seven Inquisition soldiers in tow, each of them whole and healthy. Sera and Vivienne had left the mire without strangling each other, and they had even managed to find the warden that Leliana had asked them to look for. He didn’t know much about the missing wardens but he was quick with a shield bash and seemed well meaning. Cassandra had been convinced volunteered to bring the Inquisition soldiers safely back to Haven, Vivienne had been convinced promised to be polite during the negotiations in Redcliffe this afternoon, and Blackwall still had no idea that Hestia was the Herald of Andraste.

Well, he didn’t have any idea until this moment.

“Shit bugger piss!” Sera yelped, skittering back and letting three arrows fly in quick succession.

Hestia snapped up a shield out of habit and misty stepped away from the terror demon and his awful foot long claws. She heard Blackwall let out a mighty yell and bash the terror with his shield, but she didn’t have time to pay attention with the shade bearing down on her. Vivienne froze the demon solid just before the awful thing raked her with its own claws. Why did they all have claws? Hestia decided to forgo magic and hit the shade with her staff hard enough to shatter it into pieces. All of her movements felt sluggish and stunted, like moving underwater.

Sera stumbled into her, also moving sluggishly and the two of them were moved back onto the path. Sudden as that, Hestia’s body became her own again, her arms responded at a reasonable rate, her magic back in her fingers. She flashed Sera a grateful smile before slamming some lightning into that terror before it began it’s terrible screaming.

“It’s no use!” Blackwall yelled, as the terror was swept back into the rift. “They’ll just keep coming, we’ve got to leg it!”

“Don’t be ridiculous my dear.” Vivienne said, reaching for her flask of lyrium. “The herald can manage.”

“Wha?” Blackwall sputtered.

Hestia tore off her glove and shook out her left hand, feeling the mark already sputtering to life,
drawn almost magnetically towards the rift. She threw her arm up and felt the jolt as the mark forged its terrible connection, knitting closed this hole in the world and blocking more demons from being spit out from the fade. With a final flash, the fade tear sealed and disappeared, with only the tingling of magical energy in the air as a reminder of what had been there moments before.

Sera panted for a moment before shouldering her bow and smiling, saying, “That was fun.”

“Certainly strange,” Vivienne said, allowing her barrier to drop and planting her staff into the ground. “Nothing in my research indicated these rifts creating temporal distortions.”

“Is that what that was?” Hestia said, wiping the sweat from her brow. “It felt like my feet had got stuck in molasses.”

Blackwall, who until this moment had been very quiet indeed, finally spoke up. “What the fuck was that?”

“I thought you fought demons before.” Sera answered, blinking innocently.

“No.” Blackwall said shortly and pointed sharply at Hestia’s left hand. “That.”

“Oh, did I not mention?” Hestia waved her left hand at him, and the mark took this moment to crackle loudly and send pain shooting up to her elbow. Hestia ignored the pain and winked at Blackwall. “I sometimes answer to Herald of Andraste.”

“Huh.” was all Blackwall could say, his eyes glued to the mark. After a moment he tugged on his beard and grumbled. “You might’ve mentioned that before now.”

“And miss the chance of being treated like an ordinary person again?” Hestia said, tugging her glove back on. “Not for all the gold leaf in Orlais.”

She avoided the stares that statement drew and started into Redcliffe.

Their party was stopped by an Inquisition scout barely after they had entered the gates. “My lady.” He said, going to one knee.

Hestia looked back at Sera and Blackwall. “See what I mean?” she said, arching an eyebrow at them both. She turned back to the scout. “What’s your name?”

The scout looked up. “Brandon, my lady.”

“What’s been going on Brandon?”

“We’ve spread word that the Inquisition was coming, but you should know that nobody here was expecting us.” He said, serious eyes watching her.

“Nobody expected the Inquisition?” Vivienne said behind them, skepticism evident in every word. “Not even Grand Enchanter Fiona? What is she playing at?”

“Madame De Fer, you promised.” Hestia reminded her. Vivienne held her hands up in supplication, but a sneer still played around her mouth.

“If she was, she hasn’t told anyone.” Brandon the scout answered, shrugging. “We’ve arranged use of the tavern for negotiations.”

Before Hestia could say anything more, an elf in robes with feathery shoulders ran up to them.
“Agents of the Inquisition, my apologies.” he said breathlessly. “Magister Alexius is in charge now, but hasn’t yet arrived. He’s expected shortly.”

Hestia heard a rushing noise in her ears. “I-I’m sorry?” she asked, hoping this was all some funny funny joke. “Magister Alexius?”

The elf nodded, though she noted it was somewhat reluctant. “You can speak with the former Grand Enchanter in the meantime.” he added helpfully, before turning tail and starting his jog back into Redcliffe.

“Magister?” Blackwall repeated faintly.

“Former Grand Enchanter?” Hestia murmured, brow furrowed.

Hestia and Vivienne exchanged the same dumbfounded look. “We need to speak to Fiona.” Vivienne said, and Hestia nodded seriously.

The road into the town of Redcliffe was lined by tall pine trees, curling stalks of elfroot poking out between the roots. Hestia did her best to keep her footing as the hill began to slope sharply downward, toward the docks and houses. She’d become decently familiar with Redcliffe while working with the free mages. It had become a place of safety, one of the few left to them after three years of fighting. The villagers had been unhappy at first, but they were Ferelden and had taken the mages into their homes with only a little grumbling. With Fereldens it wasn’t about what you said, but what you did. It had taken less than six months for the free mages to be embraced, and if they weren’t family they were certainly more than just strangers.

But there was something odd now. Hestia saw mages everywhere, robes of every shade and color, staves of every wood and metal. But where was the blacksmith who told stories about the blight? Where were the twin boys who chased their dog around the town every day, getting underfoot and cackling when someone stepped in the dog’s leavings? Where was that merchant that blushed a deep red every time Hestia flirted with him?

Sera unwittingly voiced what Hestia was thinking. “Mages everywhere, but where are the normal people?”

“There is something very strange going on here.” Hestia murmured.

“Tia!”

A short and compact body pelted into her at a speed no one could possibly match. Hestia had to skitter back a few steps to avoid falling into the dirt, and looked down to see a young boy with a rash of yellow hair and a scar on his forehead with his arms wrapped around her waist.

Hestia willed herself not to cry. Oh thank Holy Andraste he was unhurt. “Levy.” She choked out, dropping to one knee and giving the boy a proper hug, pressing a kiss to the top of his head. “Levy, I’m so glad you’re safe.”

Levy pulled back from her, eyes sparkling, smile shining like the sun. His hair was longer, his cheeks no longer thin from hard travel. He was covered in dirt but he always was, a curious child surrounded by people he barely knew was always going to get into trouble. He began to move his hands, rapidly creating words in his fingersigned way. Where were you?

Hestia brushed some hair out of his face before signing back to him. I’m sorry I took so long.

Missed you.
Missed you too. What took you so long?

Got delayed. People needed my help.

He rolled his eyes. People always need your help.

She laughed a little, raising her eyebrows in challenge. Should I not help them?

He crossed his eyes at her. I didn’t say that. Where’s Seph? He asked, using his particular hand signal for Seph that looked like an explosion going off next to his ear.

Hestia’s throat was suddenly choked with tears. She’d hoped against hope that Shay had already written, that his father had already explained, this awful awful talk would not fall to her. Levy was eight years old but had already survived enough pain to fill three lifetimes. Hestia hoped she would never have to add to it. It wasn’t fair, to the boy or to her.

But if Hestia didn’t do this now she’d never be able to. Keeping it from him would only be worse. So she brought up her shaking hands and signed, Seph is gone.

What do you mean?

Seph is gone. Hestia signed again. Gone like our Markham friends.

The boys eyes widened and now tears slipped down his face. He roughly wiped them away with his sleeve, shaking his head. No no no, his hands were saying. Seph can’t be gone.

I’m sorry. Hestia began signing, over and over. I’m sorry. I’m sorry.

“Levy!” called a deep and familiar voice, and suddenly she all wanted to do was turn tail and run. “Levy where are you boy! Didn’t I tell you…”

The voice trailed off. Hestia looked up, brushing a tear from her face. “Hi Ben.” she said hoarsely.

Ben Tamrassen, sometimes Trevelyan, stood at the top of the steps a few feet away. Levy scampered back to his father, rapidly signing that Auntie Tia was back, but Seph was gone, it’s not fair, Seph is gone. Ben wiped a hand across his face, covering the deep blue tattoos for a moment. Hestia got to her feet, taking him is as she did, aware that he was doing the same. His gingery hair was badly in need of a haircut, his clothes were cleaner than they’d been when they were on road, his deep blue eyes wouldn’t leave her face.

Ben took two long strides and enfolded Hestia in his arms, swallowing her into his tight embrace. Hestia clung just as tightly and hid her face in his chest, letting the tears be shed quietly into his shirt. He smelled of the docks, but he always did. He held her too tightly, but he always did. Hestia had missed him so much.

Finally he spoke, in a voice strangled with emotion. “Maker’s Bride, Hestia. I thought you were dead.”

“Shay didn’t write you?”

“He did. Seeing words on a page and seeing you here in front of me are very different things.”

“Ben,” She whispered. There was so much to tell him, so many things to apologize for, that she barely knew where to begin.

As was his way, Ben said the words she longed to hear without even knowing that she wanted
them. “Don’t say it Hestia. What happened to Seph wasn’t your fault.”

Hestia took a breath, let it out. She’d heard it before, from Cassandra, Varric, Solas even. But it meant something more, somehow, coming from him. Someone who knew her. She loosened her grip, and Ben let her go. She wiped the tears from her face and he discreetly didn’t comment on them. Hestia did the same for him.

Levy waved a hand to get his father’s attention. Da, tell her about the - and here he used a new symbol, something Hestia didn’t recognize. He brought both hands above his head, and then quickly raised them another inch while pinching his fingers together.

“I was just getting to that.” Ben told him, signing it out along with the words spoken aloud. When he looked back at Hestia, his eyes were once again serious. “It’s good you’re here, because there’s been some real weirdness happening since you left.”

Behind them, Hestia heard Vivienne lightly clear her throat. She checked over her shoulder, not surprised to see Sera, Blackwall and Vivienne watching with different amounts of confusion on each face. When Vivienne arched one well groomed eyebrow, Hestia finally realized what a spectacular scene they must be making. She blushed and wiped at her face, trying to pull herself together.

“Boys, I’ve got some people to introduce you to.” Hestia said. Levy scampered back over to her side. “This is First Enchanter Vivienne of the Montsimmard Circle, Blackwall of the Grey Wardens and Sera… of Ferelden?”

“Ugh.” Sera pulled a face that made Levy giggle. “If I gotta be ‘Of Something’ then Ferelden is fine I suppose.”

Ben shook hands with Blackwall and Sera and did his best approximation of a respectful nod to Vivienne. “Ben Tamrassen, and this is my son, Levy.”

Levy patted her leg to get Hestia’s attention and did a quick sign. Hestia smiled. “Levy says he likes your horns.” She told Vivienne.

She could see Vivienne suppressing a smile. “He has good taste.”

“What’s with the,” Sera waved her hands around her head, “Whole thing that he does? Can we all talk in words we all understand?”

“My boy doesn’t hear right,” Ben said, putting a protective hand on Levy’s shoulder. Hestia felt her hands clench and forced them to relax. Sera meant well, it wasn’t her fault that her foot was permanently placed in her mouth. “We had a damn hard time teaching him to talk until we stumbled on the hand signs. Mostly we figure that if he knows what he’s saying and we know what he’s saying, it doesn’t matter how he says it.”

“It’s common enough.” Blackwall said gruffly, nodding in understanding. He was quicker on the uptake than he looked. “Lucky lad, to have such an understanding father.”

“Lucky we found each other.” Ben said, smiling fondly down at his son, who was currently in the middle of a crossed eyed staring contest with Sera. “But my story isn’t what we should be worried about right now.”

“Yes, you’ve been in Redcliffe for some time then?” Vivienne said, her voice low and urgent. “What has Fiona done that has got the rebels in bed with Tevinter?”
“I don’t know,” Ben told them seriously. “But I got a gut feeling that it’s only gonna get worse from here.”

Hestia twirled her staff in her hands, finishing her full spin before slamming it to the ground and letting the sigil of fire envelope the standing dummy. The flames consumed the straw filled target, licking up and up until the smoke consumed the whole target. She focused on the fire, letting it grow and grow until it seemed totally out of control, threatening to spread to the rest of the dummies.

She took a deep breath and hardened her mind, narrowing her focus in and in until she could feel the beating heartbeat of the flame, where she had first set it alight. She drew the tip of her staff through the air, drawing at the heat of the flames until at last, *at last*, they began to flicker and diminish. Slowly, the flames began to die, leaving only a smoking husk of a standing dummy behind.

Hestia fell back a step, feeling sweat on her brow. She wiped it with the back of her hand, taking a moment to breathe before the next exercise. It was certainly easier to light something on fire than to put it out. That was probably a profound thought, but she was too frustrated to care.

*Fucking magisters, fucking cultists killing all the tranquil, fucking Solas wants to keep fucking researching those fucking keystones, how could anything the fucking keystones lead to possibly be worth the cost.*

“Herald.” Called a voice she knew. Hestia turned to see Commander Cullen standing a good distance away, out of the path of the smoke. He raised his hand in greeting and came over to her, steering clear of her victim. “Afternoon.” he greeted politely.

“Afternoon.” She said, still out of breath. “And it’s Hestia.”

“Right.” He said, nodding to himself. The dark circles under his eyes seemed to be deeper today, but if he wasn’t going to complain then Hestia wasn’t going to comment. She of all people understood about trouble sleeping. Cullen gestured to the standing dummy. “Did he insult you?”

Hestia snorted, stretching out her shoulder. “It has been noted by those who understand such things that my combat magic isn’t up to snuff.” She said, doing her best not to fall into an impression of Solas. “It was suggested that I do some mental focus exercises to help with my stamina.”

“Have you been struggling in combat?” Cullen asked, seeming surprised. “Cassandra said something about your clumsiness, but.”

“My clumsiness isn’t really the issue,” She said, rolling her eyes. “I’ve managed to not trip over my feet today.”

“But if a demon sees that opportunity, you’ll be overwhelmed in moments.” He stepped back and started walking a slow circle around her, hand falling to the pommel of his sword, his eyes shifting into what Hestia had learned was his tactical expression.

“I think my mana control is the real issue here.” Hestia arched an eyebrow, trying not to make comparisons to a hawk circling in the sky. “Anything I can do to help?”
“Show me a simple staff sequence.” He said, ignoring her tone.

“Say that five times fast.”

“Hestia.” he leveled a serious look at her. Hestia did her best not to flinch, but he made it difficult. His eyes were tired, but still they caught the light and turned his hazel eyes golden. He nodded to the staff. “A staff sequence, please.”

Hestia shook herself out of it and raised an eyebrow, “Fine.”

She started into the simple offensive sequence. One burst of ice, then another, turning on her heel, sending another burst from behind her back, and another sweeping burst from the end of the staff, then forward to slam the end down on the ground. This resulted in a standing dummy covered in a fine layer of ice, already beginning to melt in the midday sun.

Cullen stood back away, watching intently. Hestia dropped out of her stance, suddenly self conscious. It’s not that he was looking at her with any real focus or malice. She’d be more comfortable if he had been undressing her with his eyes, at least then she’d know what was expected of her.

She arched her eyebrows at him. He frowned and said, “Try again, this time a proper attack. Stop when you feel yourself flagging.”

Hestia rolled her shoulders back again and took her stance, but a thought stopped her. “You’re not gonna hit me with a spell purge are you?”

Cullen blanched, steps pausing as his eyes snapped back to her face. “What?” he sputtered. “Because Cassandra hit me with one while we were sparring some weeks ago.” she continued, rolling her left shoulder back. “And while I can see what it is she was trying to accomplish, a little warning before it happens again would be very much appreciated.”

“You… wouldn’t get a warning in a real skirmish.” he said, folding his arms and nodding for her to begin.

Hestia started into the sequence again, letting the dance of it relax her. Eleyna had favored prayer and meditation before the Maker, but Hestia and Seph had both found some semblance of peace in the repetitive motion of combat magic. A blank wall doesn’t mind if you get angry at it. Of course, that blank wall doesn't critique your form and let you know that you could sprain your wrist if you spun your staff wrong. And Hestia had been so busy looking after apprentices that she'd never found the time to be more than passably decent at blowing something up. She let the staff skip through her palm once, twice, before slamming the end down and letting loose a gout of lighting.

The sweat and movement was warming her, but she found the breath to say over her shoulder, “So I should be braced for an attack at all times?”

“It’s not a bad idea.” She heard him mutter.

Left, right, spin. She was reaching the end of her limits, she could feel it, but with the commander watching she wanted to push. Didn’t want to disappoint. “I thank you for the suggestion, but I’m not in the habit of distrusting my allies.”

“We both know that’s not true.”

“I don’t,” She shot the earthen fist at the dummy and pivoted her heel out of her stance to look him
square in the face, planting the staff in the ground again. At the look on his face, his eyebrows raised and mouth almost in a smile, some of her indignation ebbed. “I don’t distrust you Cullen.”

“I know.” he said, starting into his circle again. “It was a joke.”

“I don’t.” Hestia insisted, utterly confused as to why she was bothering.

He spread his hands, shaking his head a little. “Sure, you fight with me at the war table every day because you like me.”

Hestia bit the inside of her lip, pushed her hair out of her face. It was true, she had been protesting some of his plans at the war table but she’d been chipping in with everyone’s plans. Wasn’t that what they wanted her to do? She’d recruited so many people, and they had to be given the right jobs. Had to be treated like people, not numbers. “I fight with you because I have a difference of opinion. We shouldn’t be throwing the soldiers at every problem, especially since you’re the one who’s always complaining that our boys aren’t ready for a real fight.”

“They’re never going to be ready unless they get into the field and see what the stakes are.” Cullen snapped back. He ran a hand through his hair, smoothing it back. He did that when he was frustrated, she had noticed.

“They know what the stakes are Cullen, we all know what the stakes are.” Hestia flung her arm out toward the Breach. The mark, her mark, chose that moment to crackle to life and send pain shooting up to her elbow.

She flinched but turned on her heel and began attacking the standing dummy with new intensity, suddenly furious. Bloody stupid soldier, he was never going to get it through his thick head. Stupid mark, trapping her here with these people who couldn’t decide whether they worshiped her or feared her. She channeled it into the magic, throwing two consecutive fireballs at standing dummy before hitting it with another burst of electricity.

“What would you say is your strongest school?” Cullen asked, unheeding of her roiling thoughts.

“I-” she paused, wiping her brow again. “I don’t know. I use primal spells in combat, most of the time.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

“Oh, you know. Most of the primal school, bit of creation, bit of entropy. I don’t think I ever mastered a particular school.” She admitted with reluctance, stepping out of the stance again. She was done, she could admit that, she could feel a bead of sweat rolling down her back. “I don’t think I can kill that dummy any more than I already have.”

Cullen looked at her with a critical eye. “Well, your stamina is below average but that’s to be expected. Mages that bloom late run into unexpected challenges.”

Hestia suppressed a snicker. “Did you just say bloom?”

He narrowed his eyes at her. “That’s the term.”

“I just never imagined you would use it.”

Cullen shot her a look. “Does being charming usually distract enough for people not to realize you’re lying to them?”
Her blood ran cold. Three different disaster scenarios popped into her mind, each trying to shout down the other. If she ran he’d catch her, if she knocked him out Cassandra would catch her, if she froze him to death Cassandra would catch her and then kill her. Shay was up in the chantry but if she got far enough they would use him as leverage to bring her back. Ben would go with her no question but Shay had all but become Mother Giselle’s second hand and it didn’t matter what promises Hestia had extracted from Leliana if she killed their commander here and now.

So she flipped her hair over to the other shoulder and gave him a winsome smile. “You think I’m charming? Why commander that was almost compliment.”

“Someone alert Mother Giselle,” Cullen bit out sarcastically, rolling his eyes. “Obviously I've taken ill.”

He pinned her with a look, those hazel eyes keeping her in her spot. “And you're still stalling. A mage with fifteen years of magical instruction should have mastered at least one school of magic, more likely two. If you have twenty years experience, as I suspect you do, that number jumps up to three or four.” he stopped, sighed, and ran a hand through his hair. “If you're honest with me, if you trust me, I can help you. If you insist on lying about what you're capable of, all you do is put yourself and the people you travel with in danger.”

Hestia wanted to object, but found she didn't have a leg to prop up this argument. “Have you talked to Leliana about this?” she asked quietly.

“About what? You?” Cullen shook his head. “Not really, why?”

Hestia shook her head in turn, eyes on the wreck of wood and straw that had been her standing dummy. The pole had snapped in half and now most of the bag lay on the ground, still smoking. “You just… sounded very similar for a moment there.”

“Herald?” Cullen asked, drawing nearer, concern in his gaze. Damn him.

“It’s Hestia.” She said automatically.

“Hestia, then.” he amended, waving it away.

He stopped short of her by a few feet, close enough for her to smell the oil he used on his sword and the leather of his gloves. Cullen let his hand drop to the pommel of his sword, letting the silence stretch on until Hestia was compelled to break it.

“Why did you want us to seek out the templars?” She asked softly, finally voicing the question that had been on the tip of her tongue for weeks. “Do you really distrust mages that much?”

“What?” Cullen blinked, thrown by the strange twist in the conversation. “What does that matter now? The decision has been made.”

“It matters to me.” Hestia said.

“Why?”

Why? Hestia’s mind echoed. Why was it so hard to talk to him? Bloody stupid soldiers are usually my bread and butter. What's wrong with me?

“Because we're going to ally with them if I have any say in the matter.” Hestia said fiercely, turning the frustration on him instead. “And you're afraid of magic. If you're going to have a problem with my people, or with me, I have to know now before it's too late.”
Cullen looked thunderstruck. It took him a moment to gather a response, which was just long enough for Hestia to think about whether it was a good idea to poke this particular sore spot. Well, the words were out in the air, she couldn't take them back now. Hestia had never let herself apologize for saying something that she believed in, even if it was cruel. Maybe especially then. It had got her into trouble before, but the difference was now she was alone on this ledge. It was cold up there.

Cullen took a breath, seeming to steel himself against some inner turmoil. “How many times will we be having this disagreement herald?” he asked, his voice like a cold wind. “What can I say that will satisfy you?”

“The truth would be a start.”

“If that were true we would’ve been done with this weeks ago!” he shouted, drawing looks from the chantry sisters and Iron Bull’s people that were skirmishing nearby. Cullen put a hand to his forehead and continued, quietly but no less fiercely, “Either you trust that I will do my duty to the Inquisition, regardless of my personal feelings, or you don't.”

“Trust goes both ways.” she told him.

He glared. “Should I point out that you haven't told me anything yet?”

“You first.” she responded, trying not to be reminded of bickering apprentices that they most certainly sounded like.

Cullen heaved an irritated sigh. “Are you always so stubborn?”

Hestia snorted in that inelegant way that always made her mother angry. “You are not the one to throw that particular stone my friend.”

Cullen scoffed, but he nodded. “No I suppose not.” he sighed again, deeper this time. “You said you would choose the mages because you know them. I feel the same. I know the capabilities of the templars better than anyone here, save perhaps Cassandra. We need veterans in our ranks. The recruits we have are dedicated but we’re not a real army, not yet. And beyond that, I just… believe it will be safer.”

She snorted derisively. “Safer? For the apostate mages here? For Cassandra? For you?”

“Yes,” Cullen snapped back, frustrated. “For myself, for Cassandra, and for you.”

“Me?” She said incredulously.

“Maker’s Breath Hestia, this isn't politics, it's just good sense. Have you looked at the Breach lately?” he flung a hand out toward the gaping maw that sat malevolently just over the next ridge, mocking them. “If the free mages are to help us, what do you expect them do? The enchanters will throw all their power behind your mark to close the Breach. The last time you tried that little maneuver it nearly killed you.”

She blinked.

“If the templars had agreed to help us, and I’m not saying they would have,” Cullen told her, gesturing emphatically with one hand. “But if they had, they’d be able to suppress the ambient magic of the area, perhaps suppress the power of the breach, taking the strain off you and off the mark so you could close it safely, without risking your life.”
“Oh.” She blinked, blinked again. That was never something she has considered. Stubborn loyalty made her say, “But the mages wouldn’t hurt me. They know me, I’m- I’m one of them.”

“Maker’s breath Hestia, it wouldn’t be intentional!” Cullen snapped, color coming into his face now. “But if one enchanter gets too excited or the mark overpowers you or... who knows what else could go wrong, you’ll be dead.”

“And you lose your only means of closing the rifts.” Hestia murmured, thinking it through.

Finally she saw what it was he was saying. Templar abilities would work, she’d seen it happen before in the circles. Cullen was a stubborn man, but he had a tactical mind. By attempting to recruit the mages they were all going out on a limb, not just politically but strategically as well. It was a risk, but she hadn’t been able to see just how big of a risk it was. Hestia looked up at the Breach again, trying to calculate just how much mana it would take to activate it properly. How much lyrium, how many enchanters. It was beyond her to capacity to know.

Something dark inside her whispered, *It took 99 blood sacrifices for enough power to break into the Golden City. Would it be enough to close the door again?*

“And we lose you.” Cullen said severely. Hestia’s gaze snapped to his face, to his serious eyes. “It’s not about the mark, though I won’t deny that’s a factor. But you have done much more for the Inquisition that just close some rifts.”

Hestia tried to protest. “I’m not-”

But Cullen wouldn’t let her. “You’re not some soldier or mascot or whatever it is you seem to think the Herald of Andraste should be. You can’t keep acting like you’re expendable.”

It was suddenly very hard for Hestia to breathe.

Hestia was always expendable, that was the point of letting her smuggle goods for the free mages. That was the point of joining the free mages. It’s why they let her take a break and go to the conclave in the first place. Ben needed to stay and work his contacts, Levy needed his father, Seph needed Ben to look after her. Hestia had been running so long, been fighting for so long. This war had been worse than anything she ever imagined. Children threatened and hurt by bandits, templars ambushing them outside cities and villages, tranquil dying due to neglect and ignorance. And always the running. Always fighting. Maker why couldn’t she stop fighting?

Cullen must’ve seen how stricken she was, because he slowly drew nearer and risked a hand on her shoulder. He peered into her face with those serious eyes. She felt the warmth of him, close enough to feel through her armor and the mountaintop chill.

“Is it always this hard?” she heard herself ask.

Cullen’s brows furrowed. “What?”

“Leaving the war behind?”

Confusion passed over his face for a moment, but only for a moment. Understanding dawned on him, and looked her in the eye and said, “Yes. I think it is.”

Well, honesty was better than nothing at all.

Hestia took a breath and tried for a smile. “Well,” She said, “Too late for the templars now. It’s the free mages or nothing. You’re just going to have to make sure I don’t die.”
Cullen heaved a sigh, but he gave a smile back in return. “I’m doing my damndest.”

He took a step back and started back toward the steps. She watched him go. Over his shoulder he said, “Try directing excess mana into your barriers. Might save your life.”

Hestia blinked. Looked at her staff. Smiled.

“This is like some kind of nightmare.” Hestia murmured, stepping back from the red whispering crystal.

“I’d caution against that school of thought, if I were the cautious type.” Dorian said, nimbly sidestepping a stream of water sliding through cracks above their heads.

“Thank the Maker you’re not, or this mess would be intolerable.”

“Shall I take that as a compliment?”

“You can if you like.”

The negotiations with Alexius had gone sour, just as Leliana predicted it would, and the whole thing turned into a trap, just as Cullen had predicted it would. But nobody, not even Dorian, had predicted for them to be tossed into some awful future where red lyrium grew from the walls of Redcliffe castle and Tevinter soldiers patrolled every hallway.

Hestia began to hum under her breath.

“I mean what I say though.” Dorian said, a note of warning in his voice. “There is the very real chance that we fail to return to the familiar present. And if we fail, we’ll have to get comfortable with the idea that this is our new world.”

“Don’t you worry about that.” Hestia grit her teeth around the words, walked with determination. “If I fail, it’ll be because I’m dead. I just got my brother back, I’m not losing him a second time.”

Dorian considered this, and her, with shrewd eyes. “Well, that’s one way to get motivated.”

They broke into another room and were prevented from further conversation by a spot of violence. After dodging the oncoming Venatori and preventing the zealots from killing them, Hestia wiped the sweat from her brow and flinched when the mark sputtered and fizzled again. Was she wrong or was this thing getting stronger?

“It seems to me,” She said, reaching out to haul Dorian to his feet again. “That even if we get back, there are bigger problems.”

“Do tell.” Dorian grimaced at the stains that the blood and water were leaving on the silk of his robe. “Is it the Venatori presence that is still at large? The fact that Alexius will undoubtedly be trying to kill us? The Ferelden muck getting into my boots?”

Hestia gave him a grim little smile. “Oh, those are just day to day life around here. I’m talking about this.” She pulled a fistful of fire out of the air and held it in her palm. It sat there dancing, the flames licking against her palm with no more heat than a sunbeam on her skin. “If you tell anyone I said this I’ll deny it, but I’m not the most talented mage. I know enough to protect myself, but I
was always better with theory and ritual casting. But since the Breach, the limitations of my magic have been falling away. Here, it’s even easier.”

Dorian’s eyes turned crafty as he caught her meaning. “I see. You think the Breach has interfered with what should and should not be magically possible.”

“Well, you said it yourself.” Hestia extinguished the flames with a shake of her hand. “You helped develop the theory for Alexius’s time magic. But before the Breach, that’s all it was.” She shouldered her staff and her smile turned fond. “If the First Enchanter of Ostwick knew, he’d jump for joy. He’s been trying to bind a spirit into a piece of clothing for decades.”

Dorian snickered. “Was he in desperate need of a bodyguard?”

“No, he was mostly trying to prove he could. Old bastard was always complaining about what he deemed ‘templar interference into academic pursuits’.” Hestia pitched her voice into an imitation of the old man. “If it’s in a safe and stable environment, what’s the harm?”

“Well that’s reasonable, in a safe and stable environment.” Dorian said, following her down the hallway. “But what happens when the magic you developed in theory is used against you?” There was a bitter edge to his words.

“Well, it’s a good thing we’re going back and stopping it.” Hestia said, trying to sound jovial and not sure if she succeeded. “You can point out the flaws in the research to Alexius when—what was that?”

The two of them fell silent and listened at a doorway for a moment. There was no sound of movement, only a voice filtering through the door. Was that a drinking song? Hestia caught Dorians eye and he nodded sharply, readying his staff. She reached for the handle and pushed the door in slowly. When nobody came to investigate, Hestia leaned around the wall to check the room.

It was another set of jail cells, dripping with water and lit only by the sinister glow from the red lyrium. And in one of the cells sat—

“Varrie?”

“Andraste’s sacred knickers! You’re alive.” Varric got to his feet, shock all over his wonderful little face. Something was going on with his voice, a whispering beneath his words that grated on the ear. “Where were you? How did you escape?”

“We didn’t escape.” Dorian replied while Hestia fumbled with the keys to open the cell. “Alexius sent us into the future.”

Varric snickered. “Everything that happens to you is weird.”

Hestia dropped to one knee to pull Varric in for a hug, but he stepped out of her reach. “No Nomad that’s not the best idea.” He said, holding up his a hand for her to see. There was some sort of strange miasma floating across his skin, and his eyes were bloodshot and rimmed in red. “Wouldn’t want you to get sick too.”

“What happened?” she asked, looking him over. If she didn't know any better she would guess he was—

“It’s the red lyrium.” Varric said, shrugging. “I look damn good for a dead man.”
Hestia leaned back so far she tumbled over backwards. Varric smiled sadly while she scrambled up off the damp prison floor. “Yeah,” the dwarf sighed, “That’s the right reaction. Turns out when you’re force fed red lyrium, this is what happens to you.”

“Varric.” Hestia murmured. Her heart began to ache.

Thankfully, Dorian was there to move past this heart wrenching conversational roadblock. “We get to Alexius, and I just might be able to send us back to or own time.”

“That may be more difficult than you think.” Varric said. “Alexius serves someone called the Elder One, he’s the real threat here. He assassinated Empress Celene and let an army of demons across Orlais. Alexius really isn’t the one you should worry about here.”

Hestia looked over at Dorian. “Are you sure this isn’t a nightmare?”

Dorian wrinkled his nose. “If it was, there would be less damp.”

They found Varric’s crossbow in a bag in the next cell, and then found Cassandra in another set of prison cells. But the real find was waiting at the bottom of the stairs.

Fiona leaned against the wall of her cell, propped up by a solid mass of red lyrium at least four feet tall. Her eyes had that same red bloodshot tinge that everybody had. Her voice had the same whispery quality. She was further gone than anybody else they’d seen so far.

“Ah shit.” Varric murmured behind Hestia. “She’s got a few days at most.”

“Can you tell us the date?” Dorian asked urgently. “It’s very important.”

“Harvestmere, 9:42 Dragon.” Fiona rasped with difficulty.

“9:42? So we’ve missed an entire year.” Dorian and Hestia exchanged a look.

“Only one way out of this mess.” Hestia said, shrugging her shoulders and pointedly not staring at Fiona. “Back the way we came.”

“You must beware.” Fiona rasped, sounding as if every word came with extreme effort. “Alexius serves the Elder One, more powerful than the Maker. No one challenges him and lives.”

“I can’t wait to meet him.” Hestia said grimly.

“Our only hope is to find the amulet that Alexius used to send us both here.” Dorian said, finally voicing what must’ve been turning over in his mind since they’d crash landed into this hellish place. “If he hasn’t destroyed it, I can use it to reopen the rift at the exact spot we left. Maybe.”

“Good.” Fiona rasped, eyes glinting like fire.

Dorian raised an eyebrow. “I said maybe. It may also turn us into paste.”

“You must try. Your spymaster is here, Leliana.” Fiona told them, before coughing so hard she seemed to be losing breath. When she looked up at them again, she had blood leaking from between her lips. “Find her.”

Hestia wanted to say something more, but Varric ushered her away. “Come on Nomad.” He said, very kindly for a dying man. “The only way you help her is to stop this ever happening.”

Hestia cursed under her breath all the way back up the stairs. She’d never been in this part of
Redcliffe Castle, but it was so eerily familiar, she swore it must’ve been torn out of her blackest
dreams. Cutting down spirits and and Venatori only made it worse. The stench of death was
everywhere, the smell of magic and lyrium and ozone in her nose until she felt she'd be sick with
the weight of it.

Alexius is going to pay, she thought, her stomach boiling with anger, tearing through one fade rift
after another until they finally skidded into the entrance hall.

They had opened another rift in here, of course, because fighting magister cultists wasn’t difficult
enough. Cassandra let out a howl of frustration that doubled eerily inside your ears. The warrior set
to work cutting down the demons, backed up by the ruthlessness of Leliana’s bow. Whatever those
magisters had done to age the Nightingale past her years had done nothing to diminish the bard’s
fighting spirit, and she let the arrows fly with deadly efficiency, striking enemies in the throat, in
the eye, in those tender places where the armor could not protect.

Varric and Hestia had worked out their favorite strategy a few weeks ago (months and months ago
for Varric, Hestia had to remind herself with a twist of guilt) and it was all they could do to keep up
with Cassandra. Dorian was an anomaly that continually surprised, the way he danced through the
danger with a mocking laugh always close at hand. When he lit a shade on fire and Hestia saw the
shit eating grin through the flickering flames, she finally understood.

He’s from Tevinter. He never felt ashamed of his power. Where he comes from, it’s something to be
proud of. Hestia thought, wiping the blood from her face. I wonder what that must be like?

“We should talk, when we get out of here.” Dorian huffed, after she’d sealed the rift in the main
hall. “If we get out of here.”

“Any subject in particular you’re interested in?” Hestia said, leaning her weight against her staff
and wishing she had some water or crackers or orange juice. If she used any more magic today,
she’d fall flat on her face. These magisters didn’t seem to have left a lyrium stash anywhere, not
that they used it.

“I could of course hold discourse on any number of scholarly subjects,” Dorian said, flicking his
robe back over his shoulder with a flourish of his arm. His clever eyes traveled all around the room
before they lit on her face. “But, I think the first order of business should be discussing where you
learned that song.”

Hestia did a double take, sure she’d heard wrong. “Song? What song?”

“The one you’ve been humming incessantly, Andraste’s Final Prayer.” Dorian looked at her oddly,
before a delighted smile broke over his face. “You don’t even know you’ve been doing it, do you?”

Hestia tried not to blush. She hadn’t in fact. “I suppose it’s a nervous habit. I’ll try to stop, it’s
probably going to give us away.”

“Don’t bother, we’re nearly through anyway.” Dorian told her, flipping a hand to wave away her
concerns. “Perhaps when this is through I can teach you the words.”

“I know the words.” Hestia rolled her eyes and caught Varric watching them with what seemed to
be a fond smile on his face.

“Ah, but can you sing it in the original tevene?” Dorian asked, mouth curled into a cat like grin.

Hestia’s head snapped back to him, heart leaping. “You know Final Prayer in Tevene?” She tried to
keep the longing from her voice, but from the amused look on Dorian’s face, she hadn’t succeeded.
“I’ve been searching for that translation for…” she cut herself off with a laugh. “Well, longer than the Ostwick Circle choir director said I could look.”

“We can continue this discussion another time.” Cassandra said shortly, nodding to the door at the end of the hall. “Perhaps you can tell us something of that door, Tevinter.”

Dorian and Hestia shared a glance that said, very clearly, ‘to be continued’.

While they fussed over the door and started the search for the lyrium shards that made Hestia’s palm buzz in an unpleasant way, Hestia went through the words to Andraste’s Final Prayer in her mind. It had been Elayna’s favorite, and Hestia had used the song to put the youngest apprentices to sleep well into adulthood. That had been one of the reasons the Grand Enchanter recommended for Hestia to be the caretaker of the apprentices until they were old enough for one on one mentorship.

“You’re great with kids Hestia, you speak their language.” Senior Enchanter Lydia had said to her once, when Hestia had asked. “Some other life would’ve seen you as a great midwife or mother to your own children. It’s a shame, really, that you can’t have a few of your own.”

“No it’s not.” Hestia had snapped back, full of bitterness and vitriol for the walls that kept her locked away from all she’d ever wanted. “I’d rather be celibate forever than let the Chantry take them from me.”

Lydia had looked over the top of her spectacles at her, full of that endless patience that had, at the time, made Hestia want to throw things at her. Did the woman never feel anything but amusement? “I meant because you’re so angry all the time. You’ll tire yourself out, and then when a real fight comes you won’t have the strength to fight for what matters.”

At the time, Hestia had spat an insult and stormed out of the office, but maybe Lydia hadn’t been a little bit right. She had spent so long fighting those little battles, unaware of the enormity of the war that was headed her way. But, Hestia thought, as she watched Alexius fall, the last casualty in a day soaked in death, maybe all that anger was just preparing me for this. I know how to fight for what I want now, thanks to you Lydia.

And as she watched her friends fall, already lyrium sick and hurting, she thought about that song. Was this how Andraste felt? Had she been hopelessly out of her depth, barely keeping her head above water? Or, had she found that her life had, without her knowing, been preparing her for this?

“Lead us to a place,” Hestia began, feeling tears in her eyes when Leliana and Dorian joined in, a discordant and emotional harmony. “Guide us with your grace, to a place where we’ll be safe.”

Chapter End Notes

As always, a big hug and thanks to Illyria_Lives for sharing this fucked up family with me.

I'm susuwatarisprinkles on tumblr and sootsprites94 on twitter, drop me a line sometime!
just as He called me

Cullen walked into the war room, arms filled with papers, to encounter an argument already in progress.

“We cannot just turn them away.” Josephine snapped at Cassandra, hands clamped tightly to her ever present writing board. “In the wake of allying with the mages, the Inquisition's reputation is more precarious than ever.”

“There is barely enough space in Haven for our soldiers, and now the mages are whining about conditions.” Cassandra returned, arms crossed. “I understand your concern, but we simply do not have room.”

Cullen placed his papers on the table and caught Leliana watching him. She had been the most vocal about allying with the mages, and now that she had her victory she was being unbelievably smug about it.

“The Herald will be closing the breach any day,” Josephine brushed some dark hair back from her face, and Cullen could hear the excitement in her words. “And there are plenty of people who want to witness such an historic moment. Surely, this one time-”

“You can’t guarantee it will be just this once.” Cullen said mildly, placing the stack of papers down next to Leliana. “As our reputation grows, so do the number of visiting nobles and the laundry list of their demands.”

“And we must do our best to make sure those visits are positive.” Josephine was showing remarkable patience in this argument, though Cullen couldn’t see why she was bothering. “Once the breach is closed, the Inquisition will need noble allies more than ever.”

Cullen pinched the bridge of his nose, sudden understanding flashing through his mind. “I see. This is about moving the camp. Again.”

Josephine had the grace to look guilty about it. “There have been some concerns.” She admitted. “I know we’ve all grown fond of Haven. But you said it yourself Lady Cassandra. We are running out of space. Several of the people visiting have made it clear that if we are successful-”

“They would be willing to donate land and lodging.” Cassandra finished, planting her hands on the war table. She looked so much like a war general when she did that, Cullen had to remind himself that it was he that was in charge of the armies, not her. “The idea is tempting, Lady Josephine. But we must see this task through, before we start thinking about what to do next.”

Cullen nodded. “Cassandra is right. We cannot afford to have our attention divided.”

At the sight of the united front of Cullen and Cassandra, and with no help incoming from Leliana, Josephine relented. “Oh very well. We can leave the matter for now. But you’ll think about it?” she added hopefully.

They promised they would, and Cullen thought he saw Leliana smile.

When she spoke, the smile was gone. Perhaps he'd imagined it. “If I could draw our attention back
“Which one?” Cullen settled his hand on the pommel of his sword.

“Not this again.” Cassandra said wearily.

At his questioning look, Josephine murmured, “The Right and Left Hands are still conflicted on the subject of leadership for the Inquisition.”

“Still?” Cullen was incredulous, how long would they talk in circles about this? “I thought we settled this last night.”

“And then I had some time to think about it.” Cassandra snapped. She took a deep breath, running a hand across the short crop of her hair. She glanced up at him and grimaced, an apology.

Leliana shifted, tucking her hands behind her back. “We feel that neither Cassandra or myself would be good choices for Inquisitor.”

“Because of your ties to the chantry?” Cullen asked, following the line of thought to its inevitable conclusion. Two former members of the chantry’s highest echelons, who worked closely with the Divine, Cullen knew there were those who would assume this was a grab for power in a time of crisis. Cullen scowled at the thought. “Why do we care what the chantry thinks of us anyway?”

“The chantry is not going away any time soon.” Josephine shook her head. “As long as we must interact with them, we should do our best not to insult them.”

“Chancellor Roderick still deserves to taste the toe of my boot.” Cassandra griped, but she was smiling as she said it.

Josephine sighed. “So we are back where we were before.”

“Not necessarily.” Leliana picked up a few papers and spread them on the table for the rest of them to see.

Josephine spoke first. “The Herald?”

Cassandra sent a questioning look towards Leliana who was suddenly looking elsewhere. “Hestia? Are you certain?”

Leliana shrugged, if the nightingale could do anything so unrefined as shrugging. “Why not Hestia?”

Why not Hestia? Cullen turned it over in his mind as he left the meeting. It wasn’t as if she was running away from them anymore. The last week she’d been instrumental in bringing the last of the mages to Haven and helping them find their feet. Cullen had expected more fights and whining but there had been barely any.

The chantry was always chilly and smelling of sweet candle smoke, but it was a damn sight better than outside. Most of the chantry sisters had retreated in before the sun set, with Mother Giselle directing them all this way and that way, an intricate dance of healers and helping hands. Torches burned merrily in sconces lined along the walls, to chase away the long shadows of the night. It was emptier than Cullen had expected, chilly night like this.

Shay Borchard saw him first and fell in step almost soundlessly. “Good evening Commander.”
“Good evening Mr. Borchard. Would you happen to know where all my officers have gone?” Cullen asked.

Shay had one of those small amused smiles he always seemed to have. “Apparently there's a lot of alcohol being consumed in the tavern. A sort of final send off, since we’re attempting to close the breach tomorrow.”

Cullen shook his head in bemusement. “Should've known. If there's anything mages and soldiers have in common, it's the tendency to jump at the chance to drink away their troubles.”

Shay chuckled softly. “I sympathise. Ostwick city is almost entirely docks, and sailors have been known to drink their wages just before they head back out to sea.”

They let the walls of the chantry behind, letting the bitter wind whip them in the face with its icy tendrils. There was indeed light and noise spilling from the open doors of Flissas tavern, and he could see people stumbling out, in twos and threes, giggling and then being shushed by a companion only for that companion to begin to laugh again.

Quite disconcertingly, Shay found a way to say quietly into Cullen's ear, “So I hear you're thinking of making my sister your Inquisitor.”

Cullen started, eyes wide. “What? Who told you that? How do you even know that?”

Shay smiled mysteriously. “I know everything.” at Cullen's glare, the man chuckled and relented. “Sister Leliana discussed the subject at length with Mother Giselle the other night.”

“And you are Mother Giselle’s assistant, and thus privy to sensitive information.” Cullen finished the thought, shaking his head ruefully. He really ought to be more upset about this, but he wasn't. If anything, he was grateful it was only this man, who was practiced at keeping things to himself. “Well, I would appreciate it if you don't tell anybody else. We haven't decided on anything.”

“Your secret is safe with me, ser.” Shay nodded, looking thoughtful. “May I ask which way you're leaning?”

“Do you mean the Inquisition leadership or me personally?”

“The latter.”

Cullen heaved a sigh, his hand flexing on the pommel of his sword. “I thought Cassandra was the natural choice.” He admitted, voicing the thoughts he'd had on and off all day. “Now that she's declining, all I know for certain is that it can't be me.”

Shay nodded thoughtfully. “Interesting.”

Cullen had been bracing for the question, even expecting it. Not having to answer it left him wrongfooted. To fill in the silence before it became a proper pause, he asked, “Do you have any thoughts?”

“Oh I wouldn't want to presume-”

“No no, please.” Cullen said, gesturing for Shay to continue. “And outside perspective on the situation would be helpful.”

“Well it'll hardly be a biased opinion.” Shay said, tucking his hands into the sleeves of his robe.
“Shay, and I say this in the kindest possible way,” Cullen said, rolling his eyes. “Just spit it out.”

“Well of course it should be Hestia, she is the only possible choice!” Shay burst out, immediately drawing embarrassed glances from a few of the people standing outside the tavern doors. Shay looked embarrassed and steered them down the steps away from listening ears. Then continued. “The way I see it, my sister is the best candidate, by far. Elevate her to Inquisitor and she will spend every waking moment ensuring the success of your operation and the safety of her people. Hestia will make your success her mission.”

Cullen was a little shocked, not by the declaration but more by the vehemence behind it. But then, Shay was her brother, adopted or otherwise. Cullen could see, every person in Haven could see how much Hestia and Shay cared for each other. “Well,” He said after a moment. “You were right about it being an unbiased opinion.”

“I did say it would be.” Shay rubbed the back of his neck, a little sheepishly. “I do however believe it. And I'm not in the habit of overestimating a person's abilities, not even if they are someone I care about.”

“So you really think she should get the position?”

“No ser, that is not what I said.” Shay argued. “I said Hestia would be the best candidate. If it were my choice however, I would give the position to quite literally anyone else.”

Cullen furrowed his brow, but it took only a moment to follow the thought. “Hestia would do well, but you love her too much to wish her that much hardship.” He murmured.

Shay nodded seriously. “My sister already believes that the weight of the world is on her shoulders. This decision would make it true.” The man stopped walking, turned his head to gaze up at the Breach. The Breach that they were hopefully going to close forever tomorrow.

“How long can one person hold up the sky,” Shay murmured, “Before her bones begin to break?”

Cullen looked at the breach. It glowed with malevolent light, crackling just over the ridge. He knew it couldn't possibly be true, but Cullen could swear he could hear the screech of the great maw in his dreams at night.

“You sound remarkably like my mother right now.” Cullen said, looking over to see a Shay blink before a small smile spread across the lay brothers face. “I can remember listening at the door, hearing her arguments with my father about sending me to train with the templars. I could've been twenty years younger right now.”

“From what my brother says, parenthood is only that.” Shay chuckled a little as he said it, scraping his hand over his closely shaven head. “Hope and fear in equal measure. Shall we see what mischief they've gotten up to in the tavern?”

Cullen decided against commenting on the swift change of subject. Those Trevelyans got quite cagey when the subject of family was brought up. “No, I should let the soldiers relax. You go ahead, I have some work to do.”

“Are you sure? I thought I heard something about Hestia doing The Maid of Starkhaven.”

Cullen nearly choked on his own tongue. “What?” he sputtered.

Shay laughed out loud, a deep and deeply delighted sound. “It's a song, Commander. The Maid of Starkhaven is a sea shanty.”
Cullen felt his face going red. “Oh.” was all he was able to say. “I- I see.”

Shay was still laughing. “We're from Ostwick ser. We learned the sailors songs before we knew what most of the words meant.”

“You know, for a lay brother, you do like to humiliate templars quite a bit.” Cullen said, grinning.

Shay shrugged, grinning back. “I have given my life to the Maker, I have to take my fun where I can get it.”

Cullen did go with him to the tavern after all. It was hot and noisy, stuffed to the rafters with soldiers and scouts. Varric shot them a smile from the corner where he was playing a hand of Wicked Grace with some soldiers and Warden Blackwall. There were several mages around the walls, they eyed him with wary suspicion but nobody tried to talk to him. That was a relief. Cullen had recognized one of two of them from the Gallows and he had no intention of reliving that particular moment of his past.

The Iron Bull was sitting at one table with Hestia, and she waved them over as soon as she spotted her brother.

“There you are Shay!” Hestia greeted, reaching up to drag her brother's head down so she could give him a kiss on the cheek. “I thought you were going to miss it.”

“You, dear sister, are drunk.” Said Shay, smiling fondly at her.

“You, dear brother, are right.” Hestia replied, raising her mug of ale in a toast. Her smile became crooked and mischievous when she saw Cullen. “Commander.”

“Hestia.” He greeted politely.

“She's not drunk enough to get away with being wrong about this.” The Iron Bull said, drinking from a tankard that was as big as Cullen's head.

“Can we join you?” Shay asked, already sliding into a seat next to his sister and giving her an answering kiss on the cheek.

“Please.” She replied, scooting to give him room. “You can explain to our big friend that it's a song about Kirkwall.”

“It's about Seheron.” Iron Bull said, shit eating grin firmly in place. “Par Vollen is an island nation, you think I don't know the words to a sea shanty?”

“I think you know the tune.” Hestia blinked innocently.

Cullen sat down next to Bull, who let out a growl of frustration. “Look, it makes more sense for it to be Seheron. Why would you be running a load of sugar to Kirkwall?”

“Don't they use sugar in Kirkwall?” Hestia giggled into her drink.

“Look, sugar comes from Rivain.” Iron Bull gestured emphatically. “Which is way closer to Seheron than Kirkwall.”

“Commander, don't they use sugar in Kirkwall?” Hestia asked Cullen.

“Last time I checked.” Cullen said, raising his eyebrows.
Hestia tossed a triumphant look at Iron Bull, who struggled to contain his laughter.

“The second verse is ‘I've got a sister, she's ten feet tall.’”

“She could be a chantry sister.”

“She’s a Tamassran, you crazy lunatic!” Iron Bull yelled, sending Hestia and Shay into peals of laughter. “Has all that salt water affected your brain?!”

The argument was interrupted by the appearance of that Tevinter mage, Dorian. He had a wicked glint in his dark eyes. “My apologies if I'm interrupting something important.” he greeted, sliding into the seat next to Hestia.

“Believe me skirt boy, you're not.” Iron Bull said.

Dorian completely ignored the comment, grinning at Hestia. “Hestia, do you remember that subject we were discussing?”

To Cullen's shock, Hestia batted her eyelashes at the tevinter. “Dear Dorian, I remember every moment spent in your scintillating company with crystal clarity.”

“So you damn well should.” Dorian said with satisfaction.

“This particular conversation however.”

Dorian rolled his eyes. “About that little wager I was hoping to place.”

“Oh, yes. Yes of course.” Hestia said, taking a drink of her ale. After a moment she said, “Remind me again?”

Dorian scoffed. “Varric has volunteered to bet Blackwall that you cannot be induced to sing.”

“What could possibly be the point of that?” Shay asked, leaning back in his seat and signaling Flissa.

“This is a really stupid way to get the better of Blackwall.” Hestia said to Dorian.

“I happen to think it's inspired.” Dorian said archly.

Whatever Hestia was going to say next was delayed by a soldier coming up to the table, eyeing each of them nervously. “Um, Ms Herald of Andraste miss?”

Hestia gave the soldier a warm smile that made the boy blush all the way to his boots. Cullen had to look away to hide his smile. “Yes soldier?” She asked.

“I um, a couple of the boys and I were, well.” The boy stumbled through his words, ears turning red. Hestia waited through it, patience and warmth radiating off her like a tipsy saint. “We were hoping that you would sing the lead in Sweet Polly Oliver.”

Hestia smiled delightedly, but only for a moment before a queer look crossed over her face. “I'm sorry young man,” she said, her voice oddly strained. “I'm afraid I don't know the words.”

The soldiers face fell. “Oh, well. I'm sorry to be bothering you miss. Herald of Andraste.” he shuffled away, looking embarrassed.

As soon as the boy had left, Hestia shoved Dorian away from her, flailing hands all but smacking
him in the face. “Will. You. Stop. That.” she said, puncturing each word with a smack on the mage's arm.

“Are you alright?” Cullen said, half raising out of his seat.

Hestia waved him off, brushing her hair out of her face. Dorian scooted slightly away from Cullen all the same. “It's fine, he just kicked me. Again. Why do you keep kicking me?”

Dorian ignored her. “Commander, would you tell me where that charming soldier went?”

Cullen settled in his seat, glaring. Iron Bull, apparently unconcerned, leaned back in his seat and looked back at the corner where Varric and Blackwall were still playing cards. “He's talking to Blackwall.”

Cullen looked over at the table where Varric sat, playing cards with Blackwall and some soldiers. The boy was in fact talking to Blackwall, and as he watched Cullen saw Blackwall press some royals into the boy's hand. Cullen scowled, but didn't say anything. Gambling was practically the army sponsored sport. Rylen had been reporting to him about any goings on that the officers weren't supposed to know, and apparently it was much less than usual for an army. The way to stop the gambling and alcoholism was apparently a holy purpose.

“So you don't know the words until Varric asks you to sing.” Dorian was saying to Hestia.

“Fine.” She settled into her seat, pouting. “I do know the words to Sweet Polly Oliver though. I don't know the words to many army songs, but that one I definitely know.”

“I have no doubt you can sing any number of beautiful songs,” Dorian said, cheerfully accepting a mug of ale from a waitress. “But not until Varric asks.”

Over the next hour, people came and went, the crowd got rowdier and calmer, voices rose and fell. No less than seven soldiers came to the table, each one asking the Herald to lead them in song. Each time Hestia politely turned them down, and perhaps the fact that she was surrounded by several men twice her size kept them from pushing the issue.

Cullen wandered over to talk to Varric, going out of his way to ignore the various ways Blackwall was losing his bet. Dorian and Iron Bull got into a cheerful argument about the ongoing war between Tevinter and the Qunari. Shay left, kissing Hestia's temple and wishing them all a good night. Cullen let the warmth of the ale and the room and the gentle camaraderie of people he respected wash over him.

“Hey Nomad!” Varric shouted, sometime after his card game had broken up and Blackwall had moved to sit with Sera. “It's been three whole days since I heard you beautiful voice. Why don't you grace us with a song?”

Hestia shot Cullen a smile and stood up from her seat. Cullen saw eyes from all around the room turn to her. “Well of course I would love to Varric,” she announced, drawing more attention. “But I have a problem.”

“And what problem is that?” Varric asked cheerfully, clearing enjoying every moment of this nonsense.

“I just can't decide which song these fine people would like to hear.” A cheer went up at her words. While Hestia moved away from the table, out of the corner of his eye Cullen saw Dorian duck away from their table and behind a group of young mages.
Well, Cullen thought, remembering the conversation in the war room and Leliana's insistence that they all sleep on the subject. A leader has to be comfortable with public speaking.

People began shouting out suggestions left and right, the noise threatening to overwhelm them all. Hestia stood in the center of the tavern, the center of a storm. Cullen ducked and clamped his hands over his ears as he heard the name of every song he'd ever heard all being shouted at the same time.

“Hold on, hold on, hold on!” Hestia shouted over the din, trying her best to make herself heard. Eventually it quieted enough for her to shout, “I am told by our dear hostess Flissa that it is approaching last call.”

A chorus of boos answered this announcement, and anyone unfortunate enough to be standing too near a waitress got swatted with a dish towel. And, Cullen thought, she has to be comfortable with the people working for her.

“I know, I know!” Hestia shouted, adeptly holding the attention of the room in the palm of her hand. “I want to stay up late and get drunk with you bastards as well. But, as some of you may know, tomorrow is the day the Free Mages and I close the breach or die trying!”

A cheer loud enough to shake dust from the rafters. Several of the mages still in the tavern waved their hands and received slaps on the back and a free drink or two. A good leader brings people together, Cullen thought, studying Hestia with fresh eyes.

“So,” Hestia turned on her heel and addressed the whole room. “Only one song really seemed appropriate. Will you sing it with me?”

When this last chorus of deafening cheers died down, Hestia took a moment to confer with the bard that Leliana had hired. The bard smiled broadly and started into a tune. Hestia tapped her hand along to the rhythm, her eyes closed. And she began to sing.

“Of all the money that e'er I had
I spent it in good company
And all the harm that e'er I've done
Alas it was to none but me.”

Her voice was a shaft of sunlight in a crumbling ruin. It was a cube of sugar in the mouth of a child. It was sweet and warm and light and lilting and just right for this song, for this night.

“And all I've done for want of wit
To mem'ry now I can't recall
So fill to me the parting glass
Good night and joy be to you all.”

The bard joined in on her lute as the tempo of the song picked up, people starting to join in on the chorus in ones and twos.

“So fill to me the parting glass
And drink a health whate'er befall,
And gently rise and softly call
Good night and joy be to you all.”

Hestia waved an arm almost lazily through the air, conducting the voices as she led them through the verses. She and the bard and the crowd were singing together now, alternating stanzas and
filling the tavern with joy.

Cullen caught sight of Varric’s face as Cullen himself wound his way toward the door. The look on
the dwarf’s face was somewhere between amused and… wistful? Maybe? Perhaps he was
homesick for his favorite dive. Cullen grinned, remembering the Hanged Man. He’d been only a
few times, but it was where Varric held court nearly every night. There had been quite a few bards
that blew through The Hanged Man as well.

But this was something else. Everyone in the room either knew the song or could pick up the
chorus, and the soothing rhythm of Hestia’s lilting voice was doing its work. Cullen caught himself
before he also started to sing, but it was a close thing.

Then, something strange happened. Cullen wasn’t sure anyone else noticed, the song had done its
work and the room was filled with music and laughter. Hestia had stepped out of the center of the
room, filtering into the crowd and pulling people up out of their seats.

“But since it fell unto my lot
That I should rise and you should not
I gently rise and softly call
Good night and joy be to you all”

A strange sadness passed over Hestia’s face. Nobody really noticed, just as nobody noticed when
she moved silently to the door. They kept on into the song, building into the lilting chorus even as
she slipped out the door and Cullen made to follow her.

By the time he’d dodged through the crowd and reached the doorway, she was already gone. After
the heat and noise of the tavern, the night air was a bracing shock. Cullen looked around, trying to
find her steps in the light of the moons, perhaps catch a glimpse of her before she disappeared. He
didn’t have to go far this time. Hestia hadn’t gone any further than up the steps toward the
apothecary house, where the potions had been stacked in their pots.

At first, he thought she had fallen, but then he realized just what that noise she was making was.

Hestia was crying. Weeping and shaking, breathing coming in short rapid gasps like she couldn’t
catch her breath. She was curled up next to the pots and shaking. Cullen felt so strange as he got
close, it was all so familiar.

“Hestia.” Cullen said it softly but she still jumped. “Hestia are you hurt? What happened back
there?”

Hestia looked up at him, tears streamed down her face, and in a flash, Cullen understood what was
happening. She was unraveling. Hestia was having a panic attack right here in the courtyard and
Cullen was the only one who could help, right here, right now, before she hurt herself or
hyperventilated.

“I can’t do this Cullen!” Her face was streaked with tears. “It’s not fair! It’s not fair, Cullen. I
can’t…” She took a shaky breath and scrubbed at her face. “The people here, they look at me like
I’m… I’m not some savior, I’m just. I’m not built for it.”

“Breathe,” Cullen told her softly, moving to shield her from the wind. “Just breathe.”

“You’re going to make me Inquisitor, how am I supposed to breathe?!”

Cullen grit his teeth. He should’ve known, Shay told her everything, why had he even thought to
trust the man’s judgment. “You shouldn't worry about that right now Hestia. Just try to breathe. We
haven't made a decision yet-

“You were going to make it without me, without my consent? What if I had said no?” Hestia very neatly shrieked, before clapping both hands over her mouth and folding in against the steps. “What if the breach kills me?”

“What?” Cullen asked, shocked.

“I said what if it kills me!” Hestia shouted, before her eyes widened and she hid her face from him.

She put her face in her hands, her shoulders heaving with muffled tears. Cullen wasn’t really sure what the right move was, but he reached out and chafed his hands up and down her arms, as Cassandra had done for him when he was unraveling. He kept her out of the wind until she stopped shaking.

“This shouldn’t have happened.” She murmured, so softly that he barely heard it.

“I agree,” he said grimly. “When we find the ones responsible-”

“No, Cullen,” Hestia took another shuddering breath. “I mean this shouldn’t have happened.” she wiped a hand across her face, eyes downcast in regret. “One moment of selfishness and… everything I dedicated my life to doing goes up in smoke.”

His brow furrowed. “I don’t understand. A moment of selfishness?”

She looked up at him, her own grey eyes full of grief and regret. “We weren’t supposed to be at the conclave.”

“What?”

“We weren’t supposed to be there.” Hestia swiped at her face again, her voice still trembling. “Shay, he was… he’d been invited. He and some other, some other clerics from the Ostwick Chantry. He’d been invited to try and… restore peace.” her eyes were still filling with tears but they were silent now, filling and falling without a hitched breath. “He… he wrote me. Wrote me a letter, asked if I would meet him there. And I…”

She looked him in the eye, her own grey eyes full of grief and regret. “I missed him.”

“But Shay came to us weeks after the Breach.” Cullen shook his head, still disbelieving. “You came all that way to see him, only for him to be delayed? Impossible.”

Hestis flashed him a bitter grin. “Isn’t it though?” the smile fell away and she reached up to wipe away another tear. “I spent fifteen years of my life keeping Seph and Eleyna safe… and,” she took in a ragged breath. “We weren’t supposed to be there.”

He heard the unspoken words. *She didn’t have to die.*

“Hestia!”

They both looked up at the shout, and Cullen suddenly realized how intimate a picture they made. Her on the ground, almost completely shielded from the wind by his body, he on one knee in front of her, holding her at arm's length. And oh, no book Cullen had ever read had ever let him know just how close arm's length really was.

Ben Tamrassen stepped out of the shadow of a doorway, and he hastened to Hestia’s side, worry all over his face. “What happened?”
Cullen took a breath to explain but Hestia got there first.

“I fell.” She said, too loudly. Hestia gave Cullen a warning nod before turning her attention to Ben. “Tripped over the last step, you know me.”

The worry on Ben Tamrassen's face melted away to be replaced by an affectionate smile. “Ah, Tia. Again? You could fall off a mountain top in the middle of the desert.”

“You've never even seen a desert.” Hestia returned, letting Ben help her to her feet.

“I know they're big and flat and you'd still find a peak,” Ben said warmly. He glanced at Cullen, seeming surprised to see him still standing there. “Thanks for trying Commander, but I'm afraid there's nothing that can stand in the way when Hestia decides to fall.”

Cullen looked away, down at his feet then back at the Herald. The enormity of what she had admitted was spreading out before him, leaving him reeling. The herald falling down every day couldn't possibly matter right now. That this one woman out of the thousands at the Conclave could survive was a difficult thing to grasp, but to know that it wasn’t even meant to be? That she’d been a stowaway, not an earnest pilgrim seeking peace, but a woman seeking her brother…

It seemed too much. Cullen had quietly doubted when Cassandra asserted providence. But how could he doubt now, with so much stacked against it? It couldn't be chance.

Hestia shrugged off Ben Tamrassens helping hand, but she started off with the man, words gently filling the space that the tears had left behind. She looked over her shoulder at Cullen as she started away, silently mouthing, 'Thank you.'

Cullen raised a hand. It might have been a farewell, it might've been to reach out to her. He hardly knew.

It was all ceremonial until it wasn't.

In theory, it was easy. A group of free mages, led by First Enchanter Fiona and assisted by Solas, would accompany them along the pilgrim's path to the Breach. They would be joined by the leaders of the Inquisition, the Herald of Andraste, her few relatives that had found their way to Haven, and the assorted nobles that has thrown their assorted weight behind the Inquisitions cause. Josephine would give a small speech, and then, finally, Hestia would go down into the crater and close the breach.

Hopefully. If all went to the plan, there would be drinks and dancing for days back in Haven. Cassandra refused to entertain any alternative scenario, but it hadn’t stopped Cullen’s traitorous midnight thoughts from concocting one nightmare scenario after another. It had kept him awake half the night, to the point that Cullen had to drink some of that mud that Varric called coffee the next morning.

It was all on the herald.

That part was the thing that was sticking in Cullen’s mind. All that preparation, all the practices, all the training they had given to their soldiers, to their healers, to their spies. All the effort the collected people of the Inquisition had given over the last three months, none of it was any help
against the breach. All he could do is stand there next to Leliana and Grand Enchanter Fiona, and watch as Hestia Trevelyan either saved them all or died trying.

She seemed to know it too. Hestia usually tried to get along with everybody, besides the obvious exceptions. But today she walked with purpose, spoke little, laughed not at all. She was silent all of the long ride to the breach, conferring with Solas quietly after Josephine's speech. After a moments whispering, Hestia unslung her staff from her back and handed it to Solas. She gave her brother and cousin tight hugs, picked up her nephew and pressed a kiss to his forehead.

Then, unencumbered and alone, Hestia Trevelyan walked into the crater.

Cullen stood at the ridge with Lady Montilyet, feeling utterly helpless. If he could have destroyed the breach by wishing, it would've been gone the first night. Josephine held onto his arm, whispering prayers under her breath. he could feel it when the mages began channeling their ritual, felt the shift in the magic all around the breach. Suddenly there was direction to it, a flowing of energy that had before been shifting meaninglessly around the area.

“What was it you said once Commander?” Josephine murmured to him, unable to tear her eyes away from the casting mages, Solas calling out directions, Cassandra standing at the ready. Hestia stood a little away, looking at nobody.

“What?” Cullen asked, distracted. Hestia was saying something to Cassandra, who scowled and shook her head.

“When you were insisting that we approach the templars,” Josephine continued breathlessly. “You said, ‘most of the time magic is harmless,’”

“But when it goes wrong,” Cullen said, nodding. He remembered that argument, that had been before Lord Seeker Lucius had lost his head and commanded the templars to abandon the Grand Cathedral. It seemed so long ago now, had that only been a month ago? “But when it goes wrong, there is no telling how wrong it can go.”

Grand Enchanter Fiona stood there with them, on the other side of Leliana. “Commander Cullen is right.” The elven woman said softly, her Orlesian accent not doing anything for Cullens nerves. “There is no telling what could happen here. We are, all of us, risking our lives.”

Some more than others. Cullen thought, watching Hestia. The mages were about ready, and even from up here on the ridge, Cullen could see the mark on the Heralds hand beginning to crackle and grow. Up above then, the fade rift began to sputter in reaction to the tiny echo riding on Hestia’s left hand.

“The Light shall lead her safely Through the paths of this world, and into the next.” Breathed Leliana. “For she who trusts in the Maker, fire is her water. As the moth sees light and goes toward flame, She should see fire and go towards Light.” The mark flared, the fade rift reacted.

And then it was over.

The sun had set but the dancing hadn’t stopped. The awful potato moonshine that the corporal from Nevarra, Hansen was his name, had been brewing had finally been allowed to see the light of day, and it was some of the most potent alcohol that Cullen had ever poisoned his body with. After one
cup he had begged off, sticking to water, on the basis that he wouldn’t be at risk of going blind from drinking that.

There was music, there were screams of delight, there were praises to the Maker.

They had done it.

Hestia bounced over to where he leaned against the corner of the Chantry sometime after Flissa had been convinced to dance. Judging by the color in Hestia’s face, she’d been into Corporal Hansen's moonshine as well.

“Guarding the still, are you?” she asked, leaning against the wall next to him.

Cullen raised his eyebrows at her. “How do you know about that then?”

Hestia smiled. Cullen felt his stomach flop over, he must still be drunk. “I’m the Herald of Andraste.” She said, in what she must’ve thought was a mysterious tone. “The Herald of Andraste knows everything.”

Cullen folded his arms and waited. “I’m sure there’s somebody in this camp who will believe that, but your brother pulled that particular trick on me already.”

“Oh damn that boy, taking all my best jokes.”

“If you can call that a joke.”

Hestia snickered. “You wouldn’t know a joke if it jumped out at you and hit you in the face with a pie.”

Cullen raised an eyebrow. “Should I even bother trying to answer that?”

“Oh you know, soldiers like to talk. It’s what they’re best at. They like to talk to a pretty girl, especially when that pretty girl seems interested in what they have to say, even if they don’t have much to say at all.” She leaned her head back against the stone, letting her gaze drift up to the night sky speckled with stars. “They especially like it if the pretty girl gets drunk. Though they don’t much like it if she can outdrink them, so I only had one cup that awful stuff.”

“Corporal Hansen brews some strong liquor, I will admit,” Cullen said, looking her up and down. Not a scratch, thank the Maker. This was a far cry from her feelings the night before. “I didn’t realize you cared so much about what people think of you.”

Hestia sighed and grinned at him. “Oh you know, soldiers like to talk. It’s what they’re best at. They like to talk to a pretty girl, especially when that pretty girl seems interested in what they have to say, even if they don’t have much to say at all.” She leaned her head back against the stone, letting her gaze drift up to the night sky speckled with stars. “They especially like it if the pretty girl gets drunk. Though they don’t much like it if she can outdrink them, so I only had one cup that awful stuff.”

“I don’t,” Hestia said quickly, then shot him an apologetic glance. “But the Herald of Andraste has a reputation to maintain, I suppose.” She held up a cup in her other hand. “Sure I can’t tempt you?” She asked, and that smile was back again. “It smells like death.”

Cullen chuckled. “Another time perhaps. Somebody has to stay alert in this mess.” He gestured to the camp in order to indicate the general revelry that was happening but ended gesturing to Threnn, who was sitting on bench playing cards with three soldiers and a mage.

“Are you still working?” Hestia pushed away from the stone wall to stand in front of him,
silhouetted against the firelight, smile bright as the moon, freckles speckled across her face like stars. She looked at him incredulously. “Cullen, come on. Take the night off. Let somebody else worry if the sky is falling.”

“Hadn’t you noticed?” He smiled warmly at her. “It isn’t anymore. Because of you.”

It was dark and the light was at her back. But she might’ve been blushing. Hestia shook her head. “We all did this.” She insisted, tucking a piece of hair behind one ear.

Cullen shook his head. It was what they had decided to say, but it didn’t sit right with him even so. “You did this,” he said, holding her gaze. “And if nothing else, I’m grateful.”

The smile Hestia gave him made his heart skip a beat. Her hair was the golden white of a candle flame, and Cullen was suddenly hit with the urge to run his fingers through it. “Thank you.” She told him, reaching out to touch his arm. “It, well. Thank you.”

She couldn’t seem to stop smiling. Neither could he.

Then the warning bells began to ring.

Chapter End Notes

Dun dun dun

As always, a big hug and a kiss for Illyria_Lives for sharing this big fucked up family with me. I'm susuwatarisprinkles on tumblr, and sootsprites94 on twitter. you've got questions, I've got answers. Let's talk.
An Interlude

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

In a dank stone room, an old woman lay dying.

She was surrounded by her family, as she had been promised as a girl. “Papa,” She whispered, her voice rasping like sandpaper. “Papa is here?”

“Yes.” Said the man holding her hand. “Yes, of course I’m here my dear girl.”


There were four of them in the room with her, all dark haired with copper colored skin. One man, still handsome underneath the lines beginning to show on his face, lingered near the door and looked nervous. A woman stood by the window, her long dark hair caught up under a kerchief and already generously shot through with grey, a shawl wrapped around her shoulders; she was made thin by illness and by grief, and shivered in the damp of the attic. Another woman puttered around the room, her dress flaring as she moved from one dirty spot to another, rearranging this and wiping up that. The man addressed as Papa was still, in his movements and his continence, his hair and beard peppered with silver and his eyes solemn.

By the window, the woman tugged her shawl closer around her shoulders. All along the border of the shawl, a snake curled and slithered. “Maker watch over this poor soul.” she murmured to the small altar that sat in the corner of the room, covered with a fine layer of dust. “Andraste take her to your side.”

“Papa,” The old woman croaked, before a bout of coughing overtook her. The coughing wracked her frail body, and the woman at the altar rushed to pour some water from the clay pitcher on the bedside table.

In her haste, she fumbled the pitcher and it went crashing to the floor. “Oh blast it!” She said, jumping back as the pieces of pottery scattered all over the floor.

The man by the door made an annoyed noise. “Now you’ve done it Clara. What a mess.”

Clara tucked the ends of her shawl closer. “Oh dear, and that was Mother's gift to her too.”

“I’ll call a servant.” The man said, straightening his tunic and reaching for the door handle. He looked as if he wanted to be anywhere but here.

The man at the bedside whipped his head around, snarling, “No servants up here Kevain, you know the rules!”

“Papa,” croaked the woman on the bed, and the man holding her hand turned back to her, stroking her hand to soothe her.

“Yes my girl, Papa is here.” he said, though the crack in his voice betrayed him.

The last woman came to her sisters side, scooping the broken pieces together. “Don’t make such a big fuss Clara,” She said chidingly. “We can clean it up after. We’ll have the whole attic scrubbed
when it’s… when it’s done.”

“I don’t know how you can speak in such a way about our own sister.” Clara said, reproachfully. She did not move to clean the broken pottery.

“Oh will you stop it.” The Kevain snapped. “I don’t know who you think you’re fooling, but it isn’t any of us.”

“That’s rich coming from you Kevain.” Clara snapped back. “Only Holy Andraste knows the last time you deigned to visit her!”

“Quiet both of you.” Said the sister, disposing of the broken pottery with a clattering in the bin. “We’re not here to have a holier than thou contest; we all know who loses when that gets started.”

“Amelia?” the old woman croaked, and the sister scurried to the other side of the bed.

“Yes, I’m here.” Amelia smoothed her voice into a croon, settling onto the side of the bed, the only chair in the room being occupied. “How is my dearest sister today?”

“Better now that you’ve arrived.” the woman said shakily. “Where is my apprentice? I haven’t seen her since a week.”

Amelia exchanged a look with the man at the bedside. “My little girl is laid up in bed with the sniffles.” she said quickly, reaching out to smooth frail grey hair back from a frail grey face. “She’ll be back in lessons with you soon.”

Clara had crossed to stand next to Kevain. “Fifteen years since she gave that girl a lesson.” She murmured to him, the earlier spat already subsided. “Strange what you remember.”

“The mind is a vast uncharted country.” Kevain murmured back, folding his arms. “Which of us really knows what you’ll retain when you’ve passed on?”

“Andraste take this child to your side.” Clara began murmuring again. “Oh Maker judge me whole.”

“Is there something I have to do for Papa?” The woman said, reaching for the bedside table. Beside the cup of water there was a small sharp knife. “Someone is trying to hurt us again, I know it. I could feel it.”

“No, there are no tasks today.” Amelia said, taking the knife off the bedside table and tucking it into her own pocket, out of harm’s way. “I just felt like a visit.”

The man at the bedside rose and crossed to the only window, and after a moment Kevain joined him. “She remembers Amelia’s daughter, but doesn’t recognize her own brother.”

“Or you, for that matter.”

Kevain made a face. “You’re hilarious Yoenn. Truly, you missed your calling.”

“My wife says the same thing.” Yoenn said, a smile playing around the corners of his mouth. He looked out the window. “Has it happened yet?”

Kevain nodded. “Apparently so. Maybe now those children will stop this Inquisition nonsense and come home.”

Yoenn snorted. “And how likely do you think that is going to be? Your bastard son is a feral cat,
Kevain. The more you offer him the further away he’ll run.”

Kevain scowled. “I don’t think you can cast any stones in this particular contest Yoenn. Where exactly is your youngest son?”

Yoenn turned to his brother with a face like thunder, but before he could speak Amelia cut him off. “Shut it, both of you.” she stood up from the bed, reaching for the sheet and pulling it none too gently over the face of the old woman. “She’s dead.”

Clara burst into tears and ran from the room.

“Well.” Kevain said, suddenly uncomfortable. “That’s… well. I’ll just go and…” he hurried after his sister, mumbling something about seeing to her.

Yoenn and Amelia were left in the attic room, the body of their oldest sister lying in the bed.

“Well.” Amelia said when the silence became too pregnant to be allowed. “That’s that, then.”

“I’ll have some guards from my household clean up.” Yoenn said lowly, his voice a rock salt rasp. He cleared his throat and in a calmer tone, he said, “It looks like your daughter finally closed that damned hole in the sky.”

A glimmer of pride flashed in Amelia’s eyes, before she looked back down at the still body.

“Damn right she did.”

“One problem solved.” Yoenn held out a hand and slowly drew his sister away from the bed. “And seven more rush in to take its place.”

“As it should be.” his sister murmured, allowing herself to be led away. “We wouldn’t want life to become dull.”

Chapter End Notes

Finally we see just who made Hestia the mess she is today. There's nothing I like more than a family who loves to hate each other

As always, a big thank you to Illyria Lives, for sharing this fucked up family with me. I'm susuwatarisprinkles on tumblr and sootsprites94 on twitter. Come say hi!
Let Mine be the Last Sacrifice

Chapter Notes

Oh boy, this is it. The big one.

Trigger warnings for this chapter, there is more violence and gore than have shown up in this story before now, be aware and know your limits. There are also scenes that skirt the line of decency when it comes to incest, and those themes will come up again in later chapters. Please take care of yourself first.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The warning bells began to ring. Hestia could see the moment when Cullen looked past her and Commander Rutherford came back to do his duty. Soldiers never went away, the just put the honor to sleep for a while.

What had been a celebration of continued life was now a mad scramble to get away. Hestia shoved past Seggrit and stopped Adan from falling over. By the time she got to the gates, Iron Bull and Varric had caught up with her.

“I knew this was too easy.” Varric muttered darkly.

Most of the Inquisition leadership was gathered just before the gates, which had been closed hours before.

“One watch guard reporting.” Cullen was saying to Josephine. “It's a massive force, the bulk over the mountain.”


“None.”

Josephine goggled at Commander Cullen. “None?”

There was a massive bang, and the gates rocked on their hinges. Hestia shot a glance at Iron Bull, who took her meaning like she'd handed it to him on a silver platter. He loped off to find their weapons with long heavy strides.

Another bang had Hestia skittering back a step and exchanging a look with Varric. A plaintive shout came from beyond the gates. “I can't come in unless you open.”

Hestia looked to Cassandra for permission, more out of habit than anything. Cassandra nodded and together they grasped the handles of the great wooden doors to pull them open again. If there were innocents trapped outside, it was worth a little personal danger.

The mess outside the gates was gut wrenching. Scouts and soldiers were strewn about the beach, the tents were trampled and ruined, and the few boats that had been pulled up on the docks were smashed and burning. A templar in armor was charging toward them, sword lazily swinging in the air. Cassandra reached for her sword but hadn’t even touched it before the templar stopped and pitched forward, a knife in his back.
Behind him stood a slight boy wearing dark leathers and a hat with a brim wider than his shoulders. “I'm Cole.” The boy said, in that same plaintive voice. “I came to warn you, to help. People are coming to kill you. You probably already know.”

A man was limping up beside him, wearing battered templar armor. Hestia squinted and then suddenly recognized him. He had dark skin and a close shaven head, and he definitely looked as though he’d taken a beating to get here. One eye was swollen shut. “I know you.” She said. “You were in Val Royeaux the day the Lord Seeker abandoned the Grand Cathedral.”

“Delrin Barris, Your Worship. And I am, was, a knight of the Templar Order.” the templar said, though he sounded weary. “I am at your service, Herald of Andraste. We came to warn you, but it seems we’ve come too late.” he stumbled and the boy moved to support his weight, though Ser Barris was wearing full plate and the boy looked like a stiff wind could blow him away.

“The Templars come to kill you.” said the boy seriously.

“Templars?” Cullen said, coming to join them. Behind him, Inquisition soldiers began running out of the gates, swords at the ready. A group of them started down the beach toward the trebuchets. They’d constructed that one just days ago. “Is this the orders response to our talks with the mages?” Cullen demanded, drawing Hestia out of her thoughts. “Attacking blindly?”

“The Order is broken ser.” Delrin Barris said, the pain in his eyes echoed in his voice. “Our officers, they betrayed us. They did- something to the lyrium we were taking. It was… red.”

“Ah shit.” Varric put a hand to his forehead, looking wretched.

“The Templars went to the Elder One.” Said the boy, Cole. He handed Ser Barris off to Cassandra, who was must better equipped to support the man's weight, and moved entirely too close to Hestia. “You know him? He knows you. You took his mages.”

He skittered away again, pointing towards the mountain. “There.”

Hestia came to stand beside the strange young man, straining her eyes to see. A pair of men had climbed the peak across the lake. Well, one of them was a man, dark haired in templar armor. The other… It was taller and thinner than any mortal man, taller still than a qunari. It wore dark robes and its head seemed to be twice the size of the templar at its side. And even from here, Hestia could feel the pull of the fade around it. Whatever this thing was, it had magic unlike anything she had ever seen before.

“What is that thing?” Hestia heard herself ask, still staring at the man. “Is that the Elder One that the magisters were going on about?”

The boy, Cole, looked at her with colorless eyes. “He's very angry that you took his mages.”

Suddenly it dawned on her just how much danger they must all be in. “Cullen,” She said, tearing her eyes away from the peak and that awful thing standing there. “Give me a plan. Anything.”

“Haven is no fortress,” Cullen told her, drawing his sword. “If we are to survive this monster we must control the battle. Get out there and hit that force. Use everything you can.”

He turned to the inquisition soldiers and the free mages that had gathered at the gates. “Mages, you- you have sanction to engage them. That is Samson; he will not make it easy. Inquisition, with the Herald! For your lives! For all of us!”

“Cassandra, get Ser Barris inside.” Hestia said, looking around wildly, trying to keep track of
everything at once. “He’s the only one who can tell us exactly what we’re dealing with here. Cole, what-”

Cole was not there when she turned back to him. The boy was nowhere to be seen.

“Who are you talking to Nomad?” Varric asked, looking up at her.

“I-” Hestia put the thought out of her mind when she saw the first of the Templars had reached the trebuchet. “Where’s my staff? Where’s Bull?”

“Can I be of assistance?” Madame Vivienne said, striding toward them with Hestia’s staff in one hand, looking like a better dressed version of Andraste herself.

She tossed the staff to Hestia, who for once didn’t fumble it into a mud puddle but instead used the momentum to spin on her heel, snap up a barrier over the three of them and send a bolt of lightning through a templar archer, paralyzing him for a few precious seconds.

“Your help is always appreciated Madame De Fer.” Hestia said, looking over her shoulder at the woman.

“Coming in hot!” roared a voice, and then Iron Bull was there, his lumbering steps very nearly shaking the ground as he sprinted towards them. He didn’t even stop to hand Varric his incredibly complicated and delicate crossbow, he just tossed the machine at the dwarf mid stride and roared, “Who wants some!”

“Hey!” Varric yelled, catching the crossbow deftly and flicking it open, firing a shot at the templar. “Careful with Bianca, she’s sensitive!”

The Iron Bull didn’t answer, he was too busy swinging the dwarven maul he’d picked up off the Storm Coast above his head and down onto the face of an unsuspecting templar. It stunned the adversary for only a moment, but while the templar was getting back up, Vivienne drew a glyph of ice beneath his feet.

The Iron Bull jumped back just in time to avoid being frozen in place, but the same couldn’t be said for the templar and two of his friends. Hestia felt herself smile, and she summoned an earthen fist, which hit the one templar that Iron Bull didn’t manage to break into many little pieces.

But this was starting to get strange. The next templar Hestia saw was barely a man at all. It looked more like an abomination than a templar, with long pointed claws and a huge number of jagged spikes jutting out of its back. It roared at her, a guttural and utterly unearthly sound, before it…

She ducked, but the jagged shards of red lyrium missed her by a hair and embedded themselves deep in the pile of timbers she’d been standing in front of. Varric fired a sheaf of bolts at the creature, which tossed the dwarf backwards over the pile of timbers and which knocked the thing around in a full circle before it crumpled to the ground. Varric climbed back up to the top of the pile of wood, which let him be about head height with Hestia.

“Red lyrium.” Varric said, anger and remorse coloring his gravelly voice. “Shit.”

“I saw something like this in that dark future.” Hestia told him grimly. “I guess this is what happens to you when you start eating the stuff.”

“Yeah, really puts a damper on my ‘red lyrium at the temple was a coincidence’ theory.” Varric told her, before firing his beautiful crossbow at a templar that had been creeping up in her peripheral vision.
With the help of the Inquisition soldiers the first batches of templar monstrosities were dispatched. It had been hard, those things could take a full wallop from Iron Bull and keep coming. But finally, the trebuchet was ready to be fired. The click of the mechanism was inappropriately quiet given the mass of destruction that the siege weapon could inflict.

But it wasn't enough. All around her, Hestia could smell the smoke. She could hear the fighting, and she could hear the screaming.

When they got to the second trebuchet it was crawling with these templar monstrosities. They got harder to kill all the time but Hestia’s fire combined with Vivienne’s ice ripped through them with the ferocity that only a mage that had been disrespected by a man in armor one too many times could produce. They kept the soldiers safe while they reset and aimed the great siege weapon, and though there was a close scrape with another one of those red lyrium abominations, soon they were all ready.

“Would you like to do the honors, Herald?” asked the soldier, somewhat shyly.

Hestia winked at him and pulled back the crank.

A stone the size of a large horse whirred through the air and struck true. Slower than you’d expect but somehow also much much faster than you would realize, the snow began to shift and fall, with a sound like a hiss that build very quickly into a thunderous roar. The avalanche slid down across the valley, burying dozens and dozens of those enemy torches. A cheer went up around them, Varric slapped her on the back and laughed.

Then, with a heartstopping roar, everything got so much worse.

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Many people didn’t know this because Elayna didn’t tell them, but her twin brother Armand had a touch of magic in him as well. Not enough to actually produce a spell, but enough to know that the fade was more dangerous than it ought to be for an ordinary little boy. Elayna and he had been walking in each others dreams since before they could remember, so often that neither child even knew it was unusual until Layna had shared that little secret with Hestia.

In the Circle, the three girls had complied as much information as they could on dreamers. It had required several transfer requests for materials from the circle at Dairsmuid. The rivani seers had been apparently honing the art of dream walking for ages upon ages, and the texts were extraordinarily helpful for Elayna and Armand.

When Armand ran off to join the grey wardens, his dreaming became rather different, darker and more dangerous. Several times, Elayna had enlisted the help of her cousins to find her brother in the dreaming world, and the three girls would do their best to fend off demons dressed as darkspawn so that Elayna had some time to speak to her brother.

All of this is a very long winded way of saying that Hestia knew what an Archdemon sounded like, because she had been there the first time Armand dreamed of one.
“Run.” Hestia told her friends, with finality when the beast shattered the sky with another roar. “Now.”

They all sprinted back to the gates, passing more bodies of red lyrium templar abominations and inquisition soldiers. Harritt was at his forge and Iron Bull stopped for only a moment to kick a door in.

Cullen was the only one still at the gates, holding the door while people streamed past him toward the safety of her little village. When she passed him, he let the counterweight fall back, letting the weight of the heavy oak doors shut the gates with finality.

“We need everyone back to the chantry.” He shouted to them, fighting to be heard above the chaos. “It's the only thing that might hold against that beast. At this point,” he looked Hestia in the eye, to make his meaning abundantly clear, “just make them work for it.”

Hestia made to follow him but then there was a crackling of timbers like a great roaring fireplace, and then the tavern exploded in a shower of burnt wood and broken glass. They heard a battle cry that could only be Lysette. She heard screaming from someone further into the village, unearthly roars from the red lyrium templar abominations, the thudding of her own heart.

Too much to do, she thought frantically. Not enough time. Maker help us, there's no way to stop this. There's no way to save them all.

A familiar face was running towards her. Shay stumbled to a stop in front of her, Levy clinging to his hand. Shay had ash streaked across his face. “Have you seen Ben?” Shay shouted to be heard above the din. “He's not in the house.”

“He'll show up,” Hestia shouted back. Behind her, she could hear the sound of Iron Bull raining some justified violence down those red lyrium templar monstrosities. “He'd never leave Levy alone.”

She went down on one knee in front of Levy, gave him the signal to watch her closely. Go with Shay, she told him. Go to the chantry. Da will find you there.

What's going on Tia? Levy signed, his eyes wide and fearful. Who are they?

I don't know. Hestia reached out a hand and smoothed Levy's dirty blonde hair back from his forehead. Do you trust me to keep you safe?

Levy nodded his affirmative.

Hestia gave him a little shove to send him off. He went back to Shay, who stood there for a moment, like he wasn't sure what to say. “You're not coming, are you.” He said, suddenly sounding very young.

“No.” She told him, suddenly feeling very young. “The Herald of Andraste has to save people,”

“Or else there’s no point in having a Herald of Andraste.” Shay finished the thought. He smiled at her, in that way that always broke her heart. “I know.”

She gripped his arm. “Get yourself to safety Shay. I can’t lose you too.”

Her party rejoined her side, and Lysette ran up behind, sword drawn and face spattered with blood. Iron Bull shouted, “Boss, we gotta go!”
“I’m coming!” She shouted to him. “Lysette!”

Lysette snapped to attention. “Yes your Worship!”

_It’s all in the voice_, Hestia thought. _Sound like an authority and people listen._ “Get this boy and my brother to the Chantry! I’m entrusting them to your care!”

Lysette nodded seriously. “As you wish, Herald of Andraste!”

Hestia fell in with her friends, forcing herself not to watch her brother go. He would be fine, they would be fine. As long as she didn't fail, Shay and Ben and Levy would be fine.

They fought. Perhaps for the others, it was an enjoyable fight. For her, it was nerve wracking.

Varric had to watch her back all the time, because Hestia kept looking for faces she knew, trying to keep them out of danger. She sent Iron Bull slamming through a door into a burning building to save Seggrit, dragging the ungrateful merchant out and sending him running to safety. She sent Varric into the burning wreckage of the tavern to drag an unconscious Flissa out of the smoke, barely avoiding the burning rafters that collapsed just after they were clear. Hestia and Vivienne did the impossible and brought Adan and Minaeve back to consciousness just before the stacked potions exploded, the combination of barriers held up by all four mages shielding them from the worst of the fire and shrapnel.

For every person they saved, two more were cut down. She saw soldiers she had bled with in the hinterlands, saw scouts that she had recruited killed in front of her. She turned too fast and swore she saw Auggie lying in the rubble, saw Zachariah’s face among their attackers, saw Seph cut down in front of her.

And everywhere, fire and screaming.

“Dammit Threnn!” Hestia shouted at the quartermaster, just in front of the chantry doors. “Get inside you lunatic!”

“These things ain’t worse than darkspawn!” Threnn shouted back, sword raised as she barreled right at a knot of red templar monsters. “Come on you bastards!”

“They'll kill you just as quick!” Hestia jumped to her defense, putting a shit ton of fire between Threnn and the red lyrium knight.

That red lyrium templar knight turned to leer at Hestia, and this close she could finally see what the cursed stuff could do to a person. There was no skin left on the man, just a mottled grimace of muscle and scar tissue, with eyes like burning coals staring out at her beneath a helm stained with blood. The armor was a part of him now, muscle tissue receding into the breastplate and hands turned to waxen claws. The templar knight turned his back to her, focused his attention on another one of his comrades and began hurling red lyrium shards at his compatriot.

The red templar shrieked and bucked and howled in unearthly pain. Hestia saw with horror that a red lyrium crystal was growing at his feet, and with a speed faster than she ever would have thought possible. It grew in malevolent spikes to lift up and consume the templar as his body twisted and arched, becoming something much much worse.

A blur of black leather streaked past her and then Ben was there, leaping at the templar knight with daggers out. He got his arms and legs around the knight who bellowed with rage and pain when the daggers bit under the arm and at the neck. Ben used the knives like climbing spikes, keeping his grip secure as he rode the knight like a bucking horse until he finally wrenched his knife across
the templar knights throat and bore the monster to the ground.

He looked up at Hestia, whipping the gingery hair out of his face, and said, “Where is my son?”

“He's in the chantry with Shay,” Hestia told him, a little breathless. “He's safe.”

Ben said, with that same breathlessness, “Bless you.”

They had no time at all to examine this moment, because an archer decided to loose at arrow straight at Hestia. With desperation, she pulled up a barrier out of nothing at all that turned the arrow enough for it to miss them both and embed itself in the cold ground. She looked at her staff, bewildered, before she remembered. Excess mana. Ben gave Hestia a feral grin that she returned, before they both turned their respective skills on the remaining templars.

When the chantry doors banged closed behind them, Ben was off like a shot to find his son. Varric leaned back against the wall, wiping his forehead. Vivienne went to her desk and began gathering up her things. Chancellor Roderick was collapsed in a chair, blood all down the front of his robe. The boy, Cole, squatted next to him.

Commander Cullen looked up from his harried discussion with Ser Barris, and the two of them made their way to her. “Herald, our position is not good.” He told her. “That dragon stole back any time you might have earned us.”

“I've seen an archdemon.” Said Cole, looking up at them. “I was in the Fade, but it looked like that.”

Cullen scowled at the boy, confused. “I don't care what it looks like. It's cut a path for that army. They'll kill everyone in Haven.”

“The Elder One doesn't care about the village.” Said Cole. “He only wants the Herald.”

“If it will save these people,” Hestia heard herself say, knowing as it came out of her mouth that is was the absolute truth. “He can have me.”

The look Cullen gave her made her heart ache.

“It won't. He wants to kill you.” Said Cole. “No one else matters, but he'll crush them, kill them anyway. I don't like him.”

Hestia took that in, heart seizing. Then she rounded on Delrin Barris. “How did this happen? What are those things out there? How did they come to follow this monster?”

Ser Barris took a deep breath with difficulty. “All good questions Herald of Andraste. I cannot say for certain.”

Hestia tried with all her might not to smack the injured man. “Then, can you please tell me what you do know?” She said trying to keep the growl out of her voice and not quite succeeding.

“There was… it wasn’t…” Barris looked distraught, he struggled for words.

Cole looked up at the templar knight and said, “Envy fed them lies and lyrium. Old songs, old whispers, until they were all gone.”

“Yes,” Barris rubbed at his forehead, careful of the bandage he’s been given. “I suppose that’s right. Thank you Cole.”
“The Lord Seeker had been replaced by a demon of Envy.” Barris said, while Cullen’s scowl grew more pronounced with every word. “He used this red lyrium to infect the officers, make them into those creatures you see out there. They tried to infect all of us from the officers downward, but a few saw what was happening, and got away before they marched from Therinfal Redoubt.”

“How many of you got away?” Hestia asked, turning over the implications in her mind.

“Not many, and most were injured. We wouldn’t have known how to find you, but a relation of yours put us in the right direction.” Barris said, looking at Hestia.

Hestia felt a chill go down her spine. “Which relation?” She asked faintly.

“Zachariah Trevelyan.”

Now the world went hot. “Oh.” She murmured, suddenly overwhelmed by memories of the pudgy boy who yelled too loud and hit too hard, but loved too hard too. He’d been ten when they all went into the circle, and he wailed loudly for his big sister Seraphina to come back. “But, he’s not with you.”

Barris looked down at his feet, then back at her face, eyes full of remorse. “I’m sorry, Herald. He was injured badly during our retreat. We… didn’t have time for a pyre.”

Hestia swallowed roughly. And just when she was thinking why would he ever join the templars, Cole was at her shoulder. “He wanted to do something worthwhile.” The boy said quietly, perhaps only for her ears. “Seeking safety and solitude. Too much hurt in that old house. Someday see Seraphina smile.”

Hestia furrowed her brow. “What is the world are you talking about?”

But the boy was gone.

“Please excuse him your Worship.” Ser Barris said hurriedly, when he saw the looks on Hestia and Cullen’s faces. “Cole is a… well, he’s not entirely sure what he is. As far as I can tell, he’s a spirit of some sort. He’s harmless, and has done a great deal to help. I would encourage both of you to listen when he speaks.”

“There’s a word for a creature from the fade in a human body,” Cullen growled, one hand going to his sword.

A banging crash against the chantry doors cut short the burgeoning argument.

“Did they bring a fucking battering ram?” Hestia muttered, staring at the doors. She wondered how long those could hold, then hand to clench her hands against the wave of fear that crashed over her.

“Herald there are no tactics to make this survivable.” Cullen said, turning his head slightly to look at the collected people left in the chantry. “The only thing that slowed it was the avalanche. Perhaps you could turn the trebuchets, cause one last slide.”

Hestia shook her head. “We're overrun. To hit the enemy we'd bury Haven.”

“We're dying, but we can decide how.” Cullen lowered his voice, looked her in the eye. “Many don't get that chance.”
Hestia shook her head again, holding the tears and anger back in her throat. Her eyes felt hot. “There must be another way.”

They all fell silent. The chantry was never silent, not really. There were always people moving, chanters intoning their words, healers administering to the sick and needy. But now, the noise of the chantry was children weeping, soldiers yelling, women whimpering and trying to hide it.

Cole spoke again, softly, breaking Hestia from her train of thought. “Yes that. Chancellor Roderick can help. He wants to say it before he dies.” he said, looking up at them.

Chancellor Roderick, already looking as though he was at death's door, made to stand. “There is a path.” He said, with difficulty. “You wouldn't know it unless you've made the summer pilgrimage as I have. The people can escape. She must have shown me. *Andraste* must have shown me so I could tell you.”

Hestia furrowed her brow. Was now really the time to entertain the cleric that had been throwing branches in their path from day one? “What do you mean?” She demanded. "Make sense Chancellor.”

“It was whim that I walked the path.” The Chancellor tried to stand again, and this time Ser Barris lent the man his shoulder so he could manage it. “I did not mean to start, it was over grown. But now with so many at the Conclave dead, to be the only one that remembers.”

Roderick shook his head in disbelief, and then looked straight at Hestia with a look she had come to know well. “If this simple memory can save us, this could be more than mere accident. *You* could be more.”

Hestia shivered, the weight of his belief settling across her shoulders. How many more people could she possibly disappoint?  She turned away from the thought, and towards the Commander. “What about it Cullen, will it work?”

“Possibly,” Cullen allowed, glancing askance at Chancellor Roderick. “If he shows us the path. But what of your escape?”

She didn't answer.

Cullen was quiet, but said with some hope in his voice. “Perhaps you will surprise it, find a way.”

Perhaps they both knew it was a lie, but it was a lie worth believing in.

“Very well, let me get resupplied and I'll, I'll…” Hestia trailed off. There was a rushing noise in her ears.

Cullen must've understood, for he put a hand on her shoulder for a moment, a comforting weight, warm and solid. “Take all the time you need.” He said.

Shay was down in the dungeons with Mother Giselle, distributing blankets and torches to the distraught pilgrims and injured soldiers. He was speaking in hushed tones with the cleric, but broke off when he saw her. “Thank Holy Andraste.” Shay breathed, coming over to swallow her in a hug. “She brought you back to us.”

Hestia rested her head on his shoulder, breathing in his smell of peppermint and candle smoke, so it would last her a while. When had he gotten so tall? When had he stopped being that solemn little boy that could make chantry sisters weep when he raised his voice in song?
“Chancellor Roderick needs your help.” she told him when they broke apart.

Shay's brow furrowed. “Chancellor Roderick? What could he possibly-”

But now he was listening to what Cassandra was telling the collected people, could see the pilgrims beginning to be shifted out of the dungeons and back up the stairs. Shay was so smart. He’d always been smart. It took him mere moments to work out Hestia's intentions.

He looked at her with his ice blue eyes. “You want me at the front with Chancellor Roderick.”

*Where you'll be safest.* Hestia did not voice it. She just nodded to him, went up to her tiptoes so she could press a kiss to his cheek. “I love you little brother.” She whispered to him, and then turned away so he wouldn't see her tears.

Hestia saw Dorian pulling his mentor out of the basements, manacles at his wrists and ankles. A sudden rage swept through her. Alexius knew this was coming, he knew that the templars were being turned into these monsters. He knew, and he said nothing to them. This could’ve been avoided, if only-

Her hands were shaking when she finally found Ben and Levy. They had joined up with a group of pilgrims, several families with children. As much as Ben doubted his abilities as a father, he was a natural with children. He’d managed to quiet down a crying infant and now Levy was entertaining the babe while Ben talked in low tones with the child’s mother.

Hestia had to swallow back tears before she could call out to them. “Boys,” She said, hearing her voice crack and hating herself for it.

Ben looked up immediately, hand going to his sons shoulder. Levy jumped to his feet as soon as he saw her and sped to her side, stopping mere inches from her then rocking back on his heels as was his way. Hestia went down to one knee to speak with him. *Did Da tell you about the plan?* She signed.

Levy nodded seriously. *A secret path, like in a story.*

*If we all make it it’ll be a good story,* She told him.

*You’re not coming.* While that sign technically was meant for a question, the look on Levy’s face made it clear he wasn’t asking her anything.

Hestia knew better than to lie to the boy. *Not this time love.*

Levy thought for a moment, then reached for his favorite sign. *Why?*

Why? Hestia took his hand and turned it palm up. She took her fingers and pressed the sign for *i love you* into his palm, held it there until Levy looked back up at her. With her other hand she signed, *that’s why.*

Levy nodded again, then shook his head. *I don’t understand.*

Hestia hiccuped on a laugh. *I know.* She gave the boy a tight hug and a kiss, then stood up and looked into the face of his father.

“They told you the plan?” Hestia asked him. He had ash streaked across his face, she took her thumb and tried to rub it away, producing minimal results.
“It’s a fucking stupid plan.” Ben said. He wrapped his fingers around her hand and held it there, against his cheek, letting her feel the warmth there.

Hestia sighed, smelling the docks. Ben always smelled like home. “It’s better than no plan.”

“You can’t possibly be thinking, in that mad little brain of yours, that you can pull this off on your own.”

Hestia choked on a laugh. “No no. I’ve got some backup, I haven’t taken leave of all of my senses.” She looked him in the eye. “But I can’t take you with me this time.”

“You expect me to stand here and watch you go to your death?” Ben asked, something approaching grief in his voice.

Hestia felt him trembling, and she put her other hand on his face, so he looked at her eye to eye. Grey met blue, determination met pain. “I do.” She told him.

They both knew why he would.

His gaze was desperate with longing, as he searched for the words they both daren’t say. “Maker curse my fucking father.” He finally said, a wry smile twisting his mouth.

“I know.” Hestia replied with a bitter smile of her own. She searched his face for a moment before stepping forward and pressing a featherlight kiss to his cheek. “Be well.” She whispered.

When she turned away, Ben’s eyes were bright with tears. Hestia told herself not to look back. If she looked back, she would be lost.

She caught up with Cullen and Cassandra, didn't even care that she was interrupting their fervid whispers, she simply said, “Don't let anybody take their fear out on the magister. He gets a fair trial, no matter what happened today.”

Cassandra saw the look in Hestia's eyes and nodded seriously. “I will make sure of it.”

When she moved away, that long stride full of purpose, Hestia told herself it was time. It had to be. Any longer and she wouldn't be able to do it. And like so many things, it didn't matter if she was scared. If she wasn't scared this would be so much easier. But that didn't mean she wasn't going to try anyway.

“Are they ready?” She finally asked Cullen, who was watching her with those amber eyes.

“It seems so.” Cullen said. “Keep the Elder Ones attention until we are above the treeline. If we are to have a chance, if you are to have a chance, let that thing hear you.”

Hestia nodded. “Thank you Cullen, for your patience.”

“It only seems right to let you have a moment with-”

“No,” She cut him off, turning to face him. His face was so tired. It was always so tired. “I mean your patience with me. I haven't made your life any easier the past few months, and I apologize for that.”

Cullen shook his head. “There's nothing to forgive.” he said. He might even mean it. Hestia would have liked the time to know.

“Still.” Hestia took a step closer and looked him in the eye, hoping it wouldn't be the last time she
saw him. “We have to leave the war behind, Cullen. If we can.”

Cullen was quiet, but she held his gaze as long as it took for him understand. He spoke softly, so only she could hear. “Yes. I suppose we must.”

Hestia nodded, and then she moved toward the door, pulling her hair out of her face as she went. She tugged her gloves on, took the staff tossed to her one handed. With every step, she let that pit of anger overwhelm the fear.

*If I fail, I'll die.*

*No, it's much much worse than that. If I fail, they will die.*

“We ready to make some noise boss?” Iron Bull asked, falling into step beside her.

Hestia met his gaze with grey eyes alight. “Let’s go. The Elder One wants a piece of me? He can fucking work for it.”

The ensuing fight wasn't exactly fun, but the stressful edge of mixing violence with rescuing people had been taken away. This time it was straight violence that burned the back of her throat. Fighting these awful red lyrium monsters was tough, and required her full attention which was a blessing in disguise really. Keeping a red lyrium templar abomination from killing her was a perfect distraction from how stupid and suicidal this plan was.

“What the FUCK is that?” Iron Bull yelled, faced with a hulking mass of red lyrium that was entirely encasing what used to be a man.

It drug its great claw along the ground behind it, but moved deceptively fast when it wanted to bring that great big claw crashing down on Vivienne's head. She fade stepped away, which gave Hestia the chance to freeze the thing in place. Of course it should only hold the monster for a few seconds, but Iron Bull knew better than to waste an opportunity like that. The noise it made when it finally fell…

“I guess that's the logical conclusion of the existence of these… things.” Vivienne said, something like sadness in her voice. She nudged one fallen templar with the toe of her expensive boot.

“Looks like it,” Varric agreed, his face wretched. “Shit.”

“Let's get this done,” Hestia said, putting a hand on Varric’s shoulder, “And we can ruminate on how bloody awful it is later.”

“Got the trebuchet aimed Boss.” said Bull, cranking the wheel one last time. “But there's one point of this plan I'm not entirely clear on.”

“How are we getting out alive?” Hestia grinned humorlessly. “I'm a little hazy on that myself.”

“Well that's a fuckin relief.” Iron Bull rolled his eye. “Can I at least hit the lever? I haven't used a siege weapon in years.”

“Sure Bull.” Hestia said, eyes on the horizon. How long does it take to get more than three hundred people out of the path of danger? Surely they weren't all gone yet. “We just have to wait for the
signal, then we-"

Her words were swallowed by an earsplitting roar. It was so loud and so close that it shook the ground they stood on. It rattled Varric’s crossbow bolts in their quiver. It rattled Hestia’s teeth in her head. Four heads snapped to the sky and saw with horror, a giant winged harbinger of death winging its wicked way towards them.

“Run,” Hestia said. “Now.”

They ran, sprinting for their lives and hoping against hope that the dragon couldn’t bank fast enough to follow them. Hestia was almost home and free when she remembered, the trebuchet! They hadn’t fired it, it sat there wound tight as a clock spring, and it would stay that way unless she…Hestia reversed her steps and threw herself back towards the siege weapon, sprinting with all the energy she had left and praying that she could make it before-

The archdemon let loose a gout of flame. The stacked pots exploded, sending Hestia tumbling end over end on the frozen ground. She ended up on her back, dazed and aching. Her shoulder hurt like a bitch, but she tried to shake herself out of it, tried to get up in time.

The Elder One walked out of the flames.

Up close it was even more gruesome. Spikes of red lyrium grew through its chest, around its head, jutted from the sides of its face. Its limbs were all sinew and bone, its fingers ending in cruel thin talons. What must’ve been armor jutted from where the sternum ought to be, the skin stretched across like leather on a tanners rack. The power than radiated from this thing was strong and ancient and malevolent.

Hestia scrambled to her feet, any ideas of standing and fighting had fled, all she wanted was to get away from this thing, get as far away she possibly could and then go further. She didn’t know how, but Hestia knew down in her bones that this thing hated her.

But, with a thud that sent debris flying into the air, the archdemon landed on the ground and bounded up behind her, cutting off her escape. If Hestia had been afraid before, it was nothing compared to how pants wettingly terrified she was right now. Her awareness of the dragon came in flashes, so great was this beast that she could barely comprehend the whole animal, it had to be broken up into smaller chunks. The wings were ragged along the edges. Those teeth. The neck shook as it roared and hissed at her. Its mouth is bigger than my whole body. It raised its head to the sky and declared a rattling screaming roar. I’m going to die. She was going to die.

From behind her, a voice said, “Enough.”

A wave of power passed over Hestia, blowing her hair back from her face. But the archdemon stopped displaying its teeth and backed several meters away. Hestia didn’t want to turn her back to either creature, but they had her flanked and she had no choice. She looked at the Elder One, with its sinewy arms outstretched.

Does he control it? Hestia thought, somewhere behind the terror. The fire raged all around, blocking out the world with smoke and embers. Does it obey him? Is the Elder One even a him?

The Elder One spoke, with a voice deeper and more dangerous than the bottom of the ocean. “Pretender, you toy with forces beyond your ken. No more.”

“What are you?” Hestia asked, trying to focus on anything that wasn’t screaming and throwing up. “Why are you doing this?”
“Mortals beg for truth they cannot have.” The Elder One said, almost disdainfully. It was difficult to discern emotions on a face like that, so stretched out and contorted. “It is beyond you, beyond what I was. Know me, know what you have pretended to be. Exalt the Elder One, the will that is Corypheus.”

He pointed to her with one long talon like finger. “You will kneel.”

Beneath the terror, she felt that rebellious instinct rear its head. Hestia’s lip curled. “I will not.”

Corypheus seemed almost amused at that. “You will resist. You will always resist. It matters not.” He held some sort of ceremonial orb in his other hand. Metal, with ridges etched in all around the surface. It looked ancient. “I am here for the anchor,” He said, suddenly activating some magic inside the ball, making it glow a with a sinister red light. “The process of removing it begins now.”

He threw a spell at her, and the mark activated, crackling and sizzling with greater strength that it ever had before. Her left hand began to rise against her will, drawn toward this creature, and she grabbed her wrist to try and stop it.

NO, she thought, trying to exert her own will over the mark. You’re on my hand, you do what I tell you.

Corypheus was still talking. “It is your fault ‘Herald’, you interrupted a ritual years in the planning. And instead of dying you stole its purpose.”

He intensified the spell, and so too the mark intensified. It hurt, so much more than the mark had ever had before. Stabbing pain went all the way up her arm and Hestia grit her teeth to stop herself from crying out; she would not give this thing the satisfaction.

“I do not know how you survived,” The monster said, “But what marks you as touched, what you flail at rifts, I crafted to assault the very heavens.”

It was no use, he was a much stronger mage than she would ever hope to be. Once more Corypheus fed strength into the spell, tugging at the anchor, but he’d do better to cut Hestia’s arm off for all the good he was doing. It felt like he was cutting her arm off, it felt like her hand was being torn apart bone by bone. Hestia was aware of the archdemon moving around her, was aware that she had fallen to her knees and shrieked in pain but those were secondary. The most important thing was how much this hurt.

“And you use the anchor to undo my work.” Sneered Corypheus, “The gall.”

Her voice betrayed her, and Hestia very nearly pleaded, “Take it back! I never asked for this!”

Corypheus sneered even more. “Mortals have always cried thus. Praise me for I would end the silence that answers.”

Suddenly, he was there in front of her. He grabbed her left hand and yanked her to her feet, then up and up until she was hanging several feet off the ground. His hand was a vice around her wrist and her whole arm screamed in protest. But now Hestia and the Elder One were face to face at last. “I once breached the fade in the name of another, to serve the old gods of the empire in person.” He snarled, his eyes wide and mad and angry. “I found only chaos and corruption, dead whispers. For a thousand years I was confused, no more. I have gathered the will to return under no name but my own. To champion withered Tevinter and correct this blighted world.”

“Beg that I succeed,” He snarled in her face. “For I have seen the throne of the gods, and it was empty.”

Then Corypheus reared back and threw her bodily at the trebuchet.
Hestia sailed through the air and hit the solid oak, falling to the platform in a crumpled heap. She wanted to lay there, she wanted to die here, she wanted everything to stop hurting so much. It hurt so much that she wanted to laugh. The anchor stopped fizzling on her hand, but it was hard to breathe in a way that only broken ribs could create. Hestia looked up at this creature, his pet archdemon, and knew there was no way she was walking away from here.

*Is it enough, Maker?* Hestia thought wildly, desperately. *Is this enough for you? I’ve given you everything, is it enough? Can I stop now? Is it enough to die for these people?*

The thought that bubbled up after that was a quiet one, but it was an answer. *What happens to them if I die?*

“The anchor is permanent,” Corypheus sneered. “You have spoilt it with your stumbling. So be it, I will begin again, find another way to give this world the nation and God it deserves.”

*Begin again.* Hestia reached up for a hand hold, shakily got to her feet. *If I fail, they will all die. Empress Celene assassinated, an army of demons in Orlais. He’ll kill everyone.*

Behind the archdemon, above the treeline, a flare of light lit the darkness, went up up up through the air before sailing down again.

“And you.” Corypheus was saying. “I will not suffer even an unknowing rival. You must die.”

*If I die, they die.* Hestia thought, feeling that pit of anger bolstering her enough to stand upright. *Well that's just fucking unacceptable.*

She was standing on a wooden platform, the trebuchet platform she realized in a flash of intuition. The crank for the stone was just a meter from where she stood. Hestia looked into the face of Corypheus, the creature that had killed Seraphina, and grinned. Maybe, just maybe, his victory wasn’t absolute. “You expect me to fight, but we both know how foolish that would be. Enjoy your victory. Here's your prize!”

She kicked the crank. The chain went rattling away. The trebuchet yanked, flinging the boulder towards the mountains.

She ran.

Chapter End Notes

As always, a big hug and thanks to Illyria_Lives, for sharing this fucked up family with me.

I'm susuwatarisprinkles on tumblr and sootsprites94 on twitter, come say hi
Standing there and doing nothing was the hardest thing Cullen had ever done.

Chancellor Roderick was as good as his word, and in twos and threes they snuck from the chantry and up to the path. The pass was choked with snow but nobody dared complain, nobody was stupid enough to wish for better circumstances of escape. They were lucky to be escaping with their lives, they knew, especially when so many of them hadn't. A wordless understanding to be wordless spread among the survivors. Children were hushed and lifted hand to hand when the snow drifts grew too large.

Dorian kept a sharp watch on their prisoner, who did nothing that seemed to precipitate an escape; Cassandra kept a sharp watch on them both regardless. Josephine shivered next to Cullen, while Leliana was up ahead of Roderick and Borchard, perhaps scouting for the dangers ahead. Cullen busied himself with keeping everyone moving, supporting the stragglers until he could get them back in step with the group.

And in his mind, a constant refrain, Go back for her. Go back for her, Go back for her.

He didn't. Couldn't. If Cullen endangered any of them by drawing the enemy's attention, it wouldn't only be the herald's life at risk. She did this so that we could escape, Cullen told himself, gritting his teeth against the shame. Make it worth something.

“Far enough I think.” Josephine said to him. She had wrapped herself in a shawl trimmed in fur, but Cullen could see her shivering. “We should send the signal.”

“You're right, let Leliana know.” Cullen told her, turning back towards Haven for the first time in this mess. Josephine struggled forward to find the nightingale, while Cullen made his way towards Cassandra.

“Cullen?” Cassandra asked, looking up from her watch on the prisoner.

“It's time.” Cullen told her. Cassandra nodded in her serious way.

There was a crunching of snow and suddenly Ben Tamrassen was there, eyes wild and rimmed red. “Send soldiers to help her.” he demanded, glaring at Cullen.

“Tamrassen, I know you're upset.” Cullen began, doing his best to be patient.

Tamrassen wouldn't let him finish. “You don't understand a thing! We're far enough away now, send someone back to help her! Hestia will hold that line until she drops, and if we take much longer we'll be bringing back her corpse!” His voice broke on the last word.

Cullen’s stomach had turned to lead, but he held firm. “When the rest of these people are safe and settled,” He said, thankful that his voice did not shake, “We will send search parties back to Haven.”

“By then it will be too late!” Ben yelled, his shout echoing through the trees around them.

“Then we should do our best to be sure her sacrifice means something, shouldn’t we?” Cullen said,
hating the way the words felt in his mouth.

Ben wasn’t a soldier but he had worked with the carta, and was quicker the average drunk in a bar fight. Cullen saw the punch coming with barely enough time to dodge it, saw the second punch heading for his stomach and took that one without flinching, all the marcher would get for a gut punch against a steel breastplate was a sore hand. Cullen grabbed the hand and twisted around Tamrassen’s back and held him there for a moment, before shoving him away, right into the arms of his cousin.

“Ben,” Shay hissed, getting a hand on the collar of Ben’s coat before he could have another go at Cullen. “Get a grip. This isn’t helping her.”

“He’s not helping her by staying here!” Ben growled, turning that fierce glare on the mild mannered lay brother. “Shay, she could be dead already!”

“Stop.” Shay said, a word so soft and clear, sharp enough to break glass. “You’re not helping Ben. These people are trying to help everyone, not just you. Hestia is not the only person suffering tonight, and your pain is not the only pain being felt tonight.”

The words were quiet and harsh and seemed to cut Tamrassen to the bone. Blood filled his face and he all but snarled at his kin, “What would you want to know about my pain, Shay? What else are you going to report back to your mother?”

“I know your son is going to look to your example for how adults behave when someone they care about it missing.” Shay hissed, blue eyes turning to slits. “Is this the example you’re going to show him?”

“How dare-” Ben’s hand flew to the sheath of his daggers but Cassandra was there, putting her shoulder in the marchers chest and shoving her way between the squabbling cousins.

“Enough!” She snapped, with a face like thunder. “This is getting us nowhere. Both of you get back to your positions and allow us to do our jobs!”

Borchard looked chastened, Tamrassen looked mutinous, but nobody wanted to argue with Cassandra when she used that tone. Both men trooped back to their places in the train of survivors, passing Leliana on the way back.

Leliana raised at eyebrow at Cassandra as she notched her bow. “Do I even want to know?”

“Apparently Borchard has been informing on us,” Cullen said in what he hoped was a helpful tone, but it settled into bitterness almost immediately.

Leliana nodded in that all knowing way of hers. “Yes, letters to his mother. They are benign for now, but I can keep a watch on it if you like.”

“It hardly matters now.” Cassandra muttered, looking back behind them towards Haven. All the houses were burning, smoke rose in a plume of ash and darkness. Faintly, they could hear the roar of the archdemon again.

“Ser Pavus, come here and light this,” Leliana said to the Tevinter.

Dorian, who had been standing by and watching though most of this exchange, came to stand with Leliana, a wicked look in his eyes. “If you’ll allow me, Sister Nightingale, I think I have an idea that might be better.”
Leliana turned the concentrated power of her single raised eyebrow on the man, and Cullen could actually see the moment where Dorian remembered just how dangerous The Left Hand actually was. “And what would that be, exactly?”

He recovered remarkably well, considering. “I think it would be nice if Alexius fired the flare.” The Tevinter grabbed the manacles still locked on the disgraced magisters wrists, tugged the man forward a few feet. “Let him see what his allegiance to this creature really means.”

“Enough Dorian.” Alexius sighed, shoulders slumped, eyes downcast, every inch a broken man. “You have made your point. The Elder One never intended to save Felix. Now all we can do is wait… for the end.”

Cullen ignored that chilling pronouncement, choosing instead to stalk over and grab the disgraced magister by the chains and drag him upright. “One thing I keep asking myself,” He growled. “How long did you know this was coming? How many opportunities did you have to tell us? And how many did you forsake for wallowing in your self pity?”

Alexius looked into his face with hooded, deadened eyes. “What would be the point Commander?” he drawled, either ignorant of how close Cullen was to grievously injuring him, or just apathetic about the amount of danger he was placing himself in. “Not one of you can hope to stand against him. He will always come for the mark.”

“And we will always stand against him.” Cullen hissed, before shoving the magister away from him. “Light the arrow Magister Alexius.” He snarled at the mage. “Dorian is right. You should be the one to watch this.”

Alexius sighed deeply but murmured a small flame spell and touched his hand to the tip of the arrow. The metal arrowhead glowed cherry red, and a small golden flame danced around it. Leliana drew her arm back and sighted somewhere in the heavens.

“Though darkness falls around me,” Leliana murmured into her hand, “I am shielded by flame.”

The arrow was loosed, and almost in answer, they heard the thunk of a siege weapon. The gathered survivors watched in silence as the thunder of an avalanche grew until the sound reached even their far away ears, watched as the archdemon shrieked and took to the sky, headed westward and far away from them. They watched as the slide of snow spread over Haven, dowsing the fires and covering the town that had held them all in her safe clutches. They watched as Haven was swallowed entirely.

They continued on their way.

They trekked into the mountains for what felt like hours. The night became longer and longer, stars began to flicker in the clear skies above them. The snow glimmered in the moonlight, and the only sound was the whimpering of children and the murmurs of prayers. They walked slowly now that it was approaching midnight, and many children were being carried in the arms of parents and chantry sisters, sleeping on shoulders and drooling onto sleeves.

Samson’s face swam into his mind and Cullen pushed it back, again and again. He grit his teeth against the anger, stowing it away for later. It defied understanding, why Samson would join that creature, how he could twist and corrupt the Order in such a way. Was it just the lyrium? Had
Samson’s bitterness led him down this path? Possibilities spun in his mind unbidden, each one more far fetched than the last.

*I almost wrote to him,* Cullen thought, a bile of shame and disgust rising in his throat. *Would he have responded? Could this have been prevented? Or would it just have drawn this monster’s ire to us all the sooner?*

At one point Cullen thought he heard wolves howling in the trees and had reached for his sword, but Solas had stayed his hand. “Pay them no mind Commander.” The apostate said, in his mild way. “They are no threat to us.”

“You can be sure of that?” He had asked, knowing better than to doubt Solas by this point. The elven apostate wasted no words, and he was nearly always right.

Solas nodded once. “Even rabid wolves wouldn’t attack a group of this size. If we set torches at the edges of the camp, we will be safe from the wildlife.”

“Camp?” Cullen grinned, a bitter edge to the gesture. “Are we sure we’ll even find a suitable place to rest?”

Solas’s eyes glimmered. “Do not turn to doubt just yet Commander. What is it you humans say? ‘The Maker is watching over you?’”

“Andraste is the one who watches over us.” Cullen corrected, rubbing the exhaustion from his eyes. “The Maker just sits in judgement of our mistakes.”

“Ah. My mistake.” Solas said, casting his eyes heavenward. “These matters of faith can be so complicated.”

“Yes.” Cullen said, looking out over their people.

Each one driven forward, silently, into the night. They had faith that The Inquisition would protect them, but they had failed. They had faith that the Templar Order would hold fast to its duty, but the Order had failed. They had faith that the Chantry would shelter them, but the Chantry had failed. They had had faith that Andraste would protect them, but where was she? Cullen had had faith that his suffering had been for a purpose, but what if that wasn’t true? What if his trials, like all trials, had no purpose? What could be the reason then, for all he had been through?

Cullen had had faith that Hestia would hold back the tide to allow them to escape. She had.

“Yes,” Cullen said again, although Solas had moved away from him now, to settle into a conversation with Cassandra. “You’re right about that Solas. You’re right about that.”

“Still nothing Ser.” The scout said, coming to stand in front of Cullen, who looked up at him, aggravated.

“You must have found something.” Cullen said waspishly.

“We found two crates of supplies and some broken weapons,” The scout said promptly. “But no sign of the Herald of Andraste.”
“Well, send the next group out.” Cullen told him, waving to the group of soldiers, scouts and volunteers that were ready to go back and pick through the wreckage of Haven to find anything still of use. And Hestia. Everyone wanted to be the one who found Hestia. “Not you recruit, you’re on bed rest for four hours.”

“I’m alright Commander.” The scout insisted, although he clearly wasn’t. The boy was swaying, dead on his feet, and he wouldn’t put weight on his left leg. “I can keep searching.”

“No, your keenness is noted and appreciated, but no.” Cullen made it final with a glare and a closed book. “Bed, after you see a healer. We’ve already too many good men injured, we can’t be neglecting what able men we still have.”

The scout’s chest visibly swelled, before his brain caught up with what his orders really were. “Aye Ser.” he said glumly, marching off.

Cullen shook his head, ran an aggravated hand through his hair. This camp was barely safer than where they had been before, and it had the added benefit of no standing buildings or safe places for the horses and pack animals. They had put up torches along the edges of the camp, as suggested by Solas, which had the lovely consequence of herding all the spooked and shying animals into the center of the camp, right through the healers tents. They had only just gotten the injured out of the way in time before the bronto took the whole tent down and kept going, dragging the fabric behind it.

It would be funny, Cullen had thought, If we weren't running for our lives.

Cullen pressed a hand to his face, feeling the exhaustion behind his eyes, dragging his thoughts into a crawl. This was the worst possible time for him to fall asleep, there was still so much to do. She’s still out there, she’s depending on us. There were a thousand things that still needed his attention, and until Rylen woke up from his mandated four hour rest there was nobody Cullen could trust to oversee any of these decisions. We need to get her back, we have to find her. The blizzard that had blown up soon after they had settled had died down only in the last hour, and the campfires were only just being lit again by weary exhausted mages.

Go after her, go after her, go after her!

Cullen grabbed up his sword and belted it back on, tugged his mantle a little closer around his ears. The fur was singed and smelled of ash and burning, but it still kept the chill off.

As soon as he started away from his maps, Cassandra fell in with him. “And where do you think you’re going?”

Cullen didn’t blush or babble, he was a grown man speaking to a colleague and friend, not a child caught by a chantry sister. But it was a close thing. “The search team is coming in, and I am going out with the next group.”

“Cullen, when was the last time you slept?” She asked, eyeing him closely.

Cullen cast what would’ve been annoyed glance at her, if his body hadn't taken this opportunity to yawn hugely. “I could ask the same of you. I’m fit enough for a few hours out there with the men.”

“Commander, if you go out there right now, you’re going to be one we’re sending search parties out after.” Cassandra said firmly, coming to stand in front of him, a hand on his shoulder. “You can offer nothing to those searching that another desperate pair of eyes.”

Cullen stopped, and glared at her. “Better two more than not enough.” He growled at her,
shouldering past. “I’m going out with the next group and that’s final Seeker Cassandra.”

Cassandra snorted, and somehow made it seem intimidating. “And what would that possibly accomplish?”

“It’s better than sitting around here waiting for the other shoe to drop.” Cullen muttered for only her to hear. “Our position is undefended and I can’t help but think-”

“The Herald stopped them.” Cassandra cut him off, with a certainty that Cullen envied more every day. “She stood against the enemy and prevailed.”

“So we’re just going to leave her out there?” Cullen snapped, trying to keep his voice hushed but not entirely sure he’s succeeded. Cullen took Cassandra’s wrist and led her further away from the camp. “Hestia sacrifices her chance to escape to help us and we just abandon her to die of exposure?”

“That is not what we are doing.” Cassandra turned to him, putting her hands on her hips. “We are going to find her, if-”

Cassandra’s certainty faltered, and for perhaps the first time since he’d met her, Cullen saw doubt in her eyes. “Exactly.” Cullen said, nodding. “If there is nothing left to retrieve, what happens to the Inquisition?”

*The Herald brought these people together. Without her we shall surely fall apart.* Cullen thought it and dared not say it aloud.

Cassandra thought about that. After a moment, the certainty returned, and when she looked him in the eyes the fire of determination lit her face. Sometimes Cullen thought Cassandra could lead armies into battle with that look alone. “I will go with you then.” She said, and then raised a sardonic eyebrow. “If only to keep you from being added to the list of missing persons.”

Cullen chuckled a bit. “That’s very kind of you Seeker.”

“I try.”

They did not have to search long. Almost as soon as the group had started out, (two elven scouts, a dwarf who didn’t speak much) it became clearer, the worst of the winds and snow from the blizzard had faded away, leaving a clear frozen sky speckled with stars. The footprints and occasional drag marks from boxes of supplies recovered by the earlier teams had already been covered by a fine dusting of snow. But as they rounded the bend into the pass that concealed the lights of the camp…

There she was.

Hestia looked half dead, more than half. She fell on her knees as soon as she saw them, but by the time Cullen got close enough to gauge the details she looked to be almost unconscious. This was unsurprising, because the picture those details told was far from pretty.

Snow was crusted in her hair and in every crease of her armor, caked on her boots like a second pair of boots had been slipped on over the first pair. There was blood on her face, in her hair, staining her gloves. One eye was swollen shut. Her head lolled to the side as Cassandra scooped the woman into her arms like she weighed nothing at all, and Cullen could see her lips were blue and the tip of her nose was a murky black color. Her right arm dangled uselessly at her side and she moaned in pain when Cassandra hefted her up and started back towards the camp.
“Go tell the healers.” Cullen barked, lacking anything to do with his hands. “Tell Mother Giselle and Borchard. Get them to wake up the best healer the mages had to offer. We need him now!”

The other scouts took off running, shouting for the healers. Cullen stayed with Cassandra, for once not caring that the peace of his war camp was being broken. He couldn’t stop staring at Hestia, couldn’t stop seeing some new injury. Her eyebrow was split where it had been scarred and it had started bleeding again. There was bruising on her neck, who knew how far it went down her back. There was blood and ice matted in her hair.

Ben Tamrassen got there first, because of course he did. “Hestia!” He shouted, then murmured almost too quietly to hear, “Tia, Tia you came back to us.”

“She needs urgent medical care,” Cassandra growled at the marcher. “If you can’t fix a broken bone, then get out of the way Tamrassen.”

Ben’s eyes snapped to Cassandra, and Cullen could actually see and enjoy the moment the retort died on Ben’s lips. “Shay is getting a bed ready.” He told them, falling in step behind Cassandra. “I can keep the masses back, if you like.”

“If you must.” Cassandra bit out.

Cullen always felt utterly out of place in a healers tent. He knew theoretically what went on in a healers profession, but that was as far as he had ever been able to go. The various ingredients of poultice mixing, bone setting, healing magic and various herbs used in combination had mystified him, even as a boy. It seemed more an art than a science, especially since the needs of a qunari patient were so vastly different from the needs of a dwarven one. At least, Cullen assumed so. But to see the healers working, it could be a dance. One chantry sister wiped the blood from Hestia’s face while another applied a warm cloth to her hair and began combing out the chunks of ice and snow that had accumulated there.

Cassandra assisted in removing the Heralds boots but was soon shooed out of the way to have her place taken by a Tranquil who set to the task of undoing the many buckles and knots of Hestia’s armor with the single minded devotion of a man who had no other goal in life than to assist his keepers.

“Can’t get the jacket off,” A mage said, holding out a hand to a chantry sister. “Need the shears to cut it. This arm isn’t responding the way it ought.”

“Here. I’ve got the breastplate off.” A chantry sister said, lifting the battered and bloodied piece of metal away and handing it to another sister. “See if the blacksmiths can salvage that?”

Once the breastplate was lifted away and the padding vest removed, Cullen could see the damage went down far further than he expected. Blood had stained all the way down her shirt in dingy red and brown patches and he definitely didn’t like the way she was coughing. Blood dribbled from between Hestia’s lips, and Cullen made the unilateral decision to retreat from the tent.

It was too hot and there were too many people. More than that, old images were beginning to dance before his eyes and all the magic in the air was making his joints begin to ache. Cullen felt a cold sweat break out on his brow, saw the firelight dance in the torches, saw the blood and viscera spreading across the floor, heard the screaming and the cruel laughter. He couldn’t breathe, couldn’t move, felt the stinging slap across his face, smelled the foul stench of decaying bodies and filthy breath of the demons sent to torment them.

Somebody was calling his name, but it sounded like they were far away. Was it Surana? She had
been looking for her brother last he saw her, but they had gotten separated between floors and Cullen had been holding the door back and-

“Commander!” Someone shouted, and suddenly the Seeker was there, shaking him by the shoulders. “Cullen, come on!”

“What’s wrong with him?” Ben Tamrassen was behind her, eyes bright blue and worried. “He just collapsed outside the tent.”

Cullen raised a hand to his face and the glove was covered with snow. How had that happened? He was on the ground, when had he ended up on the ground? “Cassandra, I—” He tried, but his mouth was so dry. He licked his lips and tried again. “Cassandra, I think…”

“You need to sleep, I won’t hear any excuses.” Cassandra said severely, crouching before him and getting one of his arms over her shoulder, lifting him as easily as a child. “Tamrassen, if you want to be helpful, you won’t breathe a word of this.”

Tamrassen moved out of her way, but he arched an eyebrow and shot Cassandra a grin that went almost entirely ignored. “And what do I get in return Seeker?”

“You get to keep all of your teeth.” Cassandra growled at him before she dragged Cullen back towards the tent that had been set out for the officers.

Rylen didn’t even stir when Cullen pulled open the tent flap, Cassandra shoving him inside. He all but collapsed on the bed but finally found the strength to object when Cassandra tried to pull one of his gloves off.

“Enough, Cassandra.” He told her in a whisper. He pulled off his gloves and started on the buckles of his armor, doing his best to stop his hands from shaking. “I’m a grown man, I don’t need a nurse maid.”

“Good.” Cassandra said, glaring at him. “Because I am not your mother.”

“You can be sure of that.” Cullen told her. They glared at each other for a moment before all the wind left Cullen in a rush. He looked down at his hands, they looked so pale and fragile in the dark of the tent. “My… my apologies Cassandra.” He told her. “I am very grateful for your help.”

“Yes, well.” Cassandra looked embarrassed. She put her hand on Cullen’s knee for a moment and squatted down in front of him. “What you are doing is worth something, not just for you. Other templars need to know that this is possible.”

“If it’s possible.” Cullen said, rubbing his eyes. “If it gets worse—”

“I will be the one to judge that.” Cassandra told him, that certainty that you could bend iron around evident in her voice. “Stay the course Commander. The Maker will not abandon you.”

*If he didn’t abandon me long ago, he may certainly consider it now.* Cullen thought, pulling his breastplate off. But that was the last thought he had that night, for he was asleep before his head hit the pillow.
Cullen couldn’t remember what the argument had been about, truly. He just knew that he was frustrated and yelling.

It had been four days now. Four days of packing up and running deeper into the mountains, of broken boxes and supplies running down with no way to resupply, virtually cut off from communication from the rest of the world. In a stroke of practicality, Leliana had set all her ravens go when it became clear that Haven was going to be lost. Until the birds found their way back to her, they were all alone on top of the spine of the Frostbacks. Low morale could cripple them as much as the cold and the injuries.

So Cullen was overworked and overtired and frustrated and yelling. So was Cassandra, and Leliana and Josephine.

“What would you have me tell them?” Cullen snapped at Cassandra, outraged at her bullheaded refusal to listen to his suggestions. “This isn’t what we asked them to do!”

“We cannot simply ignore this,” Cassandra snapped back, “We must find a way!”

“And who put you in charge? We need a consensus or we have nothing.” Cullen chose to ignore for the moment that he had been the loudest supporter for Cassandra becoming Inquisitor only days ago. None of them seemed to remember either.

It had been a trying week.

“Please, we must use reason.” Josephine pleaded, not seeming to realize how close she was to sticking her head into the lion’s mouth. “Without the infrastructure of the Inquisition, we’re hobbled.”

“That can’t come from nowhere.” Cullen snapped at her.

He almost immediately regretted it when Leliana’s eyes blazed fire. “She didn’t say it could.” The Nightingale snapped, putting a hand on Josephine’s arm, taking a step or two forward.

“Enough!” Cassandra shouted, throwing up her hands. “This is getting us nowhere.”

“We’re agreed on that much.” Cullen grumbled, but Cassandra was already stalking away, to lean over the maps and glower as she had been doing constantly for the last few days.

Cullen stalked back to his tent, unsure why he was headed that way but knowing he couldn’t stand there and shout at Josephine any longer or Leliana would put an arrow in his eye. He wasn’t sure why the Left Hand was so protective of Lady Montilyet, certainly their ambassador could hold her own in an argument and it wasn’t like he would ever hurt either of them, what did Leliana really think he was? He wasn’t a monster, he was just frustrated, they all were, how dare she doubt him like that?

A memory opened like a book in Cullen’s mind. That last day in Kinloch was such a relief he almost forgot the things he’d said. He’d believed them, fervently, for years, but so much of that time had become blurred in his mind. But now a few details popped into view, things he’d long forgotten.

A woman in leathers, lovely in a fierce and dangerous way, assisted by Senior Enchanter Wynne. They had finally killed the abominations in the Harrowing Chamber, finally set them all free. She’d introduced herself as Cousland, a Grey Warden. The Grey Warden, as it had turned out. And standing at her side, much younger and much kinder…
Cullen groaned and felt the shame roll over him like a wave. No wonder Leliana didn’t trust him, no wonder she looked at him sometimes like something messy she’d stepped in. She’d been there at his lowest point and now she thought that was who he was, who Cullen wanted to be.

Cullen wanted to put his face in his hands and slam his head against a tree. Lacking a suitable implement for self flagellation, the next best option would most likely be to apologize to The Left Hand at some point. It would be just as painful and probably just a helpful, but at least there would be less blood to clean up. Probably.

Cullen sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. He turned around and looked around the clearing for her. Leliana was sitting next to Josephine, head on her knees.

He was about to head over to ask her to speak with him, privately, when the singing started.

“Shadows fall.
And hope has fled.
Steel your heart.
The dawn will come.”

Cullen looked up, familiar words settling into his chest like a good whiskey, burning a path down. Mother Giselle was walking away from The Heralds tent, head bowed and hands folded. Her voice was deep and strong, an alto that could carry a trio if the higher parts were weak.

Cullen knew the song in his bones. His mother had used to sing it to him when he was afraid of the shadows under his bed.

“The night is long.
And the path is dark.
Look to the sky.
For one day soon.
The dawn will come.”

Then, another voice. Leliana joined in, her voice clear and clean as a bell. Her eyes were bright, not with tears but with something more. Cullen looked at her, at the people slowly gathering in the clear space they had left in front of the Heralds tent. And then, past Mother Giselle, he saw the Herald.

“The Shepherd's lost.
And his home is far.
Keep to the stars.
The dawn will come.”

Hestia was wrapped in a blanket, scars patched and blood cleaned away. She was pale and blond and freckly with a hooked nose and knowing grey eyes. These things he knew about her. But, there was something about this moment, about this song, about this night. It was something that he’d seen but never bothered to notice, but Hestia was really quite beautiful.

Cullen felt his breath catch in his throat. She lived. She lived. So can we.

Cullen closed his eyes and let the singing wash over him, rather surprised to find that he too was lifting his voice to the sky.

“The night is long.
And the path is dark.
Look to the sky.
For one day soon.
The dawn will come."

People went to their knees, people saluted the Herald, people had tears in their eyes. At least for now, the pall in the camp seemed to be lifted. People laughed again, either in relief or in embarrassment. Cullen rubbed the back of his neck and sighed, looking around and catching Cassandra's eye. Sorry, he mouthed to her, and Cassandra nodded to him once.

*We’ll make this work.* Cullen thought. *We can do it.*

*We have to.*

Chapter End Notes

As always, a thanks and a hug for Illyria_Lives, for sharing this fucked up family with me

I'm susuwatarisprinkles on tumblr and sootsprites94 on twitter, feel free to say hello!
Hestia had asked Solas to give her a bearing each morning, so she wouldn’t lead them in circles across these mountains searching for his supposedly perfect place for the Inquisition. After two weeks in the mountains, she almost convinced that he was having a go at her and she’d been too thick to realize it. But when she crested the ridge and saw it, all ill thoughts flew out of her mind.

“Skyhold.” Solas said, coming up behind her. She could hear the smug smile on his face but she was far too starstruck to care.

Skyhold was the perfect name for it. It sat cradled in the mountains like the peak of a belltower. It had towers and ramparts and a great stone bridge. There were even flags from the previous occupants still fluttering in the wind. It was huge and solid and probably freezing but right now it was the most beautiful thing Hestia had ever seen.

“It… will take a lot of work.” Hestia said, finally closing her gaping mouth.

Solas hummed an agreement.

“And it’ll be difficult for the rest of the world to get to us.”

“I rather think that was the point.” Solas looked like the cat that ate the canary, truly. “Any other complaints?”

“I imagine in time I’ll have hundreds.” Hestia said, turning to smile at him in earnest. “It’s perfect Solas. Just perfect. What can I do to repay you?”

Solas raised his eyebrows. “Whatever are you talking about Hestia? You found this place, after all.”

Hestia grinned at him for another moment before spinning around and shouting to the ones closest behind them, “You have to see this! We found it!”

She had been right. It was going to take a lot of work, for all of them. But, with some luck and elbow grease, Skyhold could become something really extraordinary.

Everywhere Hestia turned, there was something to be discovered. There was a tower with several flights of stairs that could turn you around and around until you didn’t know which way you were facing. Some old and broken bookshelves on one of those floors made it clear that it was once a library. Vivienne and Dorian were in competition for who’s friends and contacts could fill that library the fastest.

Leliana had recovered all but two or three of her birds and set up a rookery almost as soon as they moved in. Her scouts were moving through the castle with the lightning speed of people who knew if they fell behind their boss could very easily make them disappear. Not one of them would say a
word against her, not even when Iron Bull plied them with ridiculous amounts of alcohol.

It became clear that all that walking hadn’t been helpful for Hestia’s condition, and she still couldn’t really grip anything with her right hand, so they found her a place to sleep and ordered her on bed rest for at least three days. That hadn’t stuck. Hestia heard someone had knocked down a wall and found a whole separate area that could be turned into a kitchen and Hestia was desperate to find it. She’d gotten turned around and had ended up in a tiny courtyard replete with overgrown bushes and a tiny stone gazebo.

“Whatever magic hid you for so long, I am grateful for it.” Hestia murmured, running a hand carefully along the stone of one wall, feeling the warmth that had seeped into the stones. “This place is perfect for us.”

The wind played through the trees and she closed her eyes, letting the whispering of the leaves soothe her nerves. Being fussed over by those healers had given her the biggest sense of deja vu. Hestia wandered over to the small patch of grass in this little garden and sat down, digging her fingers down into the earth. It was wet, surprisingly, and the grass was the soft ticklish variety than grew with reckless abandon on the hillsides of Tantervale.

**Now how could there be fertile ground all the way up here?** Hestia thought, biting the inside of her lip. Everything should be frozen and hard as the marble Vivienne wants to cover the walls with. She looked up at the sky, at the fluffy white clouds that sat in the bright blue sky. Skyhold sat too high up for weather, higher than the rain and snow could reach. The air wasn’t thin either, it was clean and warm and sweet with the smell of grass and workmans dust.

Hestia puzzled over this. How old was Skyhold? How much magic had seeped into these old stones? She could ask Solas, but she was loath to get up from the grass. This was the first time she’d been alone in days, weeks even. There were so many people in the Inquisition, more and more looking to her for decisions. And, strangest of all, she’d been making them. Every day it got easier to say with confidence, yes this is what you should be doing. No, do something else. Yes of course we should build a tavern, there’s space for one right there. No, any torture devices you’ve found in those old cells can get tossed right into the waterfall, thank you. There’s no place for torture in the Inquisition.

*Should’ve run that by Leliana*, she thought, giving up the ghost and laying down in the grass, pillowing her head on her arms. *She might have a different idea. I’ll do it after dinner. She’s usually in a better mood after she’d had a good meal.*

This was the first time Hestia had been alone since they had found Skyhold. Since she had found Skyhold. That was the story and nobody really seemed to care that she’s been taking advice from Solas, that she’d had to be carried by Iron Bull for the first three days of the journey. Details didn’t seem to matter. It was like Varric had said to her once, don’t let the technicalities of reality get in the way of a good story.

Hestia felt the warm breeze drift over her, felt the soft grass tickling her skin, felt the soft kiss of the sunbeams on her face…
little fade island and down down down into the blackness below. The fade was always like this at first, sand and twisted trees and fearlings and rage demons that she had to chase away so she could get some proper thinking done.

Hestia huffed a sigh and looked around. This was the fade, everything tinged slightly green and floating in an endless abyss. She looked and there it was, the Black City, a small malevolent kingdom sitting in the distance. Hestia had spend a week determinately walking toward it once, when she was young and foolish. It had never gotten any closer, and she’d gotten a stinging slap from her mentor when she admitted what she’d done.

*Nothing but darkspawn and death that way lies, my girl. Set your sights on more earthly things and we’ll all be safer.*

Hestia shoved that thought away and fast. The last thing she wanted was any demons out here getting a taste of that particular fear.

Hestia thought for a moment, and her little island became something more familiar. The twisted trees grew upward and outward, taking on the shape of buildings leaning too close together. The sandy pathways became waterways, and the patch of ground she was sitting on became a thin and brightly colored boat laden with flowers. Hestia found an oar in her hands and smiled, feeling the worn wood.

This was Ostwick. She was home.

“**There you are Hestia.**” a familiar voice said in her ear.

Hestia looked up into the face of someone she knew well. Standing on a dock a few meters away was Elayna Trevelyan, her cousin and beloved friend. She looked about the same, long dark hair billowing out behind her in lovely black waves, blue eyes set deep in a dusky brown face, smile wide as the Ostwick sunset.

Hestia squinted. **“You’re either a very clever demon or a rather stupid cousin, I can’t decide which.”**

Eleyna crossed her eyes and stuck out her tongue. **“Just let me get in the boat you.”**

Hestia snickered. **“Stupid cousin it is then.”**

She steered the boat close to the dock and Elayna stepped aboard without a thought. The two cousins embraced while the boat steered itself along the stinking claustrophobic canals of Ostwick city. Hestia and Elayna both put up a proper barrier around their little boat, just in case any overzealous demons wanted to jump out from behind a bridge.

“I’ve been searching for you for days.” Elayna told her as soon as the barriers shimmered into life. **“What happened to you?”**

“What do you mean what happened to me?” Hestia asked, reaching out and taking a flower from the many bulging sacks in front of her. She took the flower and tucked it behind Elayna’s ear, who didn’t even bother to complain.

“You were in and out of the fade for three or four days.” Elayna told her seriously, brushing some hair out of Hestia’s face and looking at her with those medics eyes. **“I see you closed the big hole in the sky, bravo there, but then you’re unconscious for days and now… I’m not even sure where you are Hestia.”**
“I’m somewhere safe.” Hestia said, turning an oar and letting them drift serenely around one of the many circles of waterway that turned Ostwicks canal system into a lovely work of art. “Our camps was attacked by some… sort of monster. But I’m fine, Shay is fine, Levy and Ben are fine.”

Elayna sat back, smoothing down the front of her circle robe. It was the blue of a full fledged enchanter, and she always kept a silver brooch at her throat, a snake curled around a stave, in deference to their shared family name. She looked around at the dreamworld of Ostwick that Hestia had conjured for the two of them to enjoy. “Why do you always dream in this place?” she asked softly, sad eyes flickering from building to bridge to dock to boat.

Hestia shrugged, rubbing the back of her neck and looking down. “Maybe I was homesick.” she said, trying for a carefree smile.

Elayna shook her head. “For this? This isn't an Ostwick I've ever seen.”

Hestia looked up at the slanting buildings, the bright shining sun. If she squinted, she could hear the calls of the gulls and terns; if she strained her ears she could hear the hush of the sea. Elayna was right of course. Ostwick was this beautiful perhaps twice a year, and the rest of the time the fog covered everything and the docks stank of fish.

Hestia looked back at Layna and offered her hand. Elayna took it and squeezed back. “You can be homesick for something you've never had.” Hestia told her. “Would you like us to see what Ostwick really looks like now?”

Elayna shook her head. “If we're dreaming, it might as well be of beautiful things.”

Hestia smiled and looked down. She hadn’t realized that she had dreamed herself up a circle robe of her own, in black and blue. She frowned snapped her fingers, turning it into the white leather armor that Cassandra had commissioned for her, shiny and brand new. The real set had been too damaged in the attack on Haven and had needed to be abandoned in the snow. Perhaps some scavenger would find the battered metal and broken maile, but it wouldn’t do Hestia any more good.

They spoke of unimportant things for a while, Hestia's health, Seraphina's funeral in Ostwick, Elayna's friends and pen-pals, how Ben's mother was coping now that she was married at 65 to Guard Captain Thomas.

And then Hestia looked up and saw Elayna watching her. “Hestia,” She began in that gentle way that always broke Hestia’s heart.

Of the three of them, Hestia always worried about Elayna the most. Knowing that the world was harsh, Hestia had taken the stance that anything that wanted to get to Elayna or Seraphina would have to go through her first. And Seph knew without a doubt that people had to be tested before they could be trusted, and if they tried to bite you that she could bite back. But Elayna, with her gentle hands and her gentle heart, would always try to give second and third and forth chances to those who didn’t necessarily deserve them.

This often and especially included Hestia.

Elayna said, “Hestia,” in that gentle way that always broke Hestia’s heart. “Do you need me to come to you?”

“Oh Layna-”

“We're filling up the carts with supplies for the Inquisition,” Elayna pushed on over Hestia’s
protests. “I can easily find a place on one.”

“Josephine asked for supplies from Bann Yoenn?” Hestia grit her teeth. “I asked her for one thing.”

“And I’m sure my father wouldn’t mind. He’s all for the Inquisition, lots of people around here are.” Elayna reached out and took Hestia’s hands, squeezed them gently. “If you need our help, you need only ask.”

“Oh I’m sure he’s full of support for the Inquisition.” Hestia scoffed, pulling her hands back and standing quickly, stepping off the boat onto a dock. “Your father can be so supportive when it suits him.”

“And what is that supposed to mean?” Elayna asked, rising smoothly from the boat and waving a hand to make it disappear.

“It means I don’t want House Trevelyan to promise this Inquisition anything.” Hestia snapped, turning on her heel and bumping against the side of a fish mongers shed, counter laden with piles of fresh catch. “I don’t want to know what they will demand in exchange.”

“This isn’t the Ostwick of days past Hestia.” Elayna told her, serious eyes watching her. “My father is an honorable man.”

Hestia let out a bitter laugh. “Oh yes, duty and honor and a big Andrastian shield, all Uncle Yoenn needs to hide our family legacy.”

Walls were rising around them, the wood beneath her feet changing to cobbles to sand to clean grey stone. The shadow of the parapet where everything changed grew and slid across Elayna’s face, covering her cousin in the half light of the courtyard. This stone courtyard where nothing could grow, not matter how hard anybody tried. Her hair was bound up against her neck now, in one of those complicated braided updos that she favored when she was working as a healer.

Hestia took a look around Trevelyan Keep, the place that her family had held for generations. The clean stone walls, the gravel and mud of the courtyard. The stable for the horses, the doors to the kitchen and the cellars that flooded in the wet seasons. The place that had raised them all into what they were today. The place where Seph was born, the place where Corliss had bled and wept, the place where Auggie had died. This place had been their playground, a labyrinth of rooms and hallways to amuse a gaggle of cooped up children for hours on end. But it was easy to forget that a labyrinth was built as a prison for the monsters within.

Hestia spat on the stone.

“If you didn’t want my help, all you had to do was say so.” Elayna’s voice was flat.

Hestia felt a wave of shame wash over her, and it only compounded when she saw the look on Elayna’s face. “Oh Layna,” Hestia said, starting toward her. “You know I didn't mean you.”

Elayna stepped back from her, holding up a hand and making Hestia halt her steps. “No, I don't know that!” Elayna said. “You want me to stand here and pretend I'm not insulted by that? This is your family! This is your home!”

“This isn't my home anymore.” Hestia said, hearing how harsh the words were only when they were out of her mouth.

“Yes, you've made that abundantly clear.” Elayna snapped. “You and everyone else who left.”
Hestia blinked and her heart melted just a little. “Oh Layna.”

“No, don't you ‘Oh Layna’ me.” Elayna told her, hands balling into fists. “Don't act like you're my mother. Do you really want to see what Ostwick looks like now?”

Before Hestia could answer, Elayna waved her arm and the courtyard changed. Oh the stone was the same, the walls and the steps were as they always were. But as she watched the gravel turned to mud that was crisscrossed with cart tracks, the stables disappeared to be replaced with a large bonfire. And everywhere, the people. Chantry sisters and nurses and children and fishmongers carting their little stalls now piled high with food. Dozens of cots were set up in neat rows, and nearly all of them were filled with injured men and women, wearing armor of all colors and stripes. Templars laid down next to mages. Sellwords laid next to watchmen.

Faces she knew jumped out of the crowd. There was their old housekeeper, carrying a bundle of bloodied bandages. There was the stable hand who had given Hestia her first kiss and blushed down to his toes, now sprawled on a cot with bandages wrapped around his midsection. And there, signing a stack of papers and directing a fishmonger shed to the other side of the courtyard, was her mother.

She was tall and willowy, swathed in black fabric with silver detailing around her collar, with smooth brown skin, intense hazel eyes, and short black hair that had been artfully tousled and curled around her face, softening her hawkish features. If Amelia Trevelyan wasn't beautiful enough for Orlais, she would at least be striking in Ostwick and Rivain.

The first thought was Momma, but was a hind brain kind of reaction and Hestia refused to be judged for it, not that it mattered because she never intended to share that thought with anyone as long as she lived. Her second thought was much more mundane. She changed her hair.

“Refugees.” Elayna said, her voice dispassionate. “Dozens of them. They've come from everywhere, they've lost their lives, their homes, their family. And before you ask, this was her idea.” she gestured towards Amelia Trevelyan, who was now apparently in spirited discussion with an enchanter. “Opening our home to these people, feeding the hungry, healing the injured, she organized all of this.”

“Well of course she did.” Hestia said, a bitter laugh on her lips. She tore her eyes away from the woman who threw her away and turned her back, something she'd never have the courage to in real life. “That’s what she does, Layna. She organizes events and parties and people, all the while making our family seem like the most pious and perfect people in existence. That’s what she’s after, what they're all after. She doesn’t care about these people Layna, all my mother cares about is making herself look good!”

“Who cares!” Elayna shouted back at her, not for a minute cowed. “Who cares what her reasons are, as long as the wounded stop bleeding! The blind man doesn’t care who helps him across the bridge, as long as he doesn’t fall in the water.”

“He should,” Hestia snapped. “If he knew that his helper would cast him to the sharks the moment it suited them better.”

“And you would know all about that wouldn’t you,” Elayna said, and then her mouth snapped shut.

“What does that mean Layna?” Hestia asked, risking a step forward.

“Nothing. Forget it.”
“Layna, tell me what you meant.”

“No.” Elayna refused to make eye contact, preferring to admire the cobblestones.

Hestia sighed and grit her teeth. In her best teachers voice, she demanded, “Elayna, pick your head up and look at me when you’re talking!”

“You’re not my mother!” Elayna yelled, glaring at Hestia. Around them, the illusion shivered and quaked, reacting to the most powerful dreamer’s emotions. “And you were very happy to run off with Ben and Seph and leave me alone when it suited you!”

“You didn’t want to fight!”

“You’re damn right and I still don’t!” Elayna threw an arm out at the cots and the bonfire and the fish carts. “This is all your war made. Not justice, not honor, just blood and pain and death!”

*People are starving, dying of exposure, chased off the roads by templars and mages alike.* Words she’d shouted at Cullen came back to Hestia in a wave, along with the memory of the exhaustion she’d felt as they’d run another mile, hid another apprentice, killed another soldier. *It wasn’t the templars who suffered, and it wasn’t us either. It was the people caught in between.*

“What would you have had me do?” Hestia asked Elayna. “I couldn’t come home. Mother told me that if I joined the free mages I would no longer be welcomed here. She threatened to have me arrested. Would you have trusted Ben to look after Seph on his own?”

“I-“ Elayna stopped and thought about it. They had barely known Ben then, he was Armand’s friend but to the Trevelyan girls he was just a stranger who grudgingly shared their name. Seph had known him a little before the circle but that had been very long ago. “I...”

They stood there.

“I was all alone. You left me behind, all of you.” Elayna’s voice was plaintive. She wrapped her arms around her midsection, to ward off an imagined chill.

“I didn’t mean to.” Hestia said, feeling how empty the words felt.

Elayna was right again. Actions mattered more than intentions ever could. Hestia took two strides to pull her little Layna into a hug. “I’m sorry,” she whispered. She meant it. Elayna returned the hug after a moment. “I didn’t mean to leave you. You are in my heart forever Layna, you know that.”

“I know.” Elayna sighed. “Why can’t you come home?”

Hestia moved back, held her cousin at arms length. Lovely Elayna, who saw the good in people, who could inspire joy and loyalty with a smile. *I could’ve saved people if I were you.* Hestia thought. *If I were you, I wouldn’t have failed them. Wouldn’t have failed Seph. I should have been able to do more.* How could she make Elayna understand? It was difficult enough for Hestia to believe and she had lived it.

She held up her left hand, looked at the anchor that marked her. It was something different here, not a strange marring of flesh but a soft glittering beacon; it shown with a soft light no matter where she was or what she did with it. Elayna looked at the hand too, eyebrows drawn down in worry.

“I can’t leave the job half done, my love.” Hestia said softly, hearing the way her voice
reverberated around the cold stone. The sound of the surf was closer here, but the sand was further up the coast. “I have to stay, but you can stay where you’re doing some good. Stay safe for me.”

Elayna nodded solemnly, looking so much like the girl she had been when they had all been stolen from their childhood home. “This isn’t another crusade that will definitely get you killed, is it?” she asked.

Hestia snickered a bit. “Yes, it’s definitely one of those.”

Elayna waved a hand and the high stone walls collapsed into sand, sloughing off the two walls of Ostwick and turning into the dunes on the beaches. Seagrass waved merrily all around them and Hestia looked up to see terns wheeling around in the grey overcast sky. They stood on the smooth sand of their favorite beach, a small cove beset with tide pools. They had spent long afternoons here, the whole gaggle of children scrambling over the rocks and marveling at the tiny organisms that could make a life there.

Hestia looked down to see her shoes were gone, her pants rolled up, and she ankle deep in sea water. Elayna’s robe had been hitched up into her belt, exposing her dusky skin to the foaming surf. She looked up at Elayna, who was doing a bad job of hiding a smile.

“Well, that’s something to be proud of.” Elayna said. “I guess.”

Hestia’s eyes fluttered open, squinted at the shadow that stood above her. When the world came into focus, she smiled groggily. “Hello Solas.”

“Hello there Inquisitor.” Solas greeted, looking bemused to find her curled up in the grass. “I was dispatched to find you by Cassandra.”

Hestia sat up, rubbed the sleep from her eyes. “Has word got around already?”

“It would seem to be.” Solas said, offering her a hand up, which she took. “There is a rather large crowd forming outside, in point of fact.”

Hestia raised her eyebrows as she brushed the grass and dirt from her clothing. Josephine had said something about a ceremony or a speech, but Hestia wasn’t sure anyone had been really listening. There had been a lot of talking the last few days, but the only thing that seemed to be happening was construction on Skyhold. She could see workmen around the garden now, going about their business and studiously ignoring her. Maybe they weren’t being paid enough to wonder why their leader was sleeping on the grass.

“And incidentally, when were you going to tell me you were a Somniari?” Solas asked, just a hint of reprove in his voice.

Hestia gave him an amused smile over her shoulder as she passed him. “Since it’s my cousin and not myself that has been blessed with that particular skill, I doubt I ever would have told you such a spectacular lie.”

Solas arched an eyebrow. “An extraordinary gift,” he commented. “Not well understood by most.”

Hestia shrugged, pushing open the door and very nearly tumbling over a pile of timbers left just
inside the great big hall that was the heart of Skyhold. Solas caught her elbow to keep her from dislocating her other shoulder. All around scaffolding was going up, stones were being lifted up and up, dust was filtering through the beams of sunlight that dappled the old ripped rugs. *It'll be a shame to fix that hole.* She thought. *I hope we'll have enough natural light without it.*

Then she looked at the great double doors, flung open to ventilate the hall and alleviate the smell of dust and mold and animal leavings. The shadow of Cassandra cut a path all the way to the other end of the hall, to the pedestal where a throne used to be. *Nevermind,* Hestia thought while she watched the warrior stride toward them. *The light will be fine.*

“My cousins gifts are wonderful, but they are also a secret known only to few.” Hestia said to the elf at her side. “Can you keep a secret Solas?”

She had meant it in jest but something very much like sadness flashed across the elfs face before Solas put it away again. “I have been known to.” He said. “From time to time.”

“There you both are!” Cassandra said, interrupting Hestia’s thoughts. “The healers said you snuck out of your sickbed. Again.” She cast a severe eye at Hestia, who smiled unrepentantly.

“I did get some sleep, if that makes it any better.” Hestia said, raising her eyebrows.

“It does not.” Cassandra said shortly. She looked down at her feet in a rare display of anxiety before looking back at the two of them again. “I know we discussed this a few nights ago, but I don’t know how much of it you remember-”

“Solas already told me about the crowd.” Hestia cut her off. “Has Josephine scrounged up a ceremonial hat or something?”

Cassandra scowled at her, then at Solas. “It’s a sword.” She said, crossing her arms. “Leliana thought it would be more appropriate.”

Hestia thought she detected disappointment in Cassandra's voice, but couldn’t be sure why. When a thought occurred to her, she grinned. “Did you have a little speech prepared?”

“No!” Cassandra snapped, too quickly.

Hestia smiled in earnest now. “You did!” She cooed. “That is so sweet.”

“Would you like to give us a brief overview?” Solas asked, his face carefully blank.

Cassandra scowled. “It doesn’t matter anyway. I will not stand here and be mocked.”

“I would never mock you Seeker.” Hestia replied, pressing a hand to her chest in mock surprise. “I would like to live to see another day!” When the taller woman glared down at her with the ferocity of that dragon they had all run away from back in Ferelden, Hestia relented. “My apologies Seeker, just a little joke.”

“I was only going to say,” Cassandra said, looking put upon and just a little nervous, “that it is clear that Coryphaeus has marked you as his equal. Your efforts for the Inquisition have been above and beyond what I expected of you.”

Cassandra led them back toward the double doors, into the sunlight. Hestia began to follow, but turned back when Solas didn’t keep pace with her.

“Aren’t you coming?” Hestia asked, eyebrows raised.
“I think it best not to clutter the landscape too much.” Solas told her. “We don’t want there to be any confusion about who is really in charge.”

Puzzling over that strange comment, Hestia came to stand at Cassandra's side. She looked down the long staircase into the upper courtyard, then down and beyond it into the gateyard, where Master Dennett had set up a barebones stable. The sun was bright and flawless as it shone down at what seemed to be every soldier, spy and pilgrim that made up the Inquisition. Faces she knew jumped out of the crowd. There was Blackwall, standing at the back. There was Iron Bull with his mercenary group, only partly paying attention. There was Shay with Mother Giselle, looking so proud he could burst. There was Ben with Levy on his shoulders. There was Josephine, standing with Cullen, both looking sure and steady.

And there on the landing was Leliana, a greatsword with a brass dragon hilt wrapped around the grip resting lightly in her hands.

“Your decisions let us heal the sky.” Cassandra said beside her, perhaps sensing a little of what Hestia was feeling. “Your determination brought us out of Haven. You are the creature’s rival because of what you did. And we know it, all of us.”

All of us. Hestia looked out across the sea of upturned faces and felt the fear trying to overwhelm her. How could she speak for these people, how could she presume to know what was best, how could she play with their lives when she had made Maker knew how many mistakes and missteps to take her to this point. She blinked the tears out of her eyes, trying not to let the emotions show on her face. All those faces, all those lives, they trusted her. Believed in her. In one heartstopping moment, she had gone from expendable to depended on.

“All the Inquisition requires a leader.” Cassandra continued. “The one who has already been leading it.”

“Are you sure?” Hestia whispered, that traitorous and cowardly side of her still seeking a way out. “Isn’t there someone better suited?”

Cassandra shook her head. “They want you.”

“What about you?”

“I believe this is what was meant to be. That without you, there would be no Inquisition.” Cassandra told her with serious eyes.

I’m not worthy of your esteem. Hestia wanted to say it, it was there on her tongue.

But then she thought of Seph. Seph, who had suffered so much. Seph, who would make the conscious choice every day not to let that suffering burden her. Seph, who fought back with everything she had. Seph, who had loved with her whole heart. Seph, who had died because that great blighted monster had decided becoming a god was more important than peace in their time. Hestia thought of Haven, that Coryphaeus had burned to the ground and buried because he couldn’t have what he wanted. She thought of Zachariah, who died trying to warn them.

Hestia looked out at the sea of upturned faces, saw Bull and Blackwall and Cullen and Josephine. She saw Levy and knew without a shadow of a doubt that she would kill if it would keep that boy safe, if for just another day.

Keep them safe. Seph whispered to her. It doesn’t have to be more complicated than that.

Hestia slowly descended the stairs to where Leliana waited.
“Our concern must be the order and safety of this world, not the next.” Hestia said, to Leliana and Cassandra and the Inquisition and herself. “I’m not chosen, I have chosen.”

“Wherever you lead us.” Cassandra said, taking her place at Leliana’s side.

Hestia reached out her hand and hesitated over the hilt of the great sword. The thing really was a work of art, the detailing on the hilt and the clean lines of the blade sparkling in the perfect winter sunlight. She grasped the hilt, lifting it gently out of Leliana’s hands, feeling the weight of responsibility settle over her shoulders like the weight of Cullens furry mantle.

“Have our people been told?” Cassandra called out to the people assembled below.

“They have.” Josephine responded. “And soon, the world.”

“Commander, will they follow?” Cassandra shouted, louder now.

Instead of responding, Cullen turned the question to the crowd. “Inquisition, will you follow?” He asked of them, gaining a cheer from the people collected in the gate yard. “Will you fight?” he challenged them, to louder cheers. “Will we triumph?” And then, amid the loudest cheers of all, Cullen drew his sword and raised it in salute. To her. “Your leader,” He shouted. “Your Herald, your Inquisitor!”

The crowd exploded in cheering, and Hestia, emboldened by the crowd, thrust the great sword into the sky.

And then immediately regretted it, as her right shoulder exploded in pain when she wrenched the muscles that Coryphaeus had very nearly torn three weeks earlier. But she couldn’t put the sword down, not yet, not now. This was too important. Actions speak louder than words, Hestia repeated to herself, gritting her teeth against the pain. When the cheering dies down, you can go and tell Mother Giselle that you’ve reopened your stitches because of a stupid gesture.

The smiling faces of her friends made it worth it.

The celebration had lasted deep into the night, not that Hestia got to enjoy most of it. The rest of the afternoon was spent in the healers tent, being alternately clucked at and lectured by Mother Giselle, who couldn’t seem to make up her mind whether she was annoyed or proud. Eventually she settled on both at once and finally allowed Shay and the Inquisition leaders to join her.

No, not the leaders. They were her advisors now. That would definitely take some getting used to.

Shay sat next to her on the steps now, a cup of indeterminate moonshine in each hand, having absconded with Hestia’s some hours ago. They watched the dancing and shouting and general merriment with the fond smiles of those who were too tired to dance but liked to see it happen.

Shay nudged her shoulder. “Well done Tia.” He said, gesturing to the party and the deepening shadows all around them.

“Well done for what?” Hestia asked, nudging him back, careful not to jostle her right shoulder. “I haven’t done anything yet.”
“I wouldn’t be so sure of that.” Shay told her, smiling fondly with his crinkling blue eyes. “You’ve brought all these people together, you closed the Breach, you almost single handedly ended the Mage and Templar war—”

“Fine fine, enough, stop listing my accomplishments.” Hestia laughed, shoving him away from her for a moment before leaning back against his shoulder. “And good warriors don’t always make good leaders. Look at Kordillus Drakon... the second one, I mean.”

“Oh now that’s not fair.” Shay protested. “You can’t compare him to his... to his father, there was no way his son would... be able to do something as groundbreaking as creating the Chantry.”

“Kordillus Drakon the Second walked back nearly... nearly all of his fathers accomplishments and did more harm than good when he... when he approved the Exalted March against the Dales.” Hestia told him, doing her best not to fall over when Shay sat up to listen to her more closely.

“Since when are you a student of history?” Shay asked her.

“I’m not.” She told him. “But I was a... a schoolteacher for nearly five years and to be a schoolteacher you have to have a basic understanding of... of the subjects you’re teaching.”

“So your students had to have radical opinions about the Exalted March on the Dales?”

“They have to be aware that it happened.” Hestia told him, reaching for her cup of indeterminate alcohol and whining when Shay held it up out of her reach. “Who decided to make you so tall anyway?”

“The Maker did.” Shay told her pleasantly, drinking from his cup and then hers while she grumbled obscenities. “And what I’m trying to say is that you’ve already done a lot of good things, just as I predicted you would.”

“And what I’m trying to say,” Hestia replied stubbornly. “Is that good actions I’ve apparently masterminded in the past are no guarantee of my success in the future.”

“You’ll succeed.” Shay told her. “I have faith.”

Hestia felt something warm unfurling in her chest, but she didn’t let it into her voice. “Having faith in the Maker and faith in me aren’t exactly the same thing there, lay brother.”

“I can in fact have faith in the Maker and faith in you, you know.” Shay told her fondly. “The two aren’t mutually exclusive.”

“You’re not half as drunk as you look.” Said a tall woman who walked up to them out of the deepening shadows. “If you can say things like mutually exclusive.” Hestia straightened up and flashed a smile at the newcomer, who was thickly set and covered in snow with a bag slung over her shoulder. Her hair was a frizzy flame red cloud around her deeply tanned and smiling face. Hestia had the strange feeling that she’d seen the woman before. “Room on that step for one more?” the woman asked.

“Yes of course.” Shay said, his manners returning to him in a rush. He jumped up out of his seat and offered it to the woman. “Here, take my seat. I was just off to get something for my sister to eat.”

“Are you going to give me back my moonshine before you go?” Hestia asked him, shifting to give the windblown woman space to sit down.
“Absolutely not.” Shay told her, walking backwards out of her reach.

The woman settled on the bench with a sigh, unslinging her bag to settle it gently on the grass and stretching out long thickly muscled legs that Hestia did her best not to ogle. She was injured, not dead. “It is a trip and a half trying to get up here, I tell you.” she said, drawing Hestia’s gaze. The woman held out her hand, which Hestia shook. “I’m Eleanor, but most people call me Elle.”

“It’s good to meet you Elle.” Hestia said, smiling. “I’m-”

“Oh everyone knows who you are.” Elle cut her off with a laugh. Her voice was rough and scratchy, like she was just getting over a cough. “You’re the Herald of Andraste.”

Hestia snickered and nodded ruefully. “You’re just in time for the upgrade in titles. It’s Inquisitor now.”

Elle raised an eyebrow and gave a half smile that made her eyes twinkle. “Really? Hats off to you I suppose.”

Whatever Hestia was thinking of saying next was cut off by a rustling coming from the bag Elle had placed on the ground. The bag moved once, twice, then a fluffy head of a blonde cat popped out of the top with an annoyed sounding ‘miaow!’

Elle laughed and reached down to lift the cat out of the bag. “Oh I’m sorry love, I thought you were still asleep in there.” She told it, settling the animal on her lap.

Hestia knew she was drunk because the words that came out her mouth bypassed her brain completely. “Aww,” She cooed. “Kitty!”

Elle laughed loudly while the cat turned to sniff at Hestia’s outstretched fingers. It didn’t seem like it would scratch her, so Hestia smoothed the soft fur on the cats head and twitched her finger under his chin. He seemed to like that, if the way he stretched his neck out closer to her hand was any indication.

“Be careful with him Inquisitor.” Elle told her. “You think he’s nice today but he’ll swat at your hand tomorrow, trust me.” The cat blinked bright blue eyes up at Hestia before the cat said ‘miaow’ and turned away from her to curl up in Elle’s lap.

“Inquisitor,” Cullen said, striding up to the bench, the firelight at his back and a plate of food in his hand. “Your brother asked me to bring this to you, he was concerned that-”

He stopped dead, his eyes fixed on Elle. the plate of food slipped from his hand, tumbling to the ground and splattering beans and meat across the grass. A small loaf of brown bread rolled away. Elle smiled pleasantly, her eyes glinting in the firelight.

In a snarl Hestia had heard only once, Cullen asked, “What are you doing here Hawke?”

Hestia looked at Cullen, then back to the woman next to her, her mind clouded with Corporal Hansen's excellent vintage. “Hawke?” She echoed.

The Champion of Kirkwall smiled up at him, and this time the smile had teeth. “Hello Knight Captain. Did you miss me?”
Well that... happened
as always, a big thank you to Illyria_Lives for sharing this big fucked up family with me

I'm susuwatarisprinkles on tumblr and sootsprites94 on twitter, come say hello!
Cullen knew his time in Kirkwall hadn’t been a pleasant time in the history of the city. He wasn’t sure what exactly would be classified as a good time in the history of Kirkwall, given the amount of turmoil and invasions and slavery that went on in the nations sordid past, but that wasn’t really important. What was important was what he had seen. And what Cullen had seen and experienced was several boatloads of unpleasantness that not even Varric and his undying loyalty to The Hanged Man and its terrible ale could wave off as typical city weirdness.

When Cullen walked up and saw the familiar smile of Eleanor Hawke, it came back to him in a rush. The weight of expectations, the stink of the ink in Meredith’s office, the paranoia always making templars twitch and mages jump as he passed by, the dawning horror on the faces as the qunari encroached on more and more of the city, more deserters every day.

The day the chantry exploded.

Meredith’s voice in his head, whispering, *Blessed are the peacekeepers, the Champions of the Just*

“What are you doing here Hawke?” Cullen snarled.

Hestia looked at Cullen, then back to the woman next to her, her fair face clouded with confusion. “Hawke?” She echoed.

The Champion of Kirkwall smiled up at him, and the smile had teeth. “Hello Knight Captain. Did you miss me?”

“No.” He ground out, one hand already straying to his sword. “What are you even doing here? Shouldn’t you be off hiding your murderer lover in a cave?”

Hawke rolled to her feet, unsettling the cat in her lap, who hissed and shot off to parts unknown. Where had she picked up a fondness for cats? Where was her great beast of a mabari? Her smile remained unchanged, but her eyes were like fire. “We wouldn’t have to hide if you and your templar dogs weren’t such a pain in my lovely ass.”

Cullen fought the urge to roll his eyes. She always said that. “If you’d turned him over when the guards ordered you to-“

Hawke cut him off with a stomp of her boot. “Aveline would never have put a bounty on my head.”

“You were harboring the Grand Cleric’s murderer!” Cullen was shouting now, feeling the flush of anger creeping up his neck. “Hundreds of people died that day!”

“And hundreds more would’ve died if I hadn’t intervened, or have your forgotten that Knight Captain Meredith tried to killed you?” Elle’s lip curled, but her shouts matched his volume. “And I’ve yet to hear a thank you!”

“Hey!” Hestia shouted, cutting off whatever Cullen was about to yell over the pounding in his ears. “Both of you, upstairs! Now!”
“Inquisitor,” Cullen said, sure that if he just explained his position, Hestia would see that Elle Hawke had no place in Skyhold. “If you just-”

“I said, now.” Hestia snapped, turning a scorching glare on him.

Cullen’s jaw snapped shut, and he tried not to cower at her stare. Now that the shouting had stopped, he was aware that the noise of the crowd had dropped significantly. He daren’t look behind him, sure that each and every person still celebrating was staring at his back. The hot, violent feeling in his chest only grew as he looked at Elle Hawke’s smirking face. She loved any and all attention she could get, especially if it was at his expense.

Cullen started up the stairs, trying to avoid the feeling that he was about to be dressed down by a chantry sister. When he got up to the ramparts, he turned to see Elle leaning against the wall with her arms crossed and Hestia talking to a waifish boy with a frankly gigantic hat, who had appeared at her side.

“-Varric that his best friend is here, and can you bring me one of the vials of lyrium from wherever Solas has decided to sleep?” Hestia was saying, leaning against the rampart wall to keep herself upright.

The boy shook his head with a mournful frown. “The mages have put up wards against spirits all around the tower. I can't get in without it hurting.”

“Does it hurt you or them?” Hestia asked, brow creased in concern.

“Yes.”

“Inquisitor,” Cullen said, as the boy scampered off. “Forgive my rudeness, but if I could just have a moment to explain-”

“You can explain when I'm sober enough to keep up with the insults.” Hestia replied, pressing a hand to her forehead. She turned her moonlight eyes to Hawke. “I suppose a proper introduction is in order. How did you find the journey to Skyhold?”

“Well your fortress is well protected, I'll give you that much. Some idiot is going to have to trek through all that snow to even try to kill you.” Hawke replied, leaning against the wall with one ankle crossed over the other, the picture of languid ease. That sly smile found its way back onto her face. “A mutual friend told us you've been having trouble with a darkspawn magister. The last time I saw Corypheus he had quite a lot of holes in him; so I figured I'd drop by, offer my services.”

Her eyes strayed back to Cullen and she scowled. He glowered back. “Lucky he didn't mention the Knight Captain here, or I might not have come.”

“That's not my title.” Cullen snapped.

“No? What have you exchanged it for? Coward in Chief?” Elle shot back, eyes blazing.

Cullen felt the blood pounding in his ears. “How dare you! Some of us have to stick around and deal with the consequences of our actions, not run from our mistakes!”

“Is that what you did?” Elle snarled, pushing off the wall to stalk towards him, bright white teeth flashing. “Because it looks to me as though you've run from one commanding officers skirts to another!”

“Hey!” Hestia shouted, putting herself bodily between them, pushing Cullen back before he could
get within grabbing distance of Hawke. “That's enough, both of you!”

But Cullen barely heard her, the roiling pit of anger in his gut was almost overwhelming. “Where is Anders?” He demanded of Hawke. “You can't keep him hidden forever!”

Elle moved forward and shoved him in the chest with both hands, forcing him back one step, two. “You think I'd give him up? When did I give you the impression that I betray my friends?”

“When Grand Cleric Elthina died and you let her murderer go free.” Cullen snarled back.

“I made a choice,” Elle said fiercely, the flames of her anger seemed to light her from within. “To stand with my people instead of allowing them to be caged like animals!”

“If this is what you do with your freedom, maybe you should be put in a cage!” Cullen shouted, feeling heat in his face.

Elle laughed harshly. “Oh yes, there's the templar swine I remember. ‘Mages aren't people like you and me.’”

She spat his words back at him, and long ago anger and shame rose up inside him. Cullen surged forward, seizing Elle Hawke by the lapels of her dirty leathers and slammed her against the wall of the outpost, lifting the tall woman off her feet and knocking her head against the stone.

“Shut. Up.” He ground out harshly.

Elle had a snarl on her face, and Cullen could feel her start to pull at the fade to light her hands aflame, but before this could escalate to a further level of violence, a crack of lightning struck the stone mere inches from his boots. Cullen jumped back, dropping Elle back to her feet and letting her scramble back from the smoking stones. The air crackled with ozone and Cullen had to restrain himself from drawing his sword, for fear that it had taken in some of the shock.

From behind him, he heard the cold steel of Hestia's voice. “I said, enough.”

Cullan didn't flinch, but it was a close thing. He looked over his shoulder to see not just Hestia but Varric and Cassandra standing there, staring at them. Cassandra's mouth hung open, her eyes flickering between him and Hawke. Varric rubbed the back of his head, looking tired and resigned, the boy with the very big hat peeking over Cassandra's shoulder. Perfect, Cullen thought grimly. Because what this disaster definitely needed was an audience.

“Now,” Hestia's voice was that icy wind of her true anger. “Here is how it's going to be. I don't need you two to be friends, or even to bury whatever happened to make you squabble like a pair of children. But,” She shot a glare at Hawke, who had opened her mouth to complain. “On the very rare occasion that you will be in the same room, you will speak with a civil tone in your head. You will be adults, or I swear to the Maker I will put you both over my knee.”

A shiver went up Cullen’s spine.

Elle bubbled up with laughter. “Varric, what the fuck have you signed on to?”

Varric shrugged. “You know Hawke, I think she just might mean it.”

“Varric, will you show your friend where she’ll be sleeping?” Hestia snapped, her eyes hard. “I imagine it’ll be somewhere near you. Cullen...”

A lump jumped into his throat. If he could just explain what Elle Hawke had done. “Inquisitor,
“Cullen,” Hestia snapped, voice caught somewhere between a shout and a sob. Cullen was almost
dumbstruck to see her eyes shining with tears in the moonlight. She took a steadying breath and
told him. “Go. Just, go. I will speak with you tomorrow.”

She turned and stepped past Cassandra, disappearing down the stairs without another word.

Cassandra still looked utterly baffled. Varric pointed Elle away from this little scene, and she
bumped her shoulder against Cullen’s rather more forcefully than necessary. As she passed, Hawke
hissed, “Do as you’re told Bootlicker.”

“Cullen?” Cassandra asked, looking utterly lost. “What?”

“Don’t ask Cassandra.” Cullen said, suddenly very tired. “Just, don’t ask.”

Somehow, Hestia’s disappointment stung more than Meredith’s ire ever would.

Cullen woke with a pounding headache and a pit of shame burning in his stomach. He was filled
with regrets but that was about par for the course for his life, so he at least had consistency on his
side. He should never have lost his temper with Hawke, he knew that before last night and he knew
it now. Letting her get to him would only give Elle Hawke more ammunition for the future. He
should know better by now, there was no winning when Elle was willing to scrap down in the mud.
He had to do better. He would do better.

For the Inquisition. Cullen thought grimly as he set about getting ready for the day. For
Cassandra, and myself.

For the Inquisitor.

Cullen exited the outpost that was serving as his sleeping quarters for now, meaning to head across
to the great hall and grab a small amount of breakfast before the sergeants yelled the soldiers out of
their beds, but he stopped on the stairs when he saw Hestia standing in front of the tavern, hands on
her hips.

She’s traded her traveling leathers for a pair of tight black breeches and one of those loose white
shirts with wide and breezy sleeves that came back to cuffs at her wrists. If you didn’t know better
those shirts could be mistaken for a mans, stolen from a lover. Cullen had made that mistake for
several days, though he’d never been stupid enough to voice the thought aloud. Apparently, the
Inquisitor preferred the looser fabric because it better hid bruises and cuts from recent traveling and
fighting.

All these things I’d never thought to learn, Cullen thought wryly. This Inquisition is certainly an
education.

As he drew nearer, he could hear what she was saying to Ben Tamrassen, standing at her side. “It’s
terrible.”

“I don’t think the sign is that bad.”
“It’s shit. ‘The Herald’s Rest’? When have I ever answered to ‘Herald’? And when do I ever get
time to rest?”

Ben snickered. “Maybe it’s aspirational.”

“It’s asinine.” She complained, dragging a hand through her flaxen hair. “Is that supposed to be
me? Being carried in Andraste’s arms? Does anyone care that I’ve denied that it was Andraste that
saved me?”

“They really don’t.”

“And the anchor is on the wrong hand.” She pointed to the sign hanging just outside the tavern
door, depicting Andraste in all her glory with the limp body of what was apparently the herald. One
arm was dangling from the embrace and haloed with a green light meant to signify the mark.
Hestia shook her head. “It has to come down. Now.”

After a moment spent staring at the sign, Cullen could see that she was entirely correct about the
mark. It was on the wrong hand.

“You know, somebody probably worked really hard on this.” Ben said, holding a hand out to
gesture at the sign. “It probably took them hours.”

“And I truly appreciate that.” Hestia said, sounding not at all sincere. “Now, I want another one.”

“You’re a spoiled brat.” Ben told her, and the fondness in his voice was like warm honey.

“You’re a dirty barbarian.” Hestia answered with equal warmth, and then cupped her hands around
her mouth and shouted across the courtyard. “Krem! I need you!”

Cullen descended the stairs as Cremisius Aclassi, Bulls lieutenant and ex tevinter soldier, came to
Hestia's side at a loping jog. He had that customary tired but amused grin on his face. “Inquisitor.”
he drawled.

“Krem, I need you and the Chargers to come up with a better name for the tavern.” Hestia told
him, once again pointing at the sign hanging next to the tavern door.

“What’s wrong with it?” Krem asked.

Ben heaved a sigh and dragged a hand across his face. “We can't go through this whole thing
again. It's a bad name and it must be erased from history.”

“It needs to be changed before Josephine’s noble guests from Val Royeaux get here.” Hestia told
the lieutenant.

“Any hints for me?” Krem asked, that amused smile sliding into place.

“Anything else will be better.” Hestia told him before striding towards the stairs with purpose.
Over her shoulder she called, “What was next?”

Ben and Krem exchanged a look before Tamrassen took after her, trailing at her heels like a faithful
hound, saying, “Mother Giselle wanted to talk to you about a letter from... someone? Full
disclosure, I wasn’t really paying attention.”

Krem stood at the tavern door, looking contemplatively at the sign. Cullen came to stand beside
him and Krem looked up and gave him a friendly nod. By way of greeting, the tevinter soldier
quirked an eyebrow and said, “Do you think she’d laugh if we named it Anything Else Tavern?”

Cullen smiled a bit and looked up at the great hall. He could see Hestia’s white blouse like a flag against the grey stone and shadows. “I’d say those are good odds.” He said after a moment, when she’d vanished from view.

He meant to speak to her after getting breakfast, but his duties pulled him away. *I’ll speak to her at the war meeting*, he thought, putting the worry out of his mind. Or trying to. *I will definitely speak to her before end of day.*

He tried, or meant to try. He kept missing her that first day, and then Cullen thought it better to put his mind to the task at hand. He was not avoiding her, exactly, just as she was not avoiding him. Most likely. They were simply busy. Many things had to be attended to and in such little time. The pass that led to Skyhold was growing more treacherous by the day, and things had to be settled or set in motion before Hestia and her companions left for Ferelden.

That she would be away for months before he had a chance to apologize did nothing for Cullen’s nerves.

He hadn’t found a place to be his office as of yet, so he was directing scouts and soldiers from a makeshift desk down in the gate yard, where he could keep a watchful eye on comings and goings. The boy, Cole, had been drifting around the healers tents, moving from patient to patient with seemingly random choices.

“Send men to scout the area, we need to know what’s out there.” Cullen finished saying to a lieutenant from one of the Marcher cities that Cullen always forgot. Wycome? Markham? It didn’t much matter now.

“Yes Commander.” The Marcher lieutenant saluted and walked away.

As soon as he did, a corporal came to take his place. “Commander, soldiers have been assigned temporary quarters.”

“Very good.” Cullen said, moving a list of noble houses off the map that dominated most of the wooden planks that were serving as his workspace. “I’ll need an update on the armory as well.” When he looked up a moment later to see the corporal still standing there, absently scratching his arm, Cullen snapped, “Now!”

The corporal jumped and scurried away, jumping out of the way to avoid running headlong into the Inquisitor. She held up her hands and held her ground, let the overeager soldier stumble around her and continue on his way without the both of them being knocked to the ground. The corporal apparently didn’t realize who he’d almost bowled over, for he continued on his way without a backward glance.

Hestia watched the soldier go, one eyebrow raised, half a smile on her face. It faded as she turned back to Cullen. Cullen tried not to give the impression that he was nervous to speak to her. He’d been dressed down by his superiors before, he knew what to expect.

*Because it looks to me as though you've run from one commanding officers skirts to another*

Cullen shook Hawke's words from his mind as Hestia came to stand at his side, hands on her hips, knowing eyes flitting from one paper to another. After a moment she spoke, quieter than he expected, “Give me an update.”

“We set up as best we could at Haven,” Cullen said, glancing at her out of the corner of his eye.
She looked drawn and subdued, was it a trick of the light? “But could never prepare for an archdemon. Or whatever it was. With some warning, we might have…” He trailed off.

“There was no anticipating Corypheus.” Hestia murmured.

“If Corypheus strikes again, we might not be able to withdraw. And I wouldn’t want to. We must be ready.” Cullen put as much conviction as he could into the words, hoping that if he said it, he could make it true. “Work on Skyhold is underway, guard rotations established, we should have everything on course within the week. We will not run from here Inquisitor.”

“How many were lost?”

Cullen, knowing the question was coming, still needed to take a steadying breath at the memory of that long walk through the dark. “Most of our people made it to Skyhold. It could’ve been worse. Moral was low, but has improved greatly since you accepted the role as Inquisitor.”

“Inquisitor Trevelyan.” Her lips quirked into one of her sarcastic smiles. “I wasn’t looking for another title. It sounds odd, don’t you think.”

“Not at all.” The words were out of his mouth before he had time to think about them, and Cullen was not at all astonished to learn that they were true.

Hestia raised an eyebrow. “Is that the official response?”

He chuckled. “I suppose it is, but it’s the truth. We needed a leader. You have proven yourself.”

“Thank you Cullen.” She told him. He smiled and was about to continue with his briefing when she said, “We need to talk about what happened the other night.”

Good, now this dancing around each other would be over. Better a clean wound than a thousand tiny cuts. Cullen nodded, swallowing the shame down into his stomach. “Yes. First, allow me to apologize. My conduct was unacceptable, I have no excuse. You have my word, it will never happen again.”

“Can you actually keep that promise?” Hestia asked sharply. “Or am I supposed to drag you two apart again? Grand Enchanter Fiona expressed interest in letting some of the mages fight with the army, but if this is what you think of us-”

Immediately, Cullen saw his error and wanted to kick himself for it. “Inquisitor, what happened between myself and Hawke was personal,” He hastened to say. “I am not proud of the person I become when she is around and I assure you—”

“That it won’t happen again?” She said harshly. One hand had curled into a fist and her voice was shaking. “I heard that kind of talk during the war, I expected it there. But the Inquisition demanded more of all of us Cullen. It demands more of you.”

_If this is what you do with your freedom, maybe you should be put in a cage._ Cullen hadn't been thinking about mages and templars when the words had torn out of him, but he hadn't been thinking about anything, except what would hurt Hawke. He hadn't stopped to consider how the words could be seen by anyone else. No wonder Leliana tread so lightly around him, no wonder Hawke looked at him like muck she'd scraped off of her shoe. Maker help him, if he didn't fix this now, he would never be able to walk it back.

This time, he chose his words carefully. “Hawke and I have been fighting like children since first we met. I am… not proud of who I become when she's around, nor do I claim that my actions were
in the right. If you wish, I'll go and apologize to her right now. But more importantly, if anything about my conduct is reflecting poorly on the Inquisition, I will endeavor to change it. And if that isn't satisfactory,” He added, when it looked as though she were going to speak again. He caught her gaze held it, so as to make himself as clear as possible. “I will recommend a replacement.”

Hestia’s eyes, so grey and sparkling and deep with knowing, were wide with shock. For the first time since they'd met, Cullen thought he had actually surprised her. After a moment, she said, “That's… not what I'm asking of you Cullen.” She swallowed before continuing softly. “It was just… difficult to hear those things from you, as it always is from someone you consider a friend.”

Cullen swallowed. It was one thing to hear her anger, but her disappointment was too much to bear. “I am your friend Hestia.” He said for her ears alone. “And I will try to be a better one in future.”

Hestia looked at him with eyes guarded and hands still, but Cullen still somehow had the feeling that he’d won back a little of her trust. _I will prove myself to you._ He thought, but didn't say aloud. Just when the quiet was edging into an awkward silence, Hestia rapped her knuckles on the wooden table and adopted a more brisk tone. “I had something I wanted to run past you before I brought it up in today's war meeting.”

Cullen blinked. “Of course Inquisitor.”

“What templars that are still with us have been making noises about disbanding the Order completely and folding themselves into the army.” Hestia reached out and picked up one of the papers on his makeshift desk, smoothing out the crumpled edges and settling it on top of the maps. Cullen glanced at it and saw it was a note Lysette had written to him on this very subject, and her vocal rejection of the idea. “I see you got Lysette’s strongly worded letter. I received a similar note myself.”

“News of Therinfal Redoubt has been very bad for morale amongst the templar ranks.” Cullen nodded, and as always felt the simmering of anger at the thought of Corypheus and Samson taking what good will the Order had left and stifling it. “Samson saw to that.”

“Letting the templars disband the Order is not something the Inquisition should support.” Hestia said firmly, and Cullen looked back at her in surprise. “It benefits nobody to let the Order fall apart, especially not the Inquisition.”

“I… did not expect that opinion from you.” Cullen said, choosing his words carefully.

“No, nor did I.” Hestia admitted, running a hand through her hair. She favored him with one of her sardonic half smiles. “I’m aware that my personal opinion on templars is considered radical, and it’s probably not one that the Inquisition can publically support.” She shrugged. “I had an idea that might work, but I didn’t want you to think I was stepping on your toes.”

“No, by all means.” Cullen said. “Step on my feet if you believe it necessary.” And then wanted to kick himself for saying that, but at least she laughed.

The mirth was still in her voice when she said, “Well, I was thinking we should give the Order more freedom within the Inquisition. A separate force from the Army, their own quarters and commanding officers, and we can send them where they can do more good. Places where the goodwill of the Order hasn’t corroded quite so much, so they can rebuild their good name.”

Cullen nodded as her plan took shape. It had much more tolerance and forgiveness than he
would’ve thought from her, more than he would have thought to extend the Order. In his head he was already drafting letters to chantry clerics that may appreciate templar protection. He almost didn’t hear Hestia say, “They would be reporting directly to me. I thought Ser Barris seemed a good fit for Knight Commander, but if you think differently—”

“I’m sorry.” Cullen cut her off, his mind struggling to catch up with her. “What was that?”

Hestia drummed her fingers on his desk, a nervous tick he’d noticed back in the war room at Haven. “I thought Delrin Barris might benefit from more responsibility, to let him regain his confidence in the Order. But if you have another officer in mind, perhaps Rylen? I know he’s been your right hand these last few months but if you think he’s better suited—”

“No,” Cullen said, still trying to get up to speed. “I meant… the templars would report to you?”

“Yes.” Hestia nodded, fingers still drumming. “If we keep the Order separate from the army, it seemed prudent to let their orders come from me. I’ll need your input on the assignments for the knights at first, but I imagined them as a peacekeeping force rather than an offensive one.”

“I—” Cullen took a breath, trying not the look as dazed as he felt. Had she crawled into his mind at some point during the conversation? “Yes, that seems best. Barris has been hoping to gain your approval since Haven, and he’s certainly personable enough for the position.”

“Good.” Hestia nodded and smiled at him again, her eyes darting away a moment later. “If that’s everything, I believe Sera had something she needed from me, so—”

“Wait.” Cullen said, taking a shaky breath. It wouldn have to be now, she was leaving in a few days and it would be months before he could speak to her face to face like this again. “There is one more thing. As leader of the Inquisition, you… there’s something I must tell you.”

Hestia raised her eyebrows, but nodded. “Very well.”

Cullen took a long steadying breath, trying to keep his voice even. “Lyrium grants templars our abilities, but it controls us as well. Those cut off suffer, some go mad, others die. We have secured a reliable source of lyrium for the templars here. But I… no longer take it.” he admitted, bracing for impact.

“You stopped?”

“When I joined the Inquisition.” He said quietly. “It’s been months now.”

Hestia’s eyes were wide and concerned. “Cullen if this can kill you—”

“It hasn’t yet.” He said shortly. He put his palms flat on the desk, staring unseeing at the papers strewn across its surface. “After what happened in Kirkwall, I couldn’t—” His throat closed up with memories, and he swallowed and tried a different track. “I will not be bound to the Order, or that life, any longer. Whatever the suffering, I accept it. But I would not put the Inquisition at risk.” he hastened to assure her, “I’ve asked Cassandra to… watch me. If my ability to lead is compromised, I will be relieved from duty.”

“Are you in pain?” Hestia asked quietly, brows furrowed. Why did she keep going back to that? That wasn’t the point of this. “I can endure it.”

“That’s not what I asked.”
“And I thank you for your concern. But the Inquisitions army must always take priority. Should anything happen, I will defer to Cassandra’s judgement.”

“I respect that Cullen, I do.” Hestia said, and she reached out to lay a hand on his arm, fingers resting on the vambrace he’d held onto since Kinloch Hold, the last symbol of his former life. “And it’s worthwhile what you’re doing, but don’t assume you’re doing it alone. If Cassandra is with you, then so am I. If it becomes difficult, please do not hesitate to ask for help. Promise me?”

Her words were gentle, her voice was soft and full of warmth, her eyes were so kind. Cullen felt something in his stomach turn over. Not trusting himself to speak, he nodded.

Hestia’s mouth turned up into a gentle smile. “Good. Thank you for telling me this.”

Cullen watched her go, and kept watching long after she had disappeared from sight.

It had been a long day, and Cullen was about ready to bite somebody's head off, which is why he’d sequestered himself in his new office with the doors shut, a bottle of wine and a stack of papers as his only company.

Hestia had- The Inquisitor had left Skyhold that morning, in the hope that her party could get through the passes into Ferelden before they froze completely. Whatever old magic that had baked into the stones of Skyhold that protected it from the passage of the seasons did not extend to the world outside the valley, and none but the most resilient scouts would be able to reach their mountaintop fortress until the spring thaw.

People had been leaving en masse, with scouts and soldiers being sent out by the dozens to every issue and complaint Josephine and Leliana could find, to keep their people visible and remind the rest of Thedas that the Inquisition was still about and buoyed with new purpose. Cullen had people out hunting down every mention of Samson, and hopefully those rumors would bear fruit.

It will be a lean few months, but those of us left in Skyhold will make it.

Cullen rubbed at his eyes and glared at the fireplace, wishing that the flames would burn brighter. But he was no mage and the logs crackled merrily but shed no more light. Groaning with effort, Cullen dragged himself to his feet and set about building up the fire again. All he really wanted to do was lie down in his bed and sleep but the paperwork on his desk wouldn’t let him. It looked to be an even bigger challenge than in Haven, if that was even possible.

Cullen sighed and rubbed the back of his neck, hoping to ward off a cramp the next morning. His last spat with Hawke was still playing in his mind twelve hours later, leaving Cullen with the familiar feeling of anger and shame and the knowledge that he’d stooped to her level yet again.

Hawke had left with Hestia and her party this morning, to the surprise of many in Skyhold; most had not realized the Champion of Kirkwall was even among them. Elle Hawke loved an entrance, and if she couldn’t get her greedy little hands on that, she’d settle for an exit. She’d tossed her curly red hair in the sunlight and taken her sweet time saddling her horse while Cullen stood with the other Inquisition advisors and tried not to get an ulcer from her presence.

Elle had pulled her horse up short in front of the advisors, looking to all the world like she was waiting patiently for Hestia to finish her conversation with Shay and mount her own white mare.
But out of the corner of her mouth she’d hissed to Cullen, “How does it feel to be a mage’s bitch, bootlicker?”

Cullen had promised, but still he bit back, “Much better than being an accomplice to a murderer.”

“You would certainly know the difference,” Elle had snapped. “Or do the tranquil only count as merciful deaths?”

“Hawke,” Cullen growled, feeling that hot rage on the back of his neck that always appeared when Hawke was around rising in him. “I swear to Andraste, if you don’t get out of my sight in the next fifteen seconds, I’ll-”

“You’ll what?” Hawke laughed harshly, her hands tightening on the reigns. “What can you do to me Cullen? The Inquisitor has your balls in her pocket.” Cullen wanted to snarl at her but she kept talking. “You won’t do anything, just like you couldn’t hurt me the night I arrived. You'll do what you always do Cullen. What you're told.”

Cullen grit his teeth against whatever caustic thing he wanted to spit at her and took a breath, finally replying, “Have fun in Ferelden Hawke. I hope you get eaten by a druffalo.”

Out of the corner of his eye Cullen saw Leliana stifle a grin.

At the time Cullen had put it out of his mind, but the words had been bouncing around his mind all day, distracting him from more important things. You'll do what you always do Cullen. What you're told. The worst part was Cullen was almost certain she was right. She had been right the night she arrived and right today. What had Cullen really done in leaving the templars but run from one commanding officers skirts to another? Had he just exchanged one uniform, one set of orders, one emblem on his shield, for a different set of boots and the same set of problems?

No no no. Cullen sat down hard in his chair, hearing the legs scrape loudly against the stone floor. Hestia is nothing like Meredith. The Inquisition is not the Order. This is not like last time.

Cullen didn’t want to care what Elle Hawke thought of him. He had actively tried not to care for years now. But it was hard not to care that the Champion of Kirkwall thought that you were a piece of mabari shit, even when she was wrong. If she was wrong. He should’ve known that Elle Hawke had questionable priorities when she had threatened his templars when she’d been asked about Anders. She hadn’t been the only ferelden refugee that protected him, but she had certainly been the most vocal about it, the most prominent.

And look where it had got her. Chased out of the very city that called her Champion and running for her life. Elle Hawke would never admit she was wrong about anything. If anything the bounty on her head had only seemed to make her more adamant that Anders had been right about everything. Not even Varric’s patient and steadfast friendship could mellow her.

Cullen groaned and ran his hands through his hair, probably messing it up enormously but it was too late in the day to care about his appearance. There he was again, wasting his precious time thinking about Elle Hawke. It doesn’t matter what she thinks of me, Cullen told himself sternly. She’s wrong about me and always was.

Probably.

A knock at the door jerked him from his thoughts, and a moment later Delrin Barris strode into his office, bringing a brisk cold wind in with him that sent Cullens papers flying throughout the office. “Oh, I’m sorry Commander!” Barris exclaimed, quickly slamming the door behind him and
Crouching to take the papers nearest to him.

“It’s fine, it’s fine.” Cullen said, jumping to his feet and beginning to gather up documents as well. “I could’ve sworn I locked that door.”

“Did you not want to be disturbed?” Barris asked, looking up guiltily. “This can wait until tomorrow if you like.”

“No no, you might as well.” Cullen told him, trying to sound brisk and not as grumpy as he felt. Maybe wine and self loathing didn’t mix as well as Cullen thought. “What can I help you with Knight Commander.”

Barris straightened up, his chest swelling with pride at his new title. “I had one or two templar matters that I wanted to discuss with you, but mostly I came to give you my thanks Commander.”

“Well the thanks are appreciated, but entirely misplaced.” Cullen told him, taking the papers from the man’s hands and reaching for a paperweight to keep them in place. Maybe he could ask Varric for one? “The Inquisitor is the one you should be thanking.”

“And I have ser, but I wanted to thank you for fighting for us.” Barris said earnestly.

“Barris.” Cullen said, trying for patience. “It is the Inquisitor-”

“Yes of course, but allowing the Templars this freedom was your idea.” Barris looked like he was about to bow. “The Order is grateful to you.”

“Knight Commander Barris,” Cullen said, “This is the first and last time I will be giving you an order. Shut it.” When Barris blinked but stayed quiet, he continued. “Allowing the Templars to rebuild their ranks and reputation was the Inquisitors idea, not mine. You answer to her, not me. And if, Maker willing, we defeat the creature who attacked Haven and restore peace to Thedas, you will serve the chantry once again.”

“Truly?” Barris asked quietly, eyes like saucers. “I just assumed, with the Inquisitor being a rebel mage, that you-”

“Free mage.” Cullen corrected gently. “And I imagine that many assumed the same, but I assure you, Hestia is the one who wants to you regain the goodwill of the people, both highborn and low. I suggest,” he continued gently, when Barris looked confused, “You do your best to live up to her estimation of you, and encourage your templars to do the same.”

“I will ser.” Barris raised a hand to salute, then caught himself and lowered it again, a sheepish grin on his face. “Sorry ser.”

“No need for that.” Cullen told him, trying to relax now that Barris had as well. “I am not your commanding officer Barris, I’m your equal. Call me Cullen.”

“Then you should call me Delrin.” Barris said, a wide white smile growing on his face.

“Share a drink Delrin?” Cullen said, settling behind his desk and indicating the wine bottle.

Delrin sat across from him. “Of course. I’m sorry I still can’t quite wrap my head around it. I’d heard of Inquisitor Trevelyan before I arrived at Haven, you know.”

Cullen raised his eyebrows. “No I didn’t. What did you hear?”
Barris waved his hand. “Just rumors, and the rumors about the rebel - the free mages were all the same. That she hated templars and would rather die than surrender, that she could start fires with her eyes, that you could summon her wrath by thinking about her for too long.”

“All rumors to scare the younger or angrier recruits into fighting?” Cullen asked, feeling something clench inside his chest. Hestia was many things but cruel certainly wasn’t one of them.

Barris shrugged, a dark red tint coming to his cheeks. “Nobody took those things seriously, I shouldn’t have said anything.”

Cullen waved his worry away. “If anything, you should tell Lady Montilyet about those, she can set her talents to dispelling them before the rumors get used by those who would hurt us.”

Barris nodded thoughtfully. “Yes, I suppose you’re right. It just surprised me that she would support us, is all.”

“I can’t imagine why.” Cullen said, not even trying to hide his sarcasm, if the smile on Barris’s face was anything to go by. “Hestia hasn’t been known to be politically active in any way.”

Barris snickered. “True, but that’s why I was confused. The Inquisitor didn’t strike me as particularly forgiving.”

Cullen wanted to protest, it was there in his mouth, if only out of respect for Hestia and what she’d done for the Inquisition. But the memory of the snarl in her voice when she spoke of Percy Trevelyan all those months ago flashed in his mind. There had been real hatred in her voice, the like of which he had never heard before. *He deserves anything your people throw at him. He’s worse than you know.*

But the image that stayed in his mind was her eyes, grey and knowing and gentle, her hand on his arm, her voice murmuring *If it becomes difficult, please do not hesitate to ask for help.*

Barris was still watching him, waiting on an answer, so Cullen took a drink of the wine to cover the heat building in his chest. “I suppose the Inquisitor is allowed to be complicated.”

Barris nodded ruefully. “Women.” He said, raising his cup in a toast. “May we never understand them.”

They both drank.

“Not that I have much knowledge on that subject, truth be told.” Barris said, his cheeks darkening again.

“Nor me, if it comes to that.” Cullen shrugged. “Dedicating one’s life to the Order and the Maker doesn’t give us much time for...”

“Dalliances?” Barris suggested, laughing when Cullen coughed around his mouthful of wine.

“Relationships,” Cullen said, wiping wine from his chin. “I was going to say relationships.”

They spoke of unimportant things for some hours afterward, and then Barris bid him goodnight. Cullen put the conversation from his mind as he set about his nightly routine, carefully removing each piece of armor, relaxing his muscle groups one limb at a time, cleaning and polishing what armor needed maintenance. He held one vambrace up to the light, wondering if the gash through the flaming sword could be repaired or if he ought to replace the piece entirely.
It looks to me that you’ve run from one commanding officers skirts to another

Cullen shook the thought from his head and set the vambrace aside. He would not live his life to defy Elle Hawke’s judgement of him. That way lay madness. He’d ask Cassandra tomorrow if it was worth it to replace them.

He lay back on his bed, eyes drawn to the patch of sky he could see through the hole in his ceiling. I’ll have to get that fixed one of these days. He thought drowsily. Before it starts snowing. The stars twinkled faintly. He closed his eyes.

You are not doing this alone

That was the first night Cullen dreamed of Hestia.

Chapter End Notes

This was so far my favorite chapter to write. Elle Hawke is probably my favorite person, for reasons that I will never be able to articulate.

as always, a big thank you to Illyria_Lives for sharing this big fucked up family with me

I'm susuwatarisprinkles on tumblr and sootsprites94 on twitter. Come say hi if you wanna
Winter in Ferelden was not for the faint of heart. Hestia thought she’d learned that during the mage and templar war, but they’d at least had the sense to retreat to the Free Marches when the snow started to fall in Denerim. Now, they had no choice. Griping was the way they passed the time as they went from Jader into Ferelden, bypassing Highhever and heading south towards a small village on the Imperial Highway called Crestwood, which is where Hawke was to meet her Warden contact.

“Who is this warden we’re supposed to meet?” Hestia had asked Hawke, the first night in a tavern in what seemed to be the middle of nowhere.

“It’s not any of the famous ones,” Hawke had said airily, brushing the foam from her ale off her upper lip. “And honestly I don’t know him well. You’d be better off saving your questions for him.”

Hestia had shared a glance with Iron Bull, since he seemed at least as sure as she about this arrangement, but asked no more about it.

Crestwood was just as small as Hestia had been led to believe. Besieged by undead and bandits, Hestia had been only too happy to send Hawke on to meet her warden friend while the rest of them did what they could for the people here. As the freezing rain and ice turned to snow, she sent Iron Bull at a run through the doors of the keep and laughed as he gleefully tore through the Highwaymen.

Raising the Inquisition flag had the unintended consequence of delaying their meeting with the warden and closing the rift under the lake by several days; nobody wanted to leave the keep empty in case the bandits tried to take it back. Hestia sent letters back to Skyhold, and received Leliana’s assurance that her agents would be there within days.

Until then, there was little to do but clear out the spiders from the unused rooms and eye her tower of paperwork with a certain amount of suspicion. It had been a short stack back in Skyhold, but it seemed to have multiplied in the week and a half she had been gone. The spritz of perfume and lovely ribbon Josephine had tied it up with didn’t do anything to lessen the intimidation.

She’d only just started on her response to her first letter when Dorian poked his head around the door. “There you are, Sera was wondering where you’d disappeared to.”

Hestia smiled without looking up. “Tell her I’ve been victimized by the nobles of Orlais and that she should attack them all with honey and the accompanying bees in their bedclothes.”

Dorian snickered. “I’m sure that will make her day.” He came in and sprawled in a chair closer to the fireplace, doing his best to be attractive with two extra blankets wrapped around his shoulders. “Did you know we’re actually related, Inquisitor?”

That got her attention. Hestia looked up, blinking. “Truly?”

Dorian waved a hand. “Oh, not first cousins or anything like that. Can you imagine? You’re a Trevelyan, however, and somewhere in the dank nethers of my family tree, there was also a Trevelyan. Perhaps he was even the one who ventured to Ostwick to establish the branch? We are
talking long ago, of course.”

“You knew that off the top of your head?” Hestia arched an eyebrow at him and reached for her quill.

“Not the top. Maybe the lower middle or thereabouts.” Dorian told her, holding his hands out closer to the flames that danced merrily in the fireplace. “Bloodlines are serious business in Tevinter. You’re taught lessons and tested… by strict nannies. I heard your family mentioned, and I had to go through all the old mnemonics. But yes—there it is. I knew there was a reason we looked so much alike.” He winked at her.

“I knew there was a reason I liked you.” Hestia snorted. “You learn something new every day.”

Dorian preened. “Nice, isn’t it? Like being at a quality library, provided you’re not the one stocking the shelves.”

“Or being terrorized by overprotective librarians.” Hestia balled up piece of paper and tossed it towards the fireplace, missing by a number of feet. “This bloody ink gets everywhere.”

“What is all that anyway?” Dorian asked. “Nevarran necromancers asking for the honor of reanimating your corpse after you’ve moved on to the next world?”

“No doubt there are requests for it, but Leliana has probably burned those.” Hestia said, picking up the letter she’d been staring at for days and smoothing one of the crumpled edges. “These are issues Cullen and Josephine need my opinion on. I’m to read them, make a decision then send them back. Leliana, unsurprisingly, has no questions about the direction I want the Inquisition to head in, likely because she spent several weeks in Haven investigating me, my loved ones, and every person I’ve ever spoken to.”

“The one thing they never tell you about responsibility,” Dorian mused, “Just how little privacy it affords you.”

Hestia smiled at his remark, but couldn’t tear her eyes from the letter. Considering my son has rebuffed all contact, this is the only way. That couldn’t possibly be true. She took a steadying breath before holding out the page out to him. “Dorian, you should look at this letter.”

His eyes sparkled with mischief. “A letter? Is it a naughty letter? A humorous proposal from some Antivan dowager?”

Hestia chewed on her lip, wanting badly to be carried away by his humor, to verbally spar with him until this awkwardness was behind them, but she couldn’t find it in her. Instead she opted for honestly. “It’s from your father.”

The reaction was instant. Dorian’s face shuttered, a calm and emotionless mask snapping up faster than she could blink. “I see. And what does Magister Halward want, prey tell?”

“A meeting.”

“Let me see this letter.” Dorian jumped from his chair and snatched the paper from her hands, his quick eyes reading it with a speed she had come to expect from him.

Unable to take her eyes off his almost frantic pacing, Hestia tried to fill the silence. “Your parents wrote to Mother Giselle, asking for her help. They wanted her to bring you to a meeting place. They’re worried for you, I think.”
Dorian let out a harsh laugh. “‘I know my son.’ What my father knows of me would barely fill a
thimble. This is so typical!” He stopped his pacing and rounded on her. “How long have you had this?”

Hestia jumped and tried not to shiver at the ferocity on his face. As far as she could remember,
Dorian had never been this angry with her or with anyone. No, that wasn’t quite true, he regarded
Iron Bull with a great amount of suspicion, but it never quite broke his veneer of charming humor.
This was something else entirely. Whatever he saw between the lines of clean script had clearly
upset him greatly.

She fumbled for words. “Mother Giselle gave it to me the night before we left. I was—”

“And you kept it from me for all this time?” Dorian threw the letter back onto her desk, a snarl on
his lips. “That was more than a week ago! Were you going to spring this on me just before we met
the retainer or just keep me in the dark?”

“No.” Hestia said, horrified. “No! You can’t think I would do something like that to you Dorian!”

“Then why would you keep this from me?” Dorian demanded.

“I wanted to tell you in private!” Hestia snapped back, rising from her seat and gesturing to the
door. “In case you hadn’t noticed, this is the first we’ve been alone since we left Skyhold!”

“That’s… not a bad point, okay!” Dorian took a breath, looking at his hands and tucking them back
into his blankets. After a moment of quiet, he said, much softer, “I apologize Inquisitor. That was
unworthy of me.”

“It’s quite alright.” Hestia said, running a shaky hand through her hair. “At least now I know you
have an emotional range wider than cocky smugness.”

“Hush now, that’s a closely guarded secret.” Dorian said, perhaps only out of habit. He moved
back and sat down in his chair again, not looking at her.

Hestia cautiously approached him, wary of his temper now that she’d been exposed to it. She sat
on an upturned barrel, leaned forward with her elbows on her knees. Dorian seemed to have
deflated entirely, gazing into the fire with a look of exhausted sadness on his lovely face.

“I waited too long, and I’m sorry about that.” She told him, hoping to smooth the way towards
peace.

“No, don’t apologize, that outburst was unworthy of me.” Dorian told her, looking at his hands. “I
wonder if this family retainer is a henchman, ready to hit me on the head and drag me back to
Tevinter.”

“Do you really think your father would do that?” she asked, raising her eyebrows.

“No,” Dorian admitted, “Although I wouldn’t put it past him.”

Hestia bit her lip, trying to figure out how to phrase her questions without seeming like she was
prying into his affairs too much. “There seems to be… bad blood between you and your family.”

Dorian let out a hollow laugh. “Interesting turn of phrase.” He looked up at her concerned face and
offered her a sardonic smile. “We’ve never talked about my family before have we? They’re not
fond of my choices, nor I theirs.”
“Because you broke away from Alexius? Because you left?”

“That too.” He said, bitterness shading his words.

there was a moment where the only sounds were the crackling of the fireplace, the pattering of rain on the worn flagstones, the soft sigh of the lake lapping against the shore. “We don’t have to go.” Hestia told Dorian gently. “I know I wouldn’t, if I were in your shoes. It’s entirely your decision.”

“Thank you.” Dorian said sincerely. He seemed to waffle on an answer before saying, rather plaintively, “Allow me some time to think about it?”

“Take all the time you need.” Hestia said. They both looked into the fire for a moment before she said, “Yet another thing we have in common.”

“Oh?” Dorian raised an eyebrow. “Do tell.”

“I… haven’t spoken to my parents since the circles fell.” Hestia admitted, voice hushed. It wasn’t lost on her that Dorian was the first person who wasn’t blood related that knew this particular secret. “My mother told me that if I left to fight, I would never be welcomed back.”

“It sounds terribly familiar.” Dorian said, mouth quirking into a wry grin. “But that was then. Now that you’re Inquisitor, they’ll be falling over themselves to bring you home.”

Hestia shook her head. “You’re probably right, but you never know. My mother holds her grudges closer than her small clothes sometimes.”

Dorian nodded sagely. “She’d fit right in back home.”

Hestia snorted in a most unladylike way. “You’ve no way of knowing this, but that would make her happier than a Ferelden in a kennel of puppies.”

Dorian snickered. “What is it with these barbarians and their dogs?”

“It boggles the mind.” Hestia said, rising to her feet and stretching her arms above her head. “Come on; let’s go find something to fight. Nothing clears the mind faster than life threatening danger.”

Dorian smiled and followed her out the door. “You’ve been spending entirely too much time with Iron Bull.”

Hestia was still really extremely angry about the mayor of Crestwood a few days later when they finally tracked down Hawke’s warden friend. He had stood there in the house he’d never deserved and lied to her face. It put a twist in her gut as Elle Hawke ducked around the copse of trees and waved them over. Hawke met them at the mouth of the cave, an amused smile playing around her mouth.

“Hear you went and made friends with the dragon,” Hawke said by way of greeting.

“Is hitting it over and over with a great axe until its dead considered friendship?” Iron Bull asked, the great axe in question slung over his shoulders. “Because if it is then that dragon is the best friend I’ve ever had.”
Dorian rolled his eyes. “Please don’t encourage them,” He said to Hawke. “Or they’ll run off and try to kill that other dragon we found a few months ago.”

Sera bounced up and down on the balls of her feet. She’d been giddy since the fight, like she’d discovered her new favorite thing. “I forgot about that one! Think it’s still there?”

“No!” Dorian yelped immediately, turning pleading eyes to Hestia. “Please tell me you’re not considering killing two dragons in two months.”

“Aren’t there some Venatori in the south you wanted us to take care of?” Hestia pondered innocently, laughing at the distraught noise Dorian made.

“I don’t like any of you any longer.” Dorian muttered, crossing his arms.

They followed Elle Hawke into the cave into what seemed to be a smugglers hold. It was standard as caves go, dripping water and deep mushrooms glowing faintly, dirt turning to stone beneath their boots. A wooden door was fit into the tunnel perhaps 30 yards back, filling the whole space but for a gap at the top, with the familiar image of a skull its eyes blacked out painted on the remaining boards. A clear sign to anyone familiar with bandits. Good thing too, or the wardens might have tried to check each tunnel in Crestwood.

The first thing that stood out to Hestia about this cave was the tingling of the fade on her skin. Either there had been a lot of magic cast in the past, or a very powerful spell had been wrought very recently. She didn’t have time to decide which, because the next impression was the cold point of a knife up against her throat.

Elle sauntered into the room and met the gaze of whoever held Hestia’s life in their hands. “It’s alright, she’s with me.”

A male voice growled from behind her, “You have lots of questionable friends Hawke.”

“So do you.” Hawke snorted. “But this one is the Inquisitor.”

A moment of quiet and then, “Ah.” The knife was removed from her throat and Hestia got to whip around in time to see a tall man with dark hair and a fussy little goatee say with apparent sincerity, “My apologies Inquisitor. You can’t be too careful these days.”

Hestia arched an eyebrow. “You certainly can’t. It’s a pleasure to be threatened by you, Warden…”

“Nathaniel Howe.” The Warden greeted, inclining his head in a small bow. From behind him, Hawke’s gingery cat scampered over and wound its way between Hawke’s legs. “Hawke said you had some questions.”

Hestia nodded, considering the man carefully. He was tall and compactly built. He’d sheathed the knife he’d wielded back at his side and she could see a sleek bow leaning against a makeshift desk covered in maps and papers. His movements were quick and economical and when he was still there was barely a hint that he was breathing. This man moved like a killer. Well that’s not a problem, she thought, the various faces of Ben's smuggler friends flashing through her mind. I know how to handle thugs and thieves.

“Help me make sense of this,” Hestia said, opting for friendliness. “All the wardens go missing, and then my camp is attacked by a darkspawn named Corypheus. I’m thinking one has something to do with the other.”
“And you would be right.” Nathaniel Howe agreed. He gestured for her to follow him and went to consult his papers. “I was investigating a dwarven thaig near Kirkwall when the wardens I was traveling with heard about Hawke’s defeat of Corypheus. The others were content to leave the matter there, but I was less certain. Soon after, every warden in Orlais began to hear the Calling.”

Hestia raised her eyebrows. “Well, it certainly sounds ominous. What’s the Calling?”

“The Calling is a portent of death.” Nathaniel said briskly. “When you join the wardens, there is a ritual that ties you to the darkspawn. It grants us our abilities but it is a slow kind of poison. Eventually the poison will overwhelm and kill us all. The Calling is how a warden knows it’s time to go into the deep roads and face death with honor.” He sounded almost bored with the speech, if not for the flash of fear she saw in his eyes.

“I’ve heard something about that.” Iron Bull put in from where he leaned against the stone wall, one ankle crossed over the other. “Wardens go into the deep roads to kill as many darkspawn as possible before they get the better of him.”

Nathaniel pointed a finger at Iron Bull. “Just so. It seemed very unlikely to me that every Warden is now dying at the exact same time, but nobody has time to look into that with the much larger problem looming over all our heads.”

Hestia looked at him expectantly, and when he didn’t say anything more she glanced at Hawke. “Which is?”

“With the wardens gone,” Elle said, her gingery cat tucked into her arms, “Who stops the next Blight?”

_Cullen was right._ She thought. _Hawke is quite dramatic._ “What was their solution?” Hestia asked, eyes flitting from Warden to Champion and back again.

“The senior wardens proposed a ritual involving blood magic.” Nathaniel said, a scowl in his voice. “And while wardens are allowed to take some liberties with common decency if it will help stop the darkspawn, I happen to think ritual blood sacrifice crosses some kind of line. When I protested, several warden mages attacked me. When I defended myself, Warden Commander Clarel branded me a traitor and called for my head.”

“And you think Corypheus is creating this Calling?” Hestia asked, glancing at the papers strewn across the desk.

Nathaniel Howe nodded. “Hawke has seen him influence warden minds before, through our connection to the darkspawn. Granted, it’s only a theory, but if I’m right—”

“Then Corypheus has distracted the fighting force best equipped to defeat him.” Hestia finished the thought grimly.

“And if the Calling is real, then it doesn’t really matter if Corypheus wants to be a god or not.” Nathaniel Howe pronounced with grim finality. “Without wardens the next blight, whenever it comes, will wipe out every last one of us.”

“Well, at least he’s got his priorities in order.” Dorian said. “I like that in a man.”

“The wardens are testing the ritual here, in the Western Approach.” Nathaniel drew her attention to the map, pointing out a spot in Orlais, just on the edge of the Abyssal Rift. “If you meet me there, you can see what they’re doing with your own eyes.”
“I’m not sure I buy your theory yet.” Hestia said, putting hands on hips. “Are you hearing this Calling?”

Nathaniel Howe met her eyes for the first time, and she could only describe them as haunted. “Yes,” he told her. “Yes I am.”

“I’ve seen Corypheus influence wardens before.” Elle said. She’d settled in a chair, and her ginger cat was curled up in her lap, purring loudly. “He got hold of an entire carta clan once. Made them drink darkspawn blood. Weird shit.”

Hestia smiled a bit at Hawke’s unintentional echoing of Varric’s voice. “You think he’s powerful enough to put the Calling in each one of your heads?”

“When I joined the wardens, I was guaranteed at least thirty years before my gruesome death.” Nathaniel spread his hands, a wry smile on his face. It made him seem younger, more rakish. “I’ve only been a warden for ten, so I’m in no hurry to let the deep roads take me.”

Hestia bit her lip, her fingers tapping out a rhythm against her thigh. She’d seen his power firsthand, seen him command a dragon that spit lightning and death. She still woke at night feeling the phantom pain in her mark, remembering how he’d tried to tear the anchor from her. At this point, nothing was too far-fetched.

“Very well,” she said, nodding to Nathaniel Howe. “If you’re sure, I can meet you in the Western Approach, but not until after the spring thaw. In case you hadn’t noticed, the passes are frozen and will be for some time.”

Nathaniel shrugged. “It’s not like I’m asking you to commit an army to this endeavor, though if this goes on much longer, we may have to.”

Hestia smiled at the man, “Is it we already? Feeling a sense of camaraderie are we?”

Nathaniel Howe snickered. “What is it they say? ‘You find your best friends when you’re doomed to die?’ Or is that just something my Warden Commander says?”

“I do have a personal question to ask.” Hestia said, hoping her voice was betraying how worried she felt asking. “You hadn’t run into a Warden Trevelyan or Warden Lavellan, have you?”

Nathaniel gave her a queer look. “I’ve met Lavellan once or twice; she was helping me with the research into the thaig. How do you know her?”

Hestia shrugged one shoulder. “She’s married to my cousin. I know his sister was looking for him.”

Nathaniel nodded slowly. “Hmm. It’s a small world. I can send a letter if you’d like, but I haven’t spoken with either of them since I went on the run.”

Hestia felt her apology on her lips but bit it back in time. “If all the wardens are hearing this Calling, then maybe it would be nice if my dear cousin knew that he and his wife aren’t really dying?”

Nathaniel grimaced. “It would be nice if all the wardens knew that, but I see your point. It’s certainly nice to be related to the Inquisitor, isn’t it?”

Hestia shrugged. “What kind of leader would I be if I didn’t use my power and influence to ensure the safety of my friends and family?”
“All the ordinary nobs do that.” Sera pointed out.

“Well, I never claimed to be a perfect person.” Hestia told her, tossing the girl a saucy smile. “You’ll just have to get me with a pie.”

It was very nearly silent, which was an experience Hestia hadn’t been able to enjoy in weeks. She opened her eyes, seeing the foggy clouds of silt that her feet dislodged from the bottom of the lake. It was too shallow for fish of any proper size, but a flash of the tail of the legendary uncatchable trout flickered past her vision. If she had any choice, Hestia would’ve lived her life underwater.

Unfortunately, she required air to live. She surfaced, sucking in a deep breath of air, thankful that the air outside of Crestwood was no longer tinged with smoke and death. The sun chose that moment to break past the clouds, and she was temporarily dazzled by the frozen light. It was definitely a mistake that any healer worth their salt would chastise her for, but Hestia figured if she wrapped up warm and snuck a warming rune into her bedroll it would ward off the worst of the nerve damage.

*Once in a while, you just have to make a mistake, to prove you’re not always a responsible adult.* Hestia thought.

“Hestia!” Dorian yelled sharply from the banks of the lake. “Are you finished freezing to death?”

“Not nearly enough yet.” Hestia shouted back, slicking her hair back from her face and turning to look at the man standing on the banks of the lake. Dorian Pavus was eyeing the water with no small amount of suspicion. “Not in the mood for swimming?”

Dorian cast a disparaging eye out at her. “In a proper bath house or bathing pool with filtered water, certainly. Out here in this… nature, I shouldn’t think it sanitary. And anyway, it’s freezing out here.”

Hestia smiled and drifted on her back, letting herself float in the cool water, although she was careful to stay out of the muck at the edges. It had been something like six weeks since the healers had judged her able to swim again and she’d been falling over herself to take a dip almost as soon as they’d set up camp here. In Ostwick, children learned to swim as they were learning to walk. Fishing and shipping were the major trades in Ostwick city, and Maker help her, Hestia even missed the stink of the fish markets in summer. Someone ought to have told her that running away from home meant that the seabirds wouldn’t be there to lull her to sleep at night.

“Will you come ashore? I need to talk to you.” Dorian sat down on the dock with a disgruntled huff, rather like a cat trying to find a pose that is suitably comfortable as well as annoying. He settled in a meditation pose with one knee up, staff propped against his shoulder. “Or are you genuine in your attempts to become an icicle?”

Hestia kicked her feet up and let the momentum flip her under the water, and moments later she surfaced next to the dock. She pushed wet hair out of her face and leaned her arms on the old sun-bleached wood. “How can I help you today Ser Pavus? Or have you just come to marvel at perfection?”

“I can do both can’t I?” Dorian flashed her a grin before sobering again. “I’ve just received a letter from Maeveris, my friend in Quarnius?”
“The one Varric knows for some insane merchant’s guild reason?”

“The very same. Her motion died on the senate floor, but we all knew that was going to happen. She’s grateful for the support the Inquisition provided, and as token of her gratitude, she set me this.” Dorian held up the piece of jewelry he’d been fiddling with.

Hestia leaned forward and squinted at it, dripping water on the dock. The blood red gemstone fit into the palm of his hand with not much room to spare, flat and perhaps as thick as a pack of cards. The whole gem was set in thick silver with runes carved along the edges, and a surprisingly delicate silver chain hanging from the top.

“It’s lovely.” Hestia said, looking back at Dorian. “Should I know what this is?”

“This, my backwater friend, is a mana illuminator.” Dorian said with a dramatic flourish. “It lets you see the flow of mana and lyrium in a person’s body. Back home, it’s used to see how strong a young mage is, or if any of your slaves have magical talent.”

Hestia drew back. “And suddenly I hate it.”

Dorian nodded. “Yes I thought you’d react that way. Remember, in all things it is not the tool that needs to be blamed, but how the tool is wielded.”

Hestia squinted at him. “You want me to blame you for all of the Tevinter slave trade?”

Dorian heaved a dramatic sigh. “You might as well, Solas already does.”

Hestia pursed her lips in an exaggerated pout. “Aww, did the poor posh mage have to come to terms with the fact that he’s benefited from a system that treats people like objects?”

Dorian rolled his eyes. “All right all right have your fun at my expense, I suppose I deserve it. Now will you get out of that lake? I wanted this,” he swung he illuminator on the chain once in a circle before tucking it back into a pocket, “so I could check on your mana flow.”

Hestia bit her lip and followed the thought line to its inevitable conclusion. “Because my mana control is shit-”

“And I would like to figure out why.” Dorian finished, nodding his head in satisfaction. “Now, are you going to get out of that lake or will we have to chisel you out?”

“All right, keep your hair on.” Hestia said, hoisting herself out of the water and onto the dock. The cold air hit her with the force of a blow and she almost yelped at the sting of the wind. “Hand me that towel would you?”

Dorian grabbed the towel and the blankets she’d set down at the end of the dock for this express purpose, even going the extra step to help her wring the water from her hair and wrap the blanket around her shoulders.

“There is one other thing I wanted to ask.” Dorian said quietly, when she’d pulled the fabric around as tight as it would go and was rubbing her hands together vigorously. “About the letter. From my father.”

Hestia pulled the towel off her head so she could look at him properly. He was coiffed and trimmed and his mustache was waxed to perfection, but underneath that armor he looked as uncomfortable as it was possible to be.
“Yes,” she said. “I’m listening.”

“I want to go meet the retainer.” Dorian said, the words tumbling out in a rush. “Just to see. If it’s a trap, we’ll escape and kill everyone. You’re good at that!” He pointed out with false cheer. “If not, I can tell him to tell my father he can stick his alarm in his wits end.”

Hestia bit her lip, denying herself even the possibility of influencing his decision. “Are you sure?”

“I have never been less sure of anything in my entire life. Shall we?”

“Very well,” She told him. “Tomorrow is Wintersend, we can leave the day after? Or would you like to go now?”

He didn’t want to go on Wintersend because Sera had something stupid and funny planned for the people of Crestwood, which turned out to be filling the mayor’s house with as much fish as she could get her hands on and then daring the local kids to wade through it. Hestia tried to enjoy herself despite the circumstances, but still ended up crying herself to sleep that night.

Dorian became more and more nervous as they traveled south, and by the time they arrived in Redcliffe he looked to be about to jump out of his skin. Sera and Iron Bull wanted to go in too but Hestia made them promise to wait in the square near the Hero of Ferelden statue. They stood by with the minimum of grumbling.

The Gull and Lantern was deserted when they went inside, something Hestia had never thought to see. ”Uh-oh. Nobody’s here.” Dorian said, looking around nervously. “This doesn’t bode well.”

“They both turned to see a well dressed gentlemen at the foot of the stairs. Dark skinned and darker hair shot through with grey, a well kept set of robes with what must’ve been the crest of House Pavus sewn into the embroidering across his chest. His face was well lined and tired but it was easy to see the resemblance between them.

This was no family retainer. This was Halward Pavus in the flesh.

Dorian’s greeting confirmed Hestia’s suspicions. “Father. So the whole story about the ‘family retainer’ was just… what? A smoke screen?”

“Then you were told.” Halward Pavus said, moving further into the lamp light. He inclined his head in a polite bow to Hestia. “I apologize for the deception, Inquisitor. I never intended for you to be involved.”

Dorina barked out a harsh laugh. His whole body was shaking, from anger? Fear? Something between the two? “Of course not. Magister Pavus couldn’t come to Skyhold and be seen with the dread Inquisitor. What would people think? What is ‘this’ exactly, Father? Ambush? Kidnapping? Warm family reunion?”

Dorian’s father sighed and turned his tired eyes once again to her, although Dorian had strode towards his father and was the far closer face. “This is how it has always been.”
“You went through all of this to get Dorian here. Talk to him.”

“Yes, Father. Talk to me.” Dorian snapped, his features contorting into a snarl. “Let me hear how mystified you are by my anger.”

Halward Pavus looked alarmed, like he hadn’t expected this level of vitriol from his son. “Dorian, you don’t have to—”

Dorian turned so he could see Hestia out of the corner of his eye and said, “I prefer the company of men. My father disapproves.”

Hestia was almost certain her face had not reacted even a bit. In truth, she’d had a suspicion but hadn’t felt she knew him well enough to confirm it. He flirted with her at every opportunity but she’d met women who would do the same and never think of kissing her. But to hear it said now, it felt like the most shameful admission Dorian had ever voiced aloud. His body was threaded with tension, a tightly wound spring.

“So that’s what all of this is about? Who you sleep with?” Hestia asked, a little incredulously.

Dorian shook his head and said darkly, “That’s not all it’s about.”

“Dorian, please,” His father said, one hand reaching out towards his son. “If you’ll only listen to me.”

“Why? So you can spout more convenient lies?” Dorian snapped. “He taught me to hate blood magic. ‘The resort of the weak mind.’ Those are his words. But what was the first thing you did when your precious heir refused to play pretend for the rest of his life?” The pain in his voice broke her heart. “You tried to change me!”

“I only wanted what was best for you!”

“You wanted the best for you!” Dorian snarled, tears glinting in his eyes. “For your fucking legacy! Anything for that!”

He prowled away from his father, going to lean his hands on an empty table. After a moment, Hestia crossed to his side, looking at Halward Pavus out of the corner of her eye. The man looked deflated, defeated.

“What do you want to do?” Hestia murmured to Dorian. He was still shaking, and a small flame was dancing around the focusing jewel at the head of his staff. “We can leave right now, we can stay and talk to him. It’s up to you Dorian.”

“What would you do?” He whispered, eyes downcast, his knuckles white on the wood.

Hestia knew what she would like to do to this man. She wanted to punch him in the face, she wanted to set the tavern on fire with him inside, she wanted to shout until her voice was hoarse. She felt a protectiveness stirring within her, the same kind that had led her to the circle when she was 15 years old. The same one that had led her to shed tears on Wintersend.

But… Dorian was not Seph. He was not her responsibility. It was not her choice to make.

So Hestia tried instead to think of the future. “We walk into danger every day. Should the worst happen, do you want this so be the last time you ever speak to him?”
Dorian looked up at her with eyes in so much pain. Her heart ached.

But he walked back over to his father and demanded, “Tell me why you came.”

Halward still looked so tired, but he knew a lifeline when he saw one. “If I knew I would drive you to the Inquisition…”

“You didn’t.” Dorian’s voice was savage. “I joined the Inquisition because it’s the right thing to do. Once I had a father who would have known that.”

He turned his back and headed for the door, hands shaking. Hestia started to follow, before they were both stopped by the emotion in Halward Pavus’s words.

“Once I had a son who trusted me.” Pavus Sr. said, pain etched on his face. “A trust I betrayed. I only wanted to talk to him. To hear his voice again. To ask him to forgive me.”

Dorian was quiet, but when he caught her eye Hestia could see the hope leap into his face.

She nodded to him and continued to the door.

They waited for him in the square, but Dorian didn’t speak until they were all tucked into the tavern at the top of the hill. There, sitting with Hestia in a corner near the fire, mug of terrible beer close at hand, dark eyes on the fire, he told her. “He says we’re alike. Too much pride. Once I would have been overjoyed to hear him say that. Now I’m not certain. I don’t know if I can forgive him.”

Hestia hated herself for asking this question, but she had to know, had to put the fearful twist in her gut to bed. “He tried to change you?”

Dorian nodded. “Out of desperation. I wouldn’t put on a show, marry the girl, keep everything unsavory private and locked away. Selfish, I suppose,” he said, a sardonic lilt to his words, “Not to want to spend my entire life screaming on the inside. He was going to do a blood ritual. Alter my mind. Make me… acceptable.” He took a long drink of terrible beer. “I found out. I left.”

Hestia fought the chill that went down her spine. She’d been right and hated that it was so easy to spot. “Can blood magic actually do that?”

“Maybe. It could also have left me a drooling vegetable. It crushed me to think he found that absurd risk preferable to scandal.” Dorian looked at the dancing flames, despondent. Betrayed. “Part of me has always hoped he didn’t really want to go through with it. If he had… I can’t even imagine the person I would be now. I wouldn’t like that Dorian.”

“Are you all right?”

Dorian shook his head. “No. Not really.” But he gave her half a smile all the same. “Thank you for bringing me out there. It wasn’t what I expected, but… it’s something.”

They sat in silence for a while, watching Sera flirt with the waitress and Iron Bull help her.

After a while, Dorian said, “Maker knows what you must think of me now, after that whole display.”
Hestia looked at him, his lovely profile, his lovely hair, his lovely mustache. This lovely man, who had left everything behind and traveled halfway around the world to help people who would never thank him. “I think you’re very brave.”

“Brave?” Dorian looked at her, surprised. Touched.

Hestia nodded. “It’s not easy to abandon tradition and walk your own path. To stand up and say ‘No, this is who I am, this is what I believe, and damn the consequences.’” She felt her own pain feeding into the words and stopped short before the emotion got away from her.

Dorian must’ve felt the kinship in her words, all the same. “My father never understood. Living a lie… it festers inside of you, like poison. You have to fight for what’s in your heart.”

Hestia reached out and squeezed his hand for a moment, then took it away again to take a long draught of her mug of terrible beer.

Iron Bull wandered over and sat down with a heavy sigh. Having caught the tail end of the conversation, he gave Hestia and up and down look and asked, “What was her name?”

Hestia shook her head and laughed ruefully. Even with only one good eye, he saw everything.

“Saskia.” she told him, raising her mug in toast to a called shot.

“Saskia?” Dorian echoed, arching an eyebrow. He gestured with a hand as if to say, ‘go on.’ No doubt he was eager to change the subject from his own tangled past, so he was happy to delve into Hestia’s.

Hestia shrugged and signaled a waitress for more beer. “Saskia was the… first girl I ever loved. First anyone I ever loved, really. Not that I told her, of course.” She added after a moment’s thought. “She never would’ve forgiven me for that.”

“Why not?” Bull asked.

Hestia bit her lip, trying to find a way to fit the words around the feeling. This was a long ago pain but was one of those wounds that would still be sore no matter how old you grew. “I think… she was ashamed. Ashamed of what she felt, for women, for me. Ashamed of what she was, of her magic.” Hestia could see the girl in her mind’s eye, so lovely with long dark braids, red ribbons tied just so. “Every morning and night she would go into the Chantry and pray, pray for the Maker to take from her the curse of magic, pray that he would forgive her and let her live a normal life.”

Hestia shook her head, clearing away those memories before she began to cry in this dirty tavern. “It’s hard, being in love with someone who firmly believes that what you are is a mistake.”

Dorian nodded shakily, looked away before she could see the tears in his eyes.

“That was her own fault boss, not yours.” Iron Bull’s voice was soft and when she looked at him, he held her in the here and now with a steady gaze.

“I know.” she said, giving him a watery smile. “But that’s why you have to pick the people you love with care.’

Sera was suddenly there behind her, giving her and Dorian an awkward hug from behind, arms reaching around the chair and drawing the three of them together. “Their loss, innit?” she muttered, her voice cracking. “And if I ever see your dad again Dorian, I’ll stick an arrow in his arse.”

Dorian choked on his laugh. “I’m sure his ass would appreciate it.”
a big gay group hug was the only correct ending to this chapter

as always, thank you to Illyria_Lives for sharing this big fucked up family with me

I'm susuwatarisprinkles on tumblr and sootsprites94 on twitter, come have a chat
Correspondence from the desk of Inquisitor Hestia Trevelyan

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Correspondence from the desk of Inquisitor Hestia Trevelyan

Inquisitor,

First things first: an apology. I offered the rebel mages safe harbor in Ferelden only to have them drive my uncle out of his town, so I'll admit I wasn't in the best of moods when I first met you. I just wanted everyone out of Redcliffe, and didn't care who was responsible for what. Now I wish I'd done otherwise. Isn't that always the way? These cultists... Venatori, I think they're called? We have them in the royal palace, or so I'm told. Like rats -but with magic and nasty sneers. I don't know what they're up to, but I need to find them and drive them out. Since the Inquisition knows all about them, I'm hoping you'll help. Something something grateful something.

Wait... did you just write that? You scribes do this on purpose, don't you?

King Alistair Theirin

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Inquisitor,

First, allow me once again to apologize for my behavior when the Champion was in Skyhold. It was unworthy of the office of Commander of the Inquisitions forces and I assure you, it will never happen again.

Second, you'll be happy to know that the Templars have taken to their new place in the Inquisition with a gusto that can only be described as ‘excessively enthusiastic’. Knight Commander Barris wishes to convey his thanks and assures me he will do everything in his power to rebuild the Order's good name. Whether that is a good or bad thing is entirely up to your estimation of Barris. He certainly seems dedicated.

News has returned from Vercheil. We marched without incident, although I have it on good authority that there were many closed-door meetings among Verchiel nobility. Several useful names have sent diplomatic envoys, and potential future gains may be impressive. Do not tell Sera I said so.

We have received a missive from the Ferelden Crown, asking our help identifying a Venatori agent in the royal palace in Denerim, a copy of which Leliana has enclosed. Assuming you've read that letter already, Leliana has an agent in mind to infiltrate the palace, but I think we should send a retinue of soldiers to assist in the manhunt. Not only should we apprehend the assassin, but we should be seen doing it.

Josephine no doubt has a dozen concerns requiring your attention so I shall end this letter here and wish you well.

Commander Cullen
Commander Cullen,

For what must be the thousandth time, please call me Hestia. My stance on unnecessary titles has not changed with our move to Skyhold. We are still colleagues and, I hope, still friends. Formality has no place here.

The payout from the Verchiel march went sideways and Sera is mad enough to spit hornets, but only one casualty should be reported, and not from our ranks. One of the guilty parties decided to punish his servants and turn the meeting into an ambush. You may have noticed the fortunes and lands of one Lord Pel Harmond on the revised list of Inquisition assets. If he is successful, Lady Chelle Morveau should soon throw her support and coin behind the Inquisition. Josephine should know what to do with his limited skillset after that. Who knows, he might get the advancement he seeks after all.

I’ll need you to write this up in official language of course, but I have an assignment for the Templars. Knight Commander Barris should send his best to Serult and retrieve our missing agents. We’ve lost too many as it is. I want the templars to know that if any of our people are lost, they will be tasked to save them.

As for Denerim, I think you’ve got the right idea. Leliana will send the agent, and my companions and I will arrange for an official introduction to the Ferelden crown. Nothing flushes out an assassin like a high priced target. We’ll catch him, don’t you worry.

Hoping you are well,

Hestia

P.S. Dorian says tower to E4. I told him to write his own letter.

Hestia,

The items you asked me to retrieve have been found. Unfortunately, the building they were found in has mysteriously burned to the ground.

Leliana

Leliana,

Thank you. Please keep them safe until my return.

Hestia
Dear Lady Montilyet,

There are scandalous rumors flying about Starkhaven, tales that paint the Inquisition as wicked usurpers and thieves. I suspect Lady Trevelyan's relatives, the ones we quieted before, are taking their petty vengeance.

There is a ringleader. Bann Dorner has taken care not to let any whisper be traced back to his household, but the man has a tongue as forked as an Orlesian bard's. If he could be made an example of, I believe the naysayers will fall silent.

Yours truly,
Lady Buttlefort

Hestia,

Your instruction is noted and I will try to remember that you are a woman of the people first and a leader second. Sometimes it’s hard to forget years of training to suit the whims of one particular mage.

It seems your relations are back at it again. Josephine no doubt enclosed the letter from her contact about Bann Dorner. Leliana wants to start a whisper campaign in Starkhaven and Josephine wants to inflate his tariffs with Antiva. It's utter nonsense of course, and I say let the villains talk themselves to death. I do not envy the size and scope of your family, believe me.

Construction continues on Skyhold, although the quarries and logging stands that you have found have been a great help and the workers are happy with the new materials. Absent any permanent quarters, the Templars have been assigned the space in the empty tower just west of the courtyard. I do hope that was the plan.

Josephine and Quartermaster Morris took the liberty of recruiting several specialists from the Circles of Magi to give you special instruction upon your return, and they arrived with all speed. Morris pointed out, and rightly too, that it would be unfair to let a subordinate train the leader of the Inquisition. I don't approve, but that is irrelevant. You will have the best. Knight Enchanter Helain has taken to running drills with the newest recruits in your absence, which is appreciated but unnecessary. Viuus Anaxus is a mortalitasi, and has traveled all the way from Nevarra, something Cassandra is very cross about. The third enchanter is… I will be honest, nobody has been able to get much out of her, besides the fact that the College of Enchanters sent her to train you. Make of that what you will.

The young lad you spoke of, Sutherland, reported back. The bandits were cleared with minor spoils. He may have potential.

Commander Cullen

P.S. Tell Dorian Knight to E4.
Leliana,

That request we discussed has now become urgent. I beg you, find Armand Trevelyan and his wife Niora, verify their safety and then make contact. Whether or not they join our cause is quite beside the point, but I hope he listens. Armand must be made aware of the danger to his life.

Elayna’s going to kill me.

Hestia.

Cullen,

I apologize but these words need to go somewhere and these days it’s difficult to have a conversation with anyone without unintended consequences. Please discard this letter as soon as you read it, I will most likely regret sending it in the morning.

Today is Wintersend. The villagers of Crestwood have opened their homes to us, and the celebration they could pull together was full of joy and laughter, in spite of their recent hardships. I tried my best to drink and dance with the rest of them, but found my efforts lacking.

Today is Wintersend. Today is Seraphina’s birthday. She would be twenty three years old.

It is six months since she died and every day I cannot shake the notion that it is my fault she is gone. I wake up every day wishing it wasn’t true. Wishing that she was here with me. I spent every day for almost fifteen years keeping her safe. I loved her like a sister. I loved her like a daughter. I led her into harm's way.

I know she made her choices, but every time I think about the war I think ‘we didn’t have to fight.’ She wanted to go, I wanted to go but we didn’t have to. There were plenty of people willing to fight, we could have stayed home.

Twenty three years old. The best part of a person's life. Who were you at twenty three, Cullen? Were you proud? Were you smart? Were you in love? Did you have all the answers? When I was twenty three I had all the answers. Now I look back and think ‘what a stupid child you are. You don’t know anything yet.’

Seraphina has been dead six months and every day I wake up, and for a moment I think that perhaps it didn’t happen. Perhaps it was a joke. An awful cruel joke that I would take in a heartbeat if the alternative was losing her forever. Maybe she’ll walk through the door and tell me how silly I’m being. Tell me where I’m going wrong.

I miss her.

Happy Wintersend, Cullen

Hestia
Ambassador Montilyet,

Although we have not always seen eye to eye, I believe that on this subject we will be in perfect agreement. I would like to build a monument at the site where Haven stood, as a memorial to all those who gave their lives defending the faith.

Shall we work together to honor these fallen heroes, Madam Ambassador?

Marquis DuRellion

Hestia,

Corypheus killed your cousin, not you. No doubt you’ve heard the words before but I felt it was important that you hear them again.

Knight Commander Barris has reported back that his templars found our lost agents in Serult, but were unable to locate the missing Marquis. They followed the agent who seemed to have quite lost her voice due to the shock, to a hut in the middle of the forest that Knight Captain Briony confirmed had belonged to an apostate. The hut was deserted and abandoned, the trail cold.

The Order of the Templars has received a request from Perendale to remove a group of mages who have locked themselves in their former Circle Tower. The populace fears what the mages may plan for the city and, given the current disruptions in the Veil, there are real dangers to consider. We do not know the condition of the mages within. Knight Commander Barris has requested that the templars be allowed to do their duty. We can certainly spare them, if the Order wishes to live up to their ideals, let them.

Enclosed is a letter from the Marquis DuRellion. He requests our help to build a memorial at Haven. I’m sure I can find some volunteers to help with construction.

Our researcher has been examining everything known of the draconic species, and she believes that she has a way to flush out a creature that might serve as a mount. The dracolisk is a rarely seen beast: wary, skittish, but hardy and powerful. Certainly not a standard addition to a stable, but in what other way has the Inquisition proven itself to be “standard”? If you wish the lures placed, it will be done.

On a personal note, thank you for sharing with me. The explosion at the conclave will be a terrible loss for years to come, but we must always remember that it is the reason we fight. We fight to avenge our fallen, and to protect the world against a monster who cares not for the lives of the innocent. Seraphina was not the only one martyred at the Conclave, but the blame rests at Coryphaeus’s feet, not yours. If he has feet. He probably has feet. Does he have feet?

Do not doubt yourself yet, Hestia. You have never failed us.

Cullen
Inquisitor,

Magister Alexius has given Grand Enchanter Fiona valuable information on how the Venatori were able to co-opt the rebel mages. Specifically, he speaks of an agent among the Fereldan nobility who prepared the mages at Redcliffe for the Venatori.

Arl Gallagher Wulff evidently allied with the Venatori with good intentions. He believed the rebel mages would withdraw to Tevinter, where they would lead a better life while their absence restored peace and stability to Ferelden.

I have informed none outside the Inquisition of this matter. What we do with this information is your decision.

Leliana

Inquisitor,

Well, that was bracing! A pitched battle with evil mages disguised as kitchen servants, fireballs flying and swords flashing...it brings back old times. I won't be eating anything coming out of those kitchens for a while, let me tell you. I wonder if they were going to poison me? Nasty little cultists. Anyhow, I'm grateful for the Inquisition's help. We wouldn't have found them without you.

King Alistair Theirin

Cullen,

I do wish you all had sent the original letter from King Alistair instead of a copy. I could recognize my brother’s handwriting anywhere, he never learned to write the ‘D’s correctly. It was a wonderful surprise nevertheless, to arrive at the royal palace in Denerim to find my eldest brother Bartholomew has been employed as a scribe for the crown.

Tell Varric that the toy he picked out is my niece's new best friend, and she’s been trying to swallow it ever since.

King Alistair sends his best regards. He remembers you from training for the Order. He said something about ghost stories and coming back to the barracks at dawn and being caught by a Chantry Sister? I didn’t want to pry.

Iron Bull has received a Ben Hassrath report about the Nevarren city of Hunter Fell, but I can’t make heads nor tails of it. He’s already sent it along to Leliana, perhaps you three can figure it out by the time we return? Ask Shay to help. He loves puzzles.
Dorian’s friend, Maevaris Tilani, may need our help again. Her resistance has drawn supporters, but those against her are the real heavy hitters. According to Dorian, “She’s crafty, but she could use more help right about now, or the resistance might die on the vine.” That is a direct quote, he made me write it. Knight Commander Barris should send several templars, our templars, disguised as Inquisition soldiers. Dorian informs me that the magisters have never encountered what a proper templar can do. I wish I could sell tickets.

I asked the Queen of Ferelden about Arl Wulff, just to get a sense of him, and she assured me he was a good man. If Josephine thinks we can make an ally of him, we should try. We can’t assassinate everyone.

That reminds me, Leliana should send an agent to assassinate the Venatori agent in King Markus’s court.

Thank you for your kind words. I am unaccustomed to the weight of leadership, but it gets easier by the day. I was so used to fighting to have my voice heard, shouting to be heard above the crowd. Now all it takes is a whisper to turn the mind of hundreds of people. It’s a little bit terrifying, if I am being honest, the weight of expectation that sits on our shoulders. On my shoulders. Varric says the Herald of Andraste is a symbol bigger than all of us, but I remain unconvinced. I am just one person.

Your thoughts?

Hestia

P.S. Dorian says pawn to F7.

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Leliana,

The King and Queen of Ferelden send their love and hope you will visit them soon. When were you going to tell me that you traveled at the side of the Hero of Ferelden during the blight? They were also worried when I told them a bit about our troubles with the wardens. Queen Cousland has sent letters to people she trusts and they should be at Skyhold soon. I believe her words were, “I hope Leliana wants to see her old friends.”

Hestia

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Hestia,

The Templars are on their way to Quarnius, and are quite excited to show magisters what true templars are capable of. They drew lots to decide which of the best of them would have the chance. We may have gotten more than we bargained for.

Word has spread about the dragon you killed. We’ve received requests from nobles eager to gawk at the head, as well as an interesting offer from Wade’s Emporium, an armorer of some note for his
work with draconic materials. If you're still in Denerim, you should stop by his shop there. Wade and Herren are troublesome but Wade’s talent is undeniable. Send them whatever materials we aren’t using ourselves.

There’s a Benn-Hassrath report you should see, about the successor to a duchy in Lydes. The late duke perished in the civil war; Three candidates have claim to the title, because nothing about Orleasian politics can ever be simple or easy. If it were, I’d get to sleep earlier every night. His cousin Carolina, already a duchess by marriage; the late duke’s daughter Monette, whose claim is muddied by her youthful naïveté and the fact that her father pushed her into a life of service to the Chantry after his wife's death, likely to protect her from the dangers of the Game; and his brother Jean-Gaspard, an ambitious and cunning man who has been searching for power.

Jean-Gaspard is a chevalier and a capable military leader. If we want him removed, I daresay we might recruit him for ourselves.

Leading others, I have found in my limited experience, is a lot like learning the sword. It takes dedicated practice to gain the muscle memory, but once you have it, the maneuver is easy and never quite goes away. The anxiety in the beginning is the wish to get the maneuver right, so that the muscle memory is correct. The more you practice leadership, it will come to you more and more naturally. Fear not Hestia, the Inquisition has faith in you. And if you make a misstep, Josephine can easily turn it into an advantage.

The crocuses that Cassandra planted in the gateyard are beginning to bloom. Do not tell her it was I who gave away that particular secret. The passes are melting, and soon all those who wished to see Skyhold will have their chance. Those of use that experienced the winter here are more than ready to see the outside world again. To say that you are missed would be an understatement.

Your fortress awaits you.

Cullen.

P.S. Bishop to H3. Check.

Cullen,

In less than a week’s time, we will be back at Skyhold. I confess I am excited to see the progress you have made since we left. Your homeland is wonderful, but trying in the winter months. I will admit I often dreamed of Ostwick. The winters are bitter and cold but I had never seen snow before coming to Ferelden. It does not agree with me.

I am told the arcanist has arrived at Skyhold and am desperate to meet her. Leliana has said wonderful things about her; that is, she has told me that the arcanist is good at what she does and then smiled mysteriously. You know how she does.

I could not convince my brother to join the Inquisition, which I think is for the best. I would love to have him near, but his wife is right. They are safer in Denerim, and relatively protected as servants of the crown. I never would have thought Bartholomew would be content to serve someone else but it suits him just fine. He is happier than I have ever seen him, though I dedicate that less to his new home than to his daughter. He found what he was meant to do in raising that beautiful little girl.
I did not think I would envy him, but I do just a little. If only all things in life were so simple.

Hestia

Chapter End Notes

I was so excited to do an epistolary chapter, y'all let me know if it came off well or if I should never ever do this again

as always, a big thanks is owed to Illyria_Lives, for sharing this big fucked up family with me. r_omulus also deserves thanks for looking this over literally ten minutes before I posted this, you're the best in the world

I'm sootsprites94 on twitter and susuwatarisprinkles on tumblr, i will always cherish your thoughts!
But know that the Sun always rises

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Three months could not be over fast enough. Cullen had done his best to whip the recruits into shape while Rylen was doing his best to keep the sergeants from rebelling outright. They had been disappointed when the Templar Order had been separated from the Inquisition army and Sergeant Hargrave was convinced that is had been Cullens idea. Nothing could dissuade his moaning. If he weren’t such a good taskmaster, Cullen would have had him reprimanded for insubordination.

As it was, Cullen was halfway through drawing up the paperwork to have the man demoted, just in case, when there was a knock on his office door.

“Come in.” Cullen said without looking up from his work. His office had three doors, he couldn’t possibly be expected to keep track of the comings and goings of everyone who wanted to go though. Half the time it was just runners sending messages from one end of Skyhold to the next.

“Commander,” Said Corporal Hansen. He came in and stopped short of the desk, like all the infantry soldiers had taken to doing. “You wanted to speak with me.”

“That I did.” Cullen put his quill back in the inkwell and rose to his feet. The boy tried to look taller. “Why did you join the Inquisition, Hansen?”

“Because it’s a holy endeavour, ser.” Hansen said immediately, his words rote and quick, his gaze on the wall.

Cullen let his hands settle on the pommel of his sword. “Really?” He drawled.

Hansen nodded. “Yes ser, the Herald of Andraste is trying to make this a better world, I wanted to be part of it.”

Cullen nodded his head. He’d heard the same from other soldiers. And that was definitely where Hansen had gotten this from. No doubt that the Inquisitor would hate it if she knew her soldiers were speaking this way, but there wasn’t much you could do to stop soldiers from gossiping. It was what soldiers did. Cullen looked Hansen up and down, then asked, “Do you know why I brought you up here corporal?”

“No ser.”

“I brought you up here to talk about your… future with the Inquisition.” Cullen said, watching the boy carefully when he took a pause.

Hansen was beginning to sweat. “Ser?” He said, or tried to. It was closer to a squeak.

“To be frank corporal, I’ve been watching you for a while.” Cullen said, suppressing a smile as the boy twitched. Maker this was funny, no wonder Knight Commander Greagoir drew out his inspection of the knights so much. What does he know, you’re thinking, and what is he going to do about it? “And it seems to me that your attention has been… divided.”

Hansen couldn’t take it anymore. “I’m the one who’s running the still!” He burst out, his accent making his words scratchy at the edges. “I’ll shut it down, I’m sorry Commander, I never should have experimented with those peppers from Rivain!”
“Hold on, hold on,” Cullen said, raising a hand to stem the flow of words. “Corporal, you’re not here to be punished.”

“I… I’m not?” Hansen squeaked, eyes wide as saucers.

“No.” Cullen assured him. “Quite the opposite, actually.”

“Really?”

“Corporal, I’ll be honest. You’re a good soldier, but it’s clear that your true talents lie in… other areas.” Cullen said gently. “Now, you can stay in the army if you like, but I think you’d be much happier working in the tavern instead.”

“You’re sacking me?” Hansen’s voice reached new levels of squeakiness.

“I am not sacking you.” Cullen told him firmly. “I am offering you another position within the Inquisition. One with a pay rise and a title besides.”

Hansen’s terror melted away to be replaced with curiosity. “A title?”

“We’d like you to work at the tavern with Cabot.” Cullen said. “Make your experiments official. Official Alcoholic Alchemist of the Inquisition? There’s a far lower chance someone would try to hit you with a shield.”

Hansen rubbed the back of his head self consciously, remembering yesterday evening’s training. “You want me to keep experimenting, and sell what I make in the tavern?”

Cullen nodded. It was a shame, it really was. Of course it was better for everyone that Hansen be working on his alcoholic mistakes full time, but he’d shown potential. If he’d held up under questioning at all he could’ve been officer material, but he’d folded like a wet sheet of parchment. That sort of thing couldn’t be taught.

“Could the title be Alchemist of Spirits? That’ll give the boys a laugh.” Hansen asked, almost shyly.

Cullen almost said no. The word was there in his mouth before he stopped, reconsidered. It was a joke, and one that would appeal to more than just the soldiers. Cole may even like it, if Varric could explain to the lad what a joke was. “Of course.” He told Hansen who brightened. “Turn in your armor to the Quartermaster and report for duty this afternoon.”

Hansen saluted, but halfway through realized he no longer needed to and put his hand back down, grinning. “Yes ser. Thank you ser.”

“Dismissed.”

Hansen shot out the door, nearly colliding with Rylen. Rylen evaded the boy with his usual maneuver of grabbing the boys shoulders and moving his body around Rylen’s own. Hansen shouted apologies as he rocketed down the stairs, eager to start his new life in mixology.

Rylen turned a wry look on Cullen. “Do I even want to know?”

“Corporal Hansen’s vintage will now be served in the tavern instead of in the valley.” Cullen told him smugly, settling back in his chair.

“Damn.” Rylen said, “I owe Varric three shillings.”
“Why do you bother betting against him?” Cullen asked. Rylen leaned in the doorway, one ankle crossed over the other. “He always wins.”

“Morbid curiosity?” Rylen shrugged. “Odds are he’ll lose one of these days.”

“Odds are his specialty, which is the only reason he keeps winning.” Cullen said, reaching for his quill. “Hang around a moment, I’m almost done with the papers for Sergeant Hargrave.”

“Pity that. I don’t actually have to demote him do I?” Rylen complained. “He’s the only one who knows how to do those tricky moves with dual axes.”

“If he keeps this up, threaten him with demotion.” Cullen said firmly. “He’s setting a bad example for the men. Questioning the Inquisitor now leads to disarray in the ranks during armed conflict. Trust me, I’ve seen it done.”

“And you want to deal with it the same way?” Rylen pushed off the door frame and came over to the desk. “Punish the ones who talk so that it pushes the suspicions down under our noses, and make him seem a martyr in the process?”

Cullen opened his mouth, then closed it again. Rylen had a point. Didn’t this sort of reaction lead to the downfall of the Seekers, the corruption of the Order? He laid down his quill. “What would you suggest?”

Rylen thought for a moment. “Let him speak to the Inquisitor.” He said eventually. “Let her explain that it was her decision to separate the Order and the soldiers, not yours.”

Cullen shook his head. “Come now, the Inquisitor has more important things to do than deal with the complaints of every Rook and Nelly that comes along. Besides, if Hargrave mouthing off gets him an audience with her, suddenly a hundred more people will follow his example.”

Rylen looked thoughtful. “Well, what about a speech before the men?” He suggested. “She’s not more than a title to most of them, and it’d be good for morale.”

Cullen tapped his foot, thinking it over. “I’ll take it to Josephine if you write it up.” He told Rylen.

Rylen’s eyes lit with pride. “As you say Commander.”

Cullen took the demotion papers and slid them into a drawer. Just in case. He thought, and tried not to think of a similar drawer that Meredith had kept in her office close to the end. It was purely for convenience, not for paranoia.

“What brings you up here, anyway?” Cullen asked Rylen, putting the matter out of his mind.

“Anything to report?”

Rylen shrugged. “No, not really. I only came up here to tell you the Inquisitor and her party are down in the valley.”

Cullen stood up so fast that he slammed his knee into the underside of his desk. Grimacing in pain, he yelped. “What?”

Rylen laughed loudly, leaning back at the size of it. “That was Shay’s reaction as well.”

“Why didn’t you lead with that?” Cullen snapped, crossing to the standing dummy and grabbing his bear fur mantle off, slipping his arms through it and belting it on with his sword belt.
The mantle was dusty and old now, the smell of smoke clinging to it no matter how many times he washed it. Part of him wanted to get rid of it, put another set of armor together, let the memories of Haven be gone with the fur. But Cullen knew in his heart that he would never do that. He would carry these memories with him, to remind him of what they had lost and what they had to lose.

Rylen, unheeding of Cullen’s wandering thoughts, snickered. “You jump like a new recruit when she’s mentioned. I thought she wasn’t planning on replacing you.”

Cullen glared at his friend, who smiled unrepentantly. “The Inquisitor has the last word on any placement in the Inquisition, including yours. And if she’s here, where are the horns?”

Almost in answer, horns began blaring all along the ramparts, one on each outpost. They had been Josephine’s idea, a clear way to greet important guests and alert the army to enemies, but until now they had never had a reason to use the measure. The noise was loud and insistent, and only grew louder when Cullen and Rylen walked out on the ramparts to look at the bridge. They had emerged in time to see the whole of the damn procession, two cavalry soldiers escorting the Inquisitor and her adventuring party across the bridge and into the gateyard, with another two flanking them. The wind snapped the flags and whipped cloaks around, tearing hoods off of heads.

Cullen hurried down the steps and caught the sight of Leliana and Josephine doing the same. By the time he’d crossed the gateyard to stand with them on the steps of the grand staircase, the gate was open and Hestia and her party were entering, amid cheers and shouts from soldiers and runners. The noble visitors kept themselves to the upper courtyard, to keep the common muck off their fancy shoes.

Mother Giselle was descending the grand staircase, a little slower than some others that were already running to help offload the bags of useful items and herbs that Hestia collected wherever she went. Shay Borchard was with her, although every step he took was measured and calm, which could only mean he was straining at the seams to break into a run to greet his sister. Cullen had spent many an evening over a game of chess with Shay over the course of this winter, and could see the tells well enough now.

Hestia kneed her horse over toward the steps where her advisors stood. She was windblown and radiant, the cold had put a blush of color into her cheeks and her eyes were wide and sparkling with knowing. Cullen’s breath caught in his throat when she smiled at them.

“And how are the Inquisitions finest today?” Hestia asked, voice raised slightly to be heard above the clamor of the stable hands.

Cullen didn’t have to worry about thinking of an answer, because Josephine took a step forward and declared loud enough for the nobles in the courtyard to hear, “Better now that you have returned to us, Inquisitor. I present for your approval, the Inquisition fortress known as Skyhold.”

Ah, so this is a presentation for the visiting dignitaries. Cullen thought, glancing up at the audience above them. Josephine swept an arm in a dramatic arc to encompass the whole of Skyhold and all of the repairs that had been completed over the winter. There was still scaffolding in the gateyard and in the grand hall, but the rest of the repairs had gone remarkably smoothly. Cullen was sure Josephine had spent far too much time in decorating the tower that would be the Inquisitor's quarters.

“You’ve done an outstanding job,” Hestia declared, after turning her horse in a small circle. Her laughing eyes found Cullen and she called to him, “How are our boys, Commander?”

Cullen stifled a grin and called out, “Your army stands ready, Inquisitor!”
Hestia gave him a dignified nod before turning to Leliana. “How is the state of things, Nightingale?”

Leliana stepped down one stair but that was all the ground she was willing to concede. In contrast to Cullen and Josephine, she didn’t raise her voice above a normal speaking level. Nevertheless, it seemed her words rang throughout both courtyards. “It is too soon to say, Inquisitor. But our efforts have been noted.”

“I noticed!” Hestia declared, turning her horse again to let her face the watchers in the courtyard. She addressed them directly for the first time. “Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for being here with us in Skyhold on this wonderful day! The Inquisition is honored to have you among us in Skyhold, and I am honored to greet you here in our home. I look forward to speaking with all of you very soon, if you will allow me to wash a bit of the dirt off first.”

There were titters from above them that turned to cheers when Hestia dug her heels into her horses sides, making the mare rear back onto her hind legs, arching her neck and tossing her mane. Cullen and several others rushed forward to calm the horse before the Inquisitor took an embarrassing fall into the mud, but she kept her seat long enough for Master Dennet to calm the horse.

Cullen braced Hestia around the waist and helped her slide to the ground. She landed inside the circle of his arms, hands on his shoulders, close enough to smell the lemon oils she put in her hair. It was longer now, a curling tangled mess that just dusted her shoulders.

“Hi,” Hestia said to him breathlessly, looking up at him with a windswept smile.

“Hello,” Cullen murmured back.

She took a moment to disentangle her fingers from the fur of his mantle. “This thing has been through a lot since Haven, hasn’t it?” She said, eyes flickering over his face.

“Does it show?” Cullen asked, quirking an eyebrow. “I’ve been thinking of getting rid of it, truth be told.”

“Shame.” She said, eyeing the fur one more time before turning her eyes back to his face. “I like it. I like the image.”

“Oh?” Cullen didn’t know when his throat had gotten so dry.

“Mm-hm.” Hestia said, her lips quirked in a smile. “It makes you more than a man, a bulwark between the world and the Inquisition.”

She moved away from him then, back to a respectable distance, and was almost immediately engulfed in a hug from Shay and Ben Trevelyan. Cullen moved away from them, knowing almost instinctively that the Inquisitors family was none of his business.

“Don’t go away that long ever again.” He heard Shay say, words muffled into her hair.

“I missed you so much.” Hestia was murmuring back.

It took some effort to turn his back to her, even so.
The first war meeting after Hestia’s return was in an important one. There was a lot they had to talk about and only two hours to do it in. Hopefully the schedule that had worked for the three of them over the winter could work for Hestia too. Cassandra had already asked him about searching for the missing seekers, and there was this information from the mysterious ‘Fairbanks’ to contend with.

Cullen didn’t think he was late but Leliana and Josephine were already in their places when he entered the war room that morning. The torches were already lit and the sun hit the windows just right to cast creeping shadows over the war table.

That thing was a marvel that the Inquisition had been lucky to find. Josephine knew someone who knew someone who was sponsoring an artist that worked primarily in woodcraft, and Cullen had sent soldiers to fell a tree that the artist could work with. It turned out to be an age old oak in a haunted forest, but a few sylvans destroyed were well worth it.

A map of Thedas was carved into the the table top, as accurate as it could possibly be when the borders of the city states in the Free Marches blurred and grew and shrank every year. Papers were stacked where they had been left the day before, map markers were strewn across the tabletop, indicating places where the Inquisition had gone or still needed to go.

The only new thing of note was a small package next to a stack of papers where Hestia was meant to stand. The package was wrapped with twine, not much bigger than his hand when he picked it up to look at it more closely.

“I wouldn’t, Commander.” Leliana’s soft voice caught his attention, and Cullen looked up to see her gaze fixed on him. “That’s the Inquisitors business, not ours.”

“What is it?” Cullen asked. Leliana smiled one of her mysterious smiles and Cullen immediately realized his mistake. “Of course.” He chuckled, putting the package back down. “Even if you knew, why would you bother telling me?”

Leliana’s eyes glittered and the matter was considered closed.

Hestia walked through the door to the war room moments after Cullen had gotten settled in his usual place at the war table. She’d exchanged her armor for one of those white and airy blouses she preferred, this time with a vest and a colorful scarf knotted at her throat. Her hair was pulled back in some kind of twist, but wavy strands of buttery blond hair were already beginning to escape.

Cullen collected these little details and desperately tried to forget them since how the Inquisitor chose to dress and style her hair also qualified as none of his business.

“Sorry I’m late, that Bann from Ferelden talked all through breakfast.” Hestia said, resting her hands on the war table and flashing a quick smile at the three of them. “I couldn’t get a word in edgewise for at least a half hour.”

“It is of no import, Inquisitor. We were not kept waiting.” Josephine answered smoothly, making a note on her writing tablet. “And how did you find Bann Loren?”

“He was in excellent health, if that’s what you mean.” Hestia favored Josephine with an amused glance. “Josephine, what have I said?”

“Our guests must see you being treated with every courtesy Inquisitor.” Josephine protested, echoing the argument she and Leliana had been having on and off for weeks. Cullen closed his eyes and sighed, he could recount their arguments in his sleep by now. “Your new title-”
“Isn’t very important when it’s just the four of us.” Hestia cut her off with a sympathetic smile. “Formality is fine in public, but when it’s within the Inquisition? My name is more than acceptable.”

“I-” Josephine looked like she was going to protest again, then relented. “Very good Hestia.”

Hestia nodded briskly. “Bann Loren was rugged and charming, since you asked. Are we hoping he’ll commit something to the Inquisition?”

Josephine brightened slightly and wrote another note. “He was willing to commit coin, supplies and several of his experienced guardsmen if he liked the look of Skyhold. Hopefully your conversation will have allowed him to make up his mind.”

Hestia smiled. “Wonderful. Now, first things first,” she reached out a hand to hover over the small package. “Leliana, is this…”

She trailed off, eyes flickering up to Leliana, who nodded. Hestia quickly undid the wrappings, discarding the twine and paper to reveal a small wooden box, the emblem of the Circle of Magi burned into the lid. Cullen very purposefully did not lean forward to see the contents, but Hestia puzzled over them, one hand hovering over the lid. After a moments silence, she looked back up at Leliana. “How do I know which is which?”

“I took the liberty of labeling them for you.” Leliana said, pointing one slender finger to the box. “Yours is on the right.”

“My right or your right?”

“Your right.”

Hestia nodded, drumming her fingers on the tabletop. With some hesitation she delved her fingers into the box and retrieved a slender glass vial that flared out into a heavy base, sealed in bright blue wax and stamped with the seal of the Circle of Magi. Cullen tensed when he saw it, immediately recognising the amount of red liquid within for what it was.

With little ceremony, Hestia shot out a hand and threw her phylactery against the stone wall. It shattered.

Cullen felt the enchantment that tied Hestia to the sample of her blood snuff out. Josephine looked shaken, Leliana had turned her head so as not to witness the event, or perhaps to protect her eyes from flying glass. Hestia looked at the mess without a flicker of emotion on her face.

“I thought I’d feel it.” She murmured.

“It’s not the sort of enchantment the mage feels.” Leliana said the words quietly.

“Inquisi- er, Hestia?” Josephine’s eyes were wide as saucers. “Was that… was that your phylactery?”

“Yes it was.” Hestia murmured.

“Was that wise?” Cullen knew he ought not to ask, but he had to do it anyhow. “What if we’d needed to find you?”

“I imagine that if I’ve been taken by someone who can hide me from Leliana’s little birds, we will have much bigger problems.” Hestia said sardonically, still looking at the mess of glass and blood,
now pooling on the floor. “And I don’t think we should be relying on Chantry approved blood magic.”

Cullen shuddered, suddenly remembering a voice from his long ago past. *If the Chantry hates blood magic so much, why do we use phylacteries?* Shouted the voice of Nadia Amell in his memory, an argument he wasn’t meant to overhear. *What is taking the blood and using it to find the mage if not blood magic? It’s not about right and wrong, it’s about keeping us locked in cages.*

With a shudder and a blink, Hestia drew herself back to the table. She knocked her knuckles on the table, shocking Cullen back to the here and now. “Well then, you read my report on Warden Howe. What do we think?” she said brightly.

“The Queen of Ferelden vouches for him.” Josephine said at once, perhaps happy for the change of subject. “He has fought at her side for several years now.”

“My agents have confirmed that.” Leliana added. “Still no word from the scouts I sent to the Western Approach, but we should hear from them soon.”

“That will be the biggest problem.” Cullen said, flexing the hand on the pommel of his sword, trying to relax his grip. “It will take four people long enough to get to the Western Approach and back, but to actually stop the wardens? It’ll take all the soldiers we have. If we march, the Inquisition will require Orlais to give permission.”

“Which won’t be easy, with the civil war still going on.” Leliana added.

“They kept fighting through the winter?” Hestia asked, eyebrows raised in concern. “It’s been nearly two years, the smallfolk are already starving. How can the crown keep this up?”

“A ceasefire is to be called in a week or two.” Josephine picked up a small envelope stamped with the golden seal of the Valmonts and slid it across the table to Hestia, who picked it up and scanned it. “In a few months, the Empress is holding a masquerade ball at the Winter Palace. The leaders will hold peace talks as part of the nights proceedings.”

“Gaspard De Chalons, rightful Emperor of Orlais, requests the honor of your presence at the Winter Palace on the 1st of Umbralis at the Satinalia Maskerade, for the celebration of the holiday and peace talks to lead to the end of the War of the Lions.” Hestia read out loud, one eyebrow arched in distaste. “Well, that’s a better name for the civil war than ‘A Massive Waste of Time’.”

“Celene’s rule was controversial since she took the throne.” Josephine said. “Many Chevaliers see her as anti military, while many nobles think she is too soft on the elves and the common folk. But she is a voice of progress in her country, and the Inquisition would not benefit from her decline.”

“There is no such thing as being too soft on the common folk, their lives are hard and they ask for nothing but peace.” Hestia tossed the invitation back on the war table. “Gaspard has invited us to the peace talks?”

Josephine nodded, making another note on her writing tablet. “It would be an opportune time to speak to Empress Celene about the situation with the wardens.”

Hestia shook her head. “The masquerade ball is 8 months from now, it’s far too long to wait. If Warden Howe is right about what the wardens are up to, we’ll have to march and deal with the political consequences afterwards.” She looked at Cullen. “How long would it take for the Inquisitions army to march to the Western Approach?”

Cullen leaned forward to look at the Orlesian half of the war table. “A month? Six weeks at the
longest? If we’re bringing siege weapons across the bulk of southern Orlais it’ll be twice that length. It depends, really, on what type of fight we’re looking at.”

“We don’t know what that will be, not until I meet Warden Howe out there.” Hestia bit her lip and reached out to grab a map marker, sliding it across the grooved surface of the war table to reach its destination right next to the abyssal rift. “He said they would be testing the blood ritual just here.”

“Did he give any indication as to the nature of the blood ritual?” Josephine asked, her accent dancing delicately over the words.

Hestia shook her head. “Ritual sacrifice of some sort. Howe was light on the details. From what I’ve gathered, getting a Grey Warden to part from their secrets is like pulling teeth.”

“It’s worse, believe me.” Leliana commented lightly, the ghost of a smile flitting on to her face before fading away again.

“A demon army to scour Orlais could be raised with blood magic.” Cullen said, pushing the smell of smoke and viscera to the back of his mind where it belonged.

“Not necessarily.” Josephine countered. “The Grey Wardens make the law in the Anderfels. Perhaps Corypheus has convinced the wardens that the same could happen in Orlais.”

“We shouldn’t speculate at this point,” Leliana said, placing another map marker on the war table and sliding it across Ferelden towards the Frostbacks. “We simply do not have enough information.”

“She’s right.” Hestia said, taking a step back to survey the whole war table at once. “As soon as we know what we’re dealing with regarding the wardens, we’ll make a real decision.” She put her hands on her hips and drummed her fingers against her belt. “What’s next?”

They continued on that way for hours before finally breaking for lunch. When it was just the three of them, they scoured her letters and argued in circles about everything. But with Hestia there, it became more of a dance. She listened to each of them and made a decision after a moment’s thought. Where she got the confidence to shake nations Cullen had no idea.

He wanted to catch her in the hall and bring up the idea of her making a speech to the army, but she was deep in conversation with Josephine and he didn’t want to interrupt. He figured that he could ask her opinion of it after lunch, but he got caught up with Leliana and her numbers on the smuggling ring her little birds had uncovered. By the time they had mapped a trail leading to the Emerald Graves, Cullen had no idea where Hestia might be.

But as usual, she was closer at hand than Cullen could imagine.

A laughing voice he knew bounced off a stone wall and found its way to Cullen's ears as he walked through the library. “I hardly think you're the one who knows what the smallfolk want.”

“And I suppose you would have me swallow that drivel about you sympathizing with the people.” a mocking voice replied.

“How dare you, I am the salt of the earth.”
“You're the salt of something at any rate. Now, hold still darling.”

Cullen walked through the doorway and looked around the corner to discover the source of the conversation was Madame Vivienne and Hestia, both seated on the balcony overlooking the great hall that Vivienne had claimed as her own. Madame Vivienne had a pair of scissors in one slender hand and a comb in the other. Hestia had a towel draped around her shoulders and a laugh on her lips.

“Well let's ask him.” Hestia said, looking over her shoulder at the other entrance to this balcony that had only recently been made safe, and shouted, “Ben!”

A man shouted back, “What?”

“Come over here, I need your expert opinion.”

“In my experience that's never been true.”

But Ben Tamrassen came loping up the steps, two wicked looking blades on one hip, easy grin on his face. There was something leonine and dangerous about the way the man moved, it had struck Cullen when they had been introduced. Ben Tamrassen moved like a man who could kill, like a man who already has.

He moved to Hestia’s side and Cullen suddenly realized what an awful eavesdrop he was being. He turned around, meaning to head down to the grand hall, doing his best to shut out the conversation still happening around him.

“You summoned me?” Ben Tamrassen was saying.

“You're an ordinary Thedosian, aren't you?” Hestia asked, her voice bright with amusement.

“I like to think I'm above average.”

“Ha ha, funny barbarian. Do you think the common people should care what my hair looks like?”


Cullen desperately wanted to leave, head out into the library and go about his business, but the answer was surprising enough that his steps stalled, and Cullen put a hand to the cool stone to listen.

Ben Tamrassen crouched in front of the seat, face turned up to Hestia with an expression like he was feeling the sun on his face. “Tia, you know you’re wonderful and I know you’re wonderful, but for most people out there you’re a name and a title. So when they see you for the first time, the image of you will always be important to them. You can’t look like a dirty smuggler anymore.”

Hestia smiled at Ben with a kind of warmth that only came with history. “You’re the one who looked like a dirty smuggler. I just looked like a runaway mage. Sunburn and all.”

Ben snickered and reached up to delicately brush the tresses of Hestia’s hair with his fingertips. “It should stop just below her chin here, and get shorter in the back. Like when Adaar chopped it off for you back in Markham, remember?”

Vivienne leaned her head to one side, considering. “It would certainly lend itself to the image of a rough and tumble adventurer.”
“It’s hard to be rough and tumble if I’m using all those creams and perfumes you’ve given me.” Hestia said. “I’m running out of space in the water closet up in that tower Josephine gave me.”

In reply Vivienne rapped Hestia on the head with the scissors. “Eyes front my dear. And I am not the one to blame that it takes you such effort to look presentable. I am only trying to instill a sense of elegance to the title of Inquisitor.”

“She’s pretty enough without any work, I think.” Ben protested, rising and taking a step back to lean against the balcony railing.

Vivienne cast him a disparaging eye. “Of course you do, but the Inquisitor has to be more than merely pretty. Pretty is an accident of nature. Elegant is a self-created work of art.”

Hestia and Ben snickered, sharing a look that spoke volumes. Hestia was grinning when she said, “Have you been up to the Inquisitors tower yet Vivienne?”

“Not yet, although I’m told Josephine spared no expense on the furnishings.” Vivienne answered, a practiced disinterest coloring her words.

“Yes I’m sure she did.” Hestia bit her lip, worrying it for a moment before saying, “I was wondering if I could persuade you to take measure of the furnishings. You’ve set up your office here so wonderfully, I think so every time I look at it.”

Ben rolled his eyes. “Flattering her ego will only get you so far Tia. You eventually have to ask for help.”

Hestia shot him a look but did nod and say, “Could you help Vivienne?”

“Of course my dear, I would be happy to lend my personal expertise on the matter.” Vivienne was practically preening at the flattery and validation she received from the Trevelyans. “What seems to be the problem?”

“It’s cold.” Ben supplied before Hestia could open her mouth.

“So cold.” Hestia agreed vehemently. “It’s beautiful up there, but all but one of the walls are set with windows. Huge expansive windows, that do almost nothing to keep in the heat from the fireplace. The doors to the balcony have only a latch to shut them at night and the wind cuts through the cracks.”

Vivienne hummed softly, still moving slowly around Hestia shearing away lock by golden lock, eyes narrowed in concentration. “Well, it seems some curtains and blankets are in order at the very least.” She said at last. “I shall see what I can do, if you’ll allow me to see the tower.”

“Would you like to take supper with me this evening, Madame De Fer?” Hestia asked, a contented smile playing over her features.

Vivienne tossed Ben a triumphant smile, gaining what she had perhaps been aiming for all along. “I would be delighted.”

Hestia’s eyes had drifted shut under the older mage’s attentions, and Tamrassen seemed content to lean against the railing and watch. A cool wind blew through the open windows, and Cullen was about to take his leave when Hestia spoke again.

“You might as well come out Cullen, Madame De Fer is going to be doing this for some time yet.”
Blood rushed into his face, but he could hardly back away now that she’d called his name. “I was going to wait until you weren’t busy.” he said, trying to sound confident as he rounded the corner and took the stairs two at a time.

“I’m not busy.” Hestia said, eyes still closed.

“And she won’t be for at least another forty five minutes.” Vivienne said without looking up. “Hello Cullen.”

“Forty five minutes?” Hestia opened her eyes and turned her head to look at Vivienne, who rolled her eyes. “Surely you can cut my hair faster than that.”

“I’ve never had a haircut that took more than ten minutes.” Ben said, grinning.

“And it shows.” Vivienne said dryly, before turning Hestia’s head back to the front. “Your hair will be finished when I say it’s finished. But in this case, I was referring to your imminent appointment with that throne.”

She nodded to the other end of the hall, where the Inquisitors throne sat, bathed in the light from the stained glass windows that graced the far wall, left untouched by Josephine but for a single glass pane they had repaired. The glass had been mercifully intact when they had moved in to Skyhold, left over from the previous occupants. The great hall was filled with light from the western sky from early afternoon until dusk, and the lighting of the torches in the great hall signaled the end to the afternoons activities and a flock of people setting down to dinner.

Cullen checked over his shoulder at the small crowd of courtiers that was gathering at that end of the hall, and when he turned back he found Hestia looking that way too. And worrying her bottom lip.

“Have you given any thought to your judgement of the mayor?” He asked, and those eyes jumped to his face.

“I’ve been able to think of little else.” She said, her eyes straying over his shoulder to the throne again. “I still don’t know what I’m going to say.”

“You can’t possibly be thinking of sparing his life,” Ben jumped up from where he’d been leaning against the railing, incredulous. “He murdered half of the people in that town!”

“And then ran when his actions came to light.” Cullen agreed.

Hestia’s eyes flickered between he and Ben, fingers drumming in her lap. “You would execute him then?” She asked, lifting her chin in what could’ve been a challenge.

“Yes.” Ben answered immediately, crossing his arms. “People from Crestwood want justice.”

“Put him in a cell at least.” Cullen said, a hand coming to rest on the pommel of his sword. “This crime can’t go unanswered.”

Hestia worried her lip some more. Her words, when she spoke again, came slowly. “I just don’t see what good ending his life will do. If there’s a chance he can still do something worthwhile…”

Ben goggled at her. “You want to let him off scot free?”

“No!” Hestia said, shooting him a look. “I’m just trying to think of what we could do to actually help the people of Crestwood.”
“This will help them.” Ben insisted, running an agitated hand through his hair. “Knowing that the person who caused you pain has been punished, that helps.”

“So now Crestwood has no mayor and another name for the list of the dead.” Hestia countered, fingers still drumming. “No, there has to be something else.”

Ben sighed and moved closer, squatting down and putting a hand on Hestia’s incessantly drumming fingers. “You can’t give second chances to everyone who comes along Hestia. Not everyone deserves redemption.”

Hestia narrowed her eyes at him, then sighed. “Can you make sure Levy isn’t there for the judgement?” She asked.

Ben nodded kindly. “Sure.” He got to his feet and started towards the courtyard, tossing a friendly wave to Cullen as he left.

Hestia caught Cullen’s eye and smiled. “I just wanted him to go away,” She said, a conspiratorial grin lighting her face.

Cullen found himself grinning back. “So you don’t believe him?”

Hestia raised and lowered one shoulder, glancing at Vivienne who had stepped back to admire her work. “The Inquisition gave me a chance to be more than I was. It seems only right to pass that on, somehow. If not in this case, I’ll find another way.”

Cullen felt something warm in his chest. Sometimes he was sure that Hestia Trevelyan could read his mind.

Vivienne tapped the scissors to her lips, then moved closer to trim more hair from Hestia’s bangs. “In this case,” The enchanter said. “It may not be possible. Bennoch was right about one thing; the people of Crestwood asked for justice. Refuse them and you will look weak.”

“Not merciful?” Hestia asked, and there might have been hesitancy in her voice.

Cullen’s hand flexed on the pommel of his sword. “She’s right,” He admitted, following the thought to its inevitable conclusion. “It would be merciful if there was doubt, but the mayor killed those people.”

Hestia began worrying her bottom lip again, and Cullen wished he hadn’t said anything. “You’re right of course. I just hoped my first real judgement wouldn’t have to end so violently.”

Cullen looked down so he wouldn’t have to witness her disappointment. He knew it was an impossible situation and she must be feeling tremendous pressure. The last thing he wanted to do was add to it. But what could he possibly say? He, Leliana and Josephine could only advise her. The Inquisitor was the one who made decisions. That meant she held all the blame, as well.

Still, he had to try. “Not your first judgement.” he said, reaching for levity. “We found the head of an Avaar tribe that was throwing goats at the battlements. He’ll be first.”

Hestia laughed a little, and the smile brought some light back to her face. “Well, at least there’s that to look forward to.”
The rest of Cullen’s day was not enjoyable. A migraine had bloomed behind his eyes not long after the Inquisitors judgement had concluded, and Cullen had elected not to inspect the afternoon training exercises, but to send Captain Raedic, a test of the surly dwarf’s leadership. Lysette would be there too, and she promised to report back to him on Raedic’s performance.

These headaches had been more and more frequent since leaving Haven and Cullen had a sneaking suspicion that he knew the cause. *I left the Order, but I haven’t been able to escape it.* Cullen thought, feeling the aches in his bones and the nausea that had been taking him most mornings. The lyrium was dogging his steps day and night, chasing him even in dreams. Cullen felt like a haunted house, each corner of his mind filled with the ghosts of what he ought to have done.

His thoughts strayed again and again to those last days in Kirkwall, where everything had gone wrong. He had thought it started with Anders, with the Chantry explosion, but the more and more he thought about it, the further and further back he had to remember. Knight Captain Meredith had been pushing for the Right of Annulment before the Chantry explosion. He knew that, had heard her arguments for it. He’d fought against it, but now he could see that he’d been pushing on the ocean.

The first duty of a Knight Captain was to check his commanding officer if they had gone too far. Meredith had gone too far, perhaps she had crossed the line into tyranny before he had ever met her. The mages at Skyhold gave him a wide berth but he saw the difference. They laughed here. They argued with voices raised and sparks dancing over their hands, with no heed to who might be listening or who they might upset. They walked where they liked without fear, although he had yet to see any mages anywhere near the tower that Barris and the other templars had claimed as their own.

Mages felt safe in Skyhold, safer than the Gallows. Safer than Kinloch Hod. Safer than any circle.

*Because it's a prison, Cullen.* Amell had said that to him once, big dark eyes filled with sadness. *I've committed no crime but to be born a mage, I will be locked behind iron doors and stone walls for the rest of my life.*

Cullen had watched her turn into an abomination before his eyes, watched that expressive face be rent and twisted into a monster sent from his deepest nightmares. She had turned blood magic on his brothers and sisters in the Order, would've turned it on him too if he hadn't stopped her. Amell would've killed him, would've turned him into a puppet without a second thought. It was the only thing Cullen could tell himself to stop her screaming voice from chasing him into the dark.

He had been so convinced that no mages from Kinloch Hold could be saved, they'd sent him away because his paranoia had interfered with his duties. And Meredith had believed in him, believed in the danger that mages presented. They had seen eye to eye on so many things. *But I was wrong wasn't I?* Cullen thought, kneading his forehead and feeling his eyes water in the weak light. *Kinloch was the exception, not the rule. Meredith's rules weren’t warranted, they were cruel. Every time we added restrictions to the mages in The Gallows, the more they slipped through our fingers.*

Cullen recalled the boy he’d been, the hopes and ideas that had been banished by those long nights at the hands of monsters. He’d wanted to keep people safe, keep mages safe from harm, keep innocent people safe from demons. But if Amell had been right...

His head hurt, his bones ached, his stomach twisted, and beneath his bed the relief beckoned.
Cullen slammed his fist on the desk, rattling the candlestick. “I made a promise.” He spoke aloud in the empty room. “I promised Cassandra that I would get this under control. I promised Rylen that the Inquisition would be different.” He ran and hand through his hair, reaching for the strength of his convictions. “I promised… I promised myself.”

_I promised myself I could be better than I was._

It was dusk, and he was alone. Cullen allowed himself a few moments with his tears. His frustration with the mistakes he had made, with the actions he ought to have taken. Mourning the boy he had been.

When Quartermaster Morris brought in his list of items and requisitions for the Inquisition leadership to sign off on, Cullen was fine. Logging stand, fine, iron ore, fine, obsidian ore, fine. He was barely paying attention until he got down to the bottom of the list.

“A bolt of Antivan silk?” Cullen asked, eyebrows raising? “Three skeins of golden embroidering thread? Two pelts from a black bear?” He looked up at the waiting quartermaster. “Why is this on my requisitions list?”

Morris shrugged, as though it should be perfectly obvious. “For your new dress uniform, Commander.”

Cullen sat back, confused. “New dress uniform?” He said. “That is certainly news to me.”

Morris furrowed his brows and took back the list. “Is it?” After a moment's inspection, he nodded sharply. “Ah, I see. The Inquisitor is the one who ordered this, she should be the one to sign off on it. Apologies Commander, such mistakes won’t be made twice.” He put the list back down and proffered the quill. “If you’ll sign off on the other items, I’ll be sure to correct the oversight.”

_A new uniform?_ Cullen thought, signing his name on the list and replacing the quill. _I was talking about the fur mantle the other day, but replace the whole uniform?_

“Morris.” Cullen said before he could think better of it. When Quartermaster Morris stopped at the door, Cullen swallowed and tried to sound less like a curious little boy. “Is there a design for this new dress uniform? So I can approve any changes?”

Morris didn’t comment one way or another, just rifled through his stack of papers until he reached the bottom. He was good like that. “I’m sorry Commander, I believe the design is still being finalized.” He told Cullen finally, eyes worried. That didn’t mean much, Morris was always worried about something or other. “I can ask the Inquisitor if you like.”

“No.” Cullen hastened to say, trying for disinterest and probably failing miserably. “Thank you Morris, it was just a thought. Everything else looks satisfactory.”

“Commander.” Morris scurried away.

Cullen turned to look at the standing dummy in the corner of his office, where his furry mantle hung, dingy and faded in the firelight. He looked down at his gloves, the dents and scratches of his armor. He hesitated, then unbuckled a vambrace and held it up to the light, looking over the long scratch that had been torn through the sword of the Templar Order.

_I left the Order._ Cullen thought, brows furrowing over the feeling. _Is it disloyal to throw away everything they gave me, keep only the parts I like? Should I have tried to fix them? Stay and affect change, try to steer the Order in a new direction_?
Could one man even do that?

The thought followed him the rest of the evening, as he finished his paperwork, as he stripped off his armor, as he went through the motions of falling asleep, knowing the dreams would be worse when his head pounded as it did. Cullen waited, eyes on the ceiling, wishing for sleep to overcome him. It didn’t.

After an hour of this he gave up, pulled on his boots and climbed down the ladder, heading for the kitchens. The cook usually left some leftover bread and uneated cookies out before she went to bed, for the scullery maids and anybody else who needed something to nibble on in the middle of the night. He stole across the gateyard, nodding to Blackwall as he passed the barn. Did the warden ever sleep, or did he simply work through the night on those rocking horses of his?

Cullen had expected the kitchen to be empty, but inside he found the fireplace still roaring with life and two women sitting at the long worktable.

Hestia and Leliana looked up from the papers and foodstuffs in front of them in surprise. “Hello Commander,” Leliana said first, nodding to him. Her hair was uncovered for once, and it was longer now than in Haven, tied back from her face with a black ribbon.

“Couldn’t sleep?” Hestia asked with a wan smile, head propped on one hand.

Both women were in nightclothes, Hestia in a large nightshirt and loose fitting pants, Leliana in what looked like a nightgown with a woolen shawl wrapped around her shoulders. The idea that both of these powerful and beautiful women slept at night, that the armor they wore each day came off, was just baffling enough for Cullen to pause before speaking.

“Unfortunately not.” He said, resisting the urge to rub the back of his head. “You?”

“The very same.” Hestia said. “Cooks gone to bed but there’s tea and some scones, if Leliana hasn’t eaten them all.”

“I ate one.” Leliana said primly.

“You ate two.”

Cullen grinned and stepped past them, towards the tea kettle and the mugs stacked next to it. “Shall we compromise?” He asked. “And say she ate one and a half?”

“I suppose, if we must be reasonable about it.” Leliana said, taking a sip from her teacup with all the grace of a trained dancer.

Cullen stood for a moment at the head of the worktable, feeling the warmth of the mug in his hands, watching as Hestia and Leliana bickered casually about foodstuffs. Two of the most powerful women in the world. He thought, feeling the gaze of Andraste on them for the first time in months. Following in her footsteps. I wonder if she’s pleased.

“Sit down Cullen,” Hestia said, looking up at him with those knowing eyes. “If there’s one thing we have here, it’s space.”

“Certainly true.” Cullen said, following her orders and taking a seat next to her at the worktable. Her eyes followed him as he at down and Cullen took a steadying breath before he looked at her fully.

Hestia gave him a slow lazy smile that sent spirals of heat down his throat and into his belly. “I
“I didn’t know it came off.” she said softly.

Cullen was sure he was already blushing. “What?” he asked.

“The armor.” Hestia nodded to his shirt and breeches, not a leather strap or steel piece to be seen. “Here I was thinking you slept in it.”

Cullen snickered, taking a long warm drink from his mug of tea. “I uh, no.” He said. “I don’t sleep in it. Although it seems that you’d like me to do away with it entirely.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Hestia glanced at Leliana and reached up to ruffle the back of her newly shorn hair. It drew his eye to her hands, skin speckled with freckles and fingernails bitten to the quick. There was a shiny rope of scar tissue looped round one wrist.

“Right.” Cullen said dryly, glancing at Leliana. She had the teacup in both hands and was watching them with an expression that could be mistaken for fondness if you didn’t know that she could kill you with a handkerchief. “That’s why there was a bolt of Antivan silk and embroidering thread on my requisition list.”

Leliana had an amused smile, while Hestia rested her chin in her hand as she laughed. “Dammit Morris.” Hestia snickered after a moment. “It was supposed to be a surprise.”

“I told you not to order materials until Josephine signed off on the design.” Leliana smiled around her mug.

“Wait, all three of you were in on this?” Cullen sputtered. “Was I ever going to be told?”

“It was going to be a gift.” Hestia’s smile was now slightly guilty, reaching for another scone from the plate. “You were complaining about the fur mantle and, I suppose we got a little carried away.”

Cullen took another drink from his mug. It was the tea that was filling his chest with warmth, not the knowledge that his colleagues not only listened when he complained but conspired to give him gifts. That it was Hestia’s idea to do so did not at all give him a fizzy feeling all the way down to his toes, as though he’d just heard a wonderful song that he was eager to hear again, or read a stirring passage in a book.

Cullen cleared his throat of any extra emotion before he asked, “Have you any idea of what this new uniform would look like?”

Hestia’s smile bathed him in sunlight. She rummaged around the papers that were piled between herself and Leliana while Cullen watched her, before finally pulling out a piece of parchment and smoothing it out for Cullen to look at.

It was nice as uniforms go. Still a solid breastplate, still metal vambraces and pauldrons. She’d added greaves to his boots, but the basic shape was the same. The fabric was all going to be changed, Cullen could see the notes scribbled in Hestia’s neat hand. *Black silk, silver embroidery thread.* There was a sketch of the Inquisition symbol, with an an arrow pointed to it. *Back in golden thread.* Hestia had scribbled. A furry pelt had been draped across the shoulder by another sketchy hand, Josephine's if his guess was correct. *Fox fur* had been added in her delicate script, but it had been crossed out and amended to *bear pelt. Black bear or dyed to match.*

“Your thoughts Commander?” Leliana asked, taking another sip from her mug.

“It’s fair enough.” Cullen said, after finding himself unequipped to explain just how much he loved it. “Black and silver?”
“And red. Inquisition colors.” Hestia said, head propped on her hand again. She leaned on the table, those eyes following his every movement. “The army wears the green and fawn but those of us at the top should have a uniform too. Or, something approximating one.”

“Where is the red coming from?” Cullen asked, a smile creeping into his voice.

“Do you remember those dragons I killed over the winter?” Hestia asked sweetly.

Cullen put his elbow on the table and propped his head on his hand. “How could I forget?”

Her mouth curved into a smile. “Our new arcanist has found that when treated right, dragonhide turns a lovely shade of red.”

Cullen blinked. “You’re giving me dragonhide armor?”

“Yes of course, you’re the commander of the Inquisition.” Hestia said easily. “You deserve the best.”

Cullen’s parents had been farmers, his brothers and sisters had slept in one room and theirs had been a large house in Honnleath, the small village where he’d grown up. His mother had worried over their clothes every night, mending tears and darning socks until the fabric was falling apart. When he joined the templars he had been shocked to find he would have a bed to himself. Even templar armor, as well crafted and maintained as it was, was made to serve a purpose.

This uniform would be the finest thing he’d ever owned.

Hestia must’ve seen the shock in his face and misread his thoughts, her eyebrows shot up. “It could be something else if you prefer.” She hastened to say; she reached out to lay a hand on his arm. He could feel her fingertips on his skin. “If you’d like me to scrap the design entirely-”

“No, I-” Cullen swallowed, hyper aware of her eyes on him. Eyes like moonlight. He looked into those eyes and told her softly, “I don’t know how I’ll ever repay you.”

Her worry melted away to be replaced by a gentle smile. Even her lips had freckles on them. “It’s a gift Cullen,” She told him, as if it was simply a box of cookies. “Just say thank you.”

Cullen said, “Thank you.”

He saw pink bloom in her face.

The door to the kitchens slammed open and Lysette stopped short just inside the door. “Lady Nightingale!” she declared, and only then did she see the other people in the room. “Oh, Commander! Inquisitor!”

Leliana looked up from her mug, having faded into the background in the past few minutes, and nodded to Lysette. “Can I help you Knight-Corporal?”

“I-yes.” Lysette seemed to waffle for a moment before her duty overwhelmed her curiosity. Cullen and Hestia had quickly straightened up and were watching her expectantly. “There’s a group of people on the bridge, and the gate guards weren’t sure if they were expected. Charter told me you were down here.” she strode forward to had a slip of paper to Leliana. “The people at the gate said this was for you.”

Leliana took the note, read it quickly, and sighed deeply. “Oh dear.” She put a hand to her forehead for a moment before pushing to her feet, gathering her shawl around her. “Tell the guards to open
the gate.” she said to Lysette. To Cullen and Hestia, she turned and said, “If you two will excuse me, I have to greet some old friends.”

Lysette nodded sharply and marched past Cullen towards the kitchens outer door. Leliana skirted around the long worktable and followed rather more sedately, her footsteps making nary a sound.

As soon as Leliana’s back was turned Hestia leaned across the table and grabbed the note with hasty fingers. “Who do you think it is?” She asked eagerly.

“What does it say?” Cullen asked, half rising from his seat. The tone had changed to quickly that he was left feeling slightly dizzy.

“See for yourself.” She said, grinning brightly, and passed the slip of paper to him.

Cullen opened the note to see just four words on the paper in an almost illegible script.

*Did you miss us? -O*

Cullen looked up and Hestia, confused, but found that Hestia was no longer there. She was running out the door and down the stairs towards the gates. “Wait!” he yelped, hastening to follow her, lest she trip and hurt herself again. “Hestia!”

He chased her across the gateyard, a white streak in the dark, until they reached the gates. He found Leliana standing just inside, arms crossed and feet bare. The portcullis clattered as it was raised, meter by meter. Hestia glanced over her shoulder at Cullen, practically beaming.

The crowd that stood on the other side of the portcullis was a motley group indeed. A couple of dwarves, one with a long ginger beard tied in braids and the other with extensive tattoos on her face, an elf woman with crossed arms and a sour expression, and- surely that golem couldn’t be what Cullen thought it was!

The dwarf with the long ginger beard sniggered and looked up at the Nightingale. “Hey there Leliana,” he said, his voice like gravel, “We heard the sodding world was ending. Thought we could help out.”

Chapter End Notes

As always, a big hug and a kiss to Illyria_Lives for sharing this big fucked up family with me

Im sootsprites94 on twitter at susuwatarisprinkles on tumblr, come say hello
Creator, see me kneel:

Chapter Notes

Content warnings for the end of this chapter, there are mentions of abuse and trauma, mostly canon typical treatment of mage children. You know yourself best. If there's a tag I missed that you feel should be added to this fic please let me know in the comments.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It turns out that only Oghren and Shale knew Leliana during the Fifth Blight. Oghren had joined the wardens sometime after the archdemon was defeated, and Queen Cousland had made him her Second in Command and left him in charge of the Ferelden wardens in her absence. Despite the smell and the off color jokes, Oghren was apparently a good commander.

The elf woman was called Velanna, and she was polite and quiet, to the point of seeming standoffish. This was offset by Sigrun, the second dwarf and Velanna’s constant companion. Sigrun was bubbly and curious about everything to the point that she could coax a smile even from her stoic mage companion.

Shale was a golem who had made it her mission to eradicate all pigeons from Thedas. Leliana and Shale had spoken quietly for a while and then Shale had stumped off to trade insults with Oghren. Cullen was avoiding the golem, thought Hestia couldn’t begin to understand why.

She was searching for the list of donations from noble houses in the Free Marches. Hestia was sure it was still in the garden somewhere, if only she could remember where she had been hiding to work on the ever growing mountain of papers on her desk. She had been sitting in the garden, got distracted by a conversation with Mother Giselle, walked with her into the great hall, wandered into the rotunda, agreed to help a friend of Solas escape from danger, and then it was dinnertime. Now, in the waning hours when the torches cast dancing shadows on everything in the garden, Hestia walked around the cool stone edges, looking for where she had placed the stack of papers.

The only other person in the garden was Elan Vemal, tending to the herbs that she and Adan watched like hawks. And over in the gazebo, Cullen and Dorian.

Hestia finally gave into her curiosity and wandered over to the gazebo, where the men were enthralled in the chess game in front of them. The smell of the flowers wafted over everything and the torches cast merry light all around the pair of them. It might’ve even been romantic if they weren’t hurling cheerful insults at each other.

“Gloat all you like, I have this one.” Cullen was telling Dorian as she walked up. When he saw her he jumped and half rose from his seat. “Inquisitor!”

“Leaving are you?” Dorian taunted, that cat who ate the canary smile firmly in place. “Does this mean I win?”

Hestia smiled and put her hands on her hips. “Are you two playing nice?” She asked them, slipping into her school teacher voice for the best effect.
Dorian twinkled at her. “I’m always nice.” To Cullen he smirked and said, “You need to come to terms with my inevitable victory. You’ll feel much better.”

“Really?” A crafty look came into Cullen’s eye and he reached out and moved one piece across the board, knocking over another. “Because I just won. And I feel fine.”

Dorian looked up at Hestia, back down at the board, up at Hestia again, then heaved a sigh and nodded to Cullen, conceding defeat. “Don’t get smug.” He said, rising from his chair. “There’ll be no living with you.”

Dorian touched Hestia’s shoulder a moment and then walked away.

“I should return to my duties as well.” Cullen said, sounding as if he would rather do anything else. “Unless you would care for a game?”

He gestured to the board, hazel eyes tinted brown in the low light.

Hestia looked at the chess board, considering. She wasn’t really a fan of chess but she had barely seen Cullen all day between talking to the new wardens and talking to Josephine and Leliana about the civil war and Cullen’s strange insistence on avoiding the golem. There were things she needed to talk to him about, preliminary strategy ideas for fighting the wardens in the Western Approach, choosing the temporary replacement for Rylen until the Knight-Captain returned with the scouts, how best to negotiate a battleground in the middle of a stalemate.

But mostly, Hestia hadn’t been able to speak to Cullen all day and she wanted to. She didn’t want to examine it any further than that.

So she said, “Prepare the board Commander,” and sat.

Cullen gave her one of those half smiles and started setting the board to rights. “As a child I played with my sister,” He told her. “She used to get this stuck up grin on her face whenever she won, which was all the time. My brother and I practiced together for weeks. The look on her face the day I finally won…”

He smiled fondly at the memory, but the smile faded when he said, “Between serving the templars and the Inquisition, I haven’t seen them in years. I wonder if she still plays.” Cullen trailed off, wistful.

“You have siblings?” Hestia asked, crossing her legs and surveying the chessboard. It was a lovely set, clean black and white stone with gilt gold around the edges. The pawns were flat stars while the king and queen stood tall, lions in mid leap.

“Two sisters and a brother.” Cullen answered.

“Where are they now?” Hestia moved a pawn forward.

“Go easy on me Commander.” She said, reaching for a piece before choosing another and sliding it forward. “I haven’t spent as much time with this game as you have.”

“You shouldn’t say that to me.” Cullen told her, raising an eyebrow. “I may decide to crush you, now that I know you’re an amateur.” He moved another piece that she immediately took with her
pawn.

Hestia looked at him and arched a brow, crooked smile playing around her mouth. “Which bits of the Chant did you memorize during your templar training? Maybe you can play Shay’s favorite game.”

“What game is that?”

Her smile turned mischievous. “Drunken Chanter. Two people recite as many lines from the Chant of Light as they can remember, taking a drink of ale or shot of whiskey after every line. The first person to fumble the words or fall unconscious is the loser.”

Cullen snickered at that mental image. “I can’t imagine your brother ever getting that drunk.”

“Oh don’t let that buttoned up and pious exterior fool you.” She grinned. “He and my cousins used to get into quite a bit of mischief back home. They were chased after by the guard captain so many times that Ben's mother eventually married the man.”

Cullen laughed some more, shaking his head as he moved another piece. “I cannot fathom Ben Tamrassen having parents, to be completely honest. It just seemed that he sprung to life fully formed, smuggling contacts and dissatisfied grumbling in place.”

Hestia bit her lip and moved another piece. “I know you don’t get along, but he means well.” She told him, hoping she didn’t sound too defensive.

Cullen immediately realized his mistake, fortunately. He ran a hand through his hair hastened to say, “No, I know that. I just meant I couldn’t imagine him as a child.”

Hestia considered Cullen, this man who strove to be as honest and honorable as he could at all times. It’s no wonder he and Ben couldn’t see eye to eye, they lived their lives so completely differently. Ben trusted a select few and gave his thoughts to even fewer, while Cullen instilled his trust and faith in the whole of the Inquisition.

*I would love to believe the way he does,* Hestia caught herself thinking. As soon as she thought it, Hestia tried to put it away again. “I know what you mean.” She said to fill the silence. “Shay and Bartholomew talk about him like he used to be this reckless troublemaker, but he already had Levy when I met him, he’d already dedicated himself to being a father. That’s the only Ben I’ve ever known.”

Cullen moved a piece, then put it back and moved another instead. “Do you know where Levy’s mother is?” He asked, delicately picking over the words.

Hestia shrugged and shook her head. “We don’t even know who Levy’s real parents are.”

He looked up, confused. “His real parents?”

Hestia drummed her fingers on the table, wondering how much of this story she had the right to tell. It wasn’t really hers, after all. But perhaps it would make things easier between them. “Ben found Levy when he was just an infant, tossed on a rubbish heap. Levy couldn’t have been more than a year old. Ben was but 22 but what was he supposed to do?”

“Levy was an infant? Who would do such a thing?” Cullen whispered, looking horrified.

Hestia shrugged, moving a piece. “We don’t know. I don’t think Ben even bothered to find out. Levy is his son, not somebody who threw the boy like garbage.” She felt her hands begin to shake
with anger, as they always did when she thought about what kind of monster would just leave a babe out in the damp and tangled alleyways of Ostwick.

Cullen put a hand to his forehead. “Could you give me a warning next time?” He asked, throat constricted in pain.

Hestia didn’t know what he was talking about, but then she looked down to see her fingers were beginning to frost over. She looked at her fingertips covered in delicate crystals of ice, then up to Cullen and his grimacing face, and finally understood.

“Oh Maker!” She shook her hands and brushed the magic from her thoughts, dispelling the minor spellwork. “I’m so sorry Cullen, I had no idea.”

“It’s not your fault, you had no way of knowing.” Cullen told her, pressing two fingers to his temple. He smiled weakly. “Gone now, thank you.”

“Is it because of the lyrium?” She asked hesitantly.

He nodded. “I believe so. I can still sense magic, but it’s more and more painful each time I do. Cassandra thinks it will stop in time, but we’ve no idea when.”

“Is this the withdrawal or is there still lyrium in your system?” Hestia tried to remember any of the books Elayna had read on healing magic, but Hestia had been very busy with the youngest apprentices at the time.

“I can’t believe there is any lyrium left in my system after this long without it.” Cullen said, taking a deep breath. “The fatigue I could live with, but the headaches are getting increasingly obstructive.”

Hestia bit her lip, considering her next words. “My cousin Elayna, she’s an accomplished healer. If you like, I could write to her, ask her to make you something to help with the pain-”

Cullen was shaking his head before she was halfway through the words. “No, thank you Hestia. I appreciate the offer, but I can manage this on my own.” He said it with confidence, with conviction that she recognized as his way of reassuring himself.

Hestia could respect his drive, even if she privately thought he was being stubborn. She tucked some hair behind her ear and considered the chessboard again. “As you say. Here I was thinking you were afraid of magic.”

Cullen looked up from the board, his eyes wide. “What?”

Hestia didn’t know why she’d said it out loud but now that it was out there she had no choice but to defend her position. “You never spend any time with any mages, besides Dorian. You won’t see the healers, and back at Haven-”

“I don’t see the healers for these because the ambient magic will only make matters worse.” Cullen told her firmly, one gloved hand clenching and unclenching on his side of the table, his words coming more rapidly with each one that tumbled from his mouth. “I don’t talk to mages because it’s clear they want nothing to do with me!”

Hestia willed herself to hold back, not to continue an argument that could only upset them both. “Don’t snap at me Commander,” She told him, consciously keeping a quaver out of her voice. “I didn’t mean to upset you. Shall we change the subject, or just- just focus on the game, perhaps?”
Cullen clenched and unclenched his fist one more time, then all the air seemed to go out of him in a rush. “No, I’m sorry.” He told her in a much gentler tone. “I’m not angry with you Inquisitor, just myself. I never wanted you to think I was afraid of you.”

“I know.” She said, and she did know that. Hestia kept her eyes on the board, moved another piece. “Do you have anyone to talk to about it? The withdrawal, the pain?”

Cullen moved another piece, the lines of his mouth still tight. “Cassandra, when she’s not busy. Myself, when she is.”

Hestia looked at Cullen, at the circles under his eyes and his carefully combed hair, everything about him cleaned and tucked just so. With the withdrawal and the long hours they were forced to keep, the strain of running an army with an inexperienced leader giving the orders, it was a wonder that Cullen could keep himself upright. Hestia felt the urge to smooth his cheek beneath her palm, to let him know that she saw him trying and she was so so touched that he was trying. To give him a proper shave, let him get a proper rest.

She put those feelings back where they belonged, in a box in the corner of her heart with all the other things she wasn’t allowed to have.

You can talk to me, Hestia thought, but didn’t dare say aloud.

They played chess in comfortable silence, the only sound the clacking of the pieces and the wind rustling through the trees.

Hestia leaned back on the fence and drank from her water skin. The vicious onslaught she’d been subject to all morning had ebbed only when she had threatened to behead the next person who caused her physical pain. They’d all laughed at her, but at least she got her break. Not that it would do her much good if she couldn’t keep her concentration for more than a few minutes.

“If you focused on your spellwork and not Bulls pectorals, you might actually learn something today.” Dorian groused at her from his side of the fence. The fact that he was just there to watch and offer unhelpful suggestions like ‘stop letting him hit you’ was probably completely beside the point.

“I am excellent at multitasking.” Hestia said airily, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. “Besides, you’re the one who can’t stop staring. I have to focus on not falling down.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Dorian said with a twist of his mouth. He smoothed his moustache out and fixed one end, a nervous tick that he must not have known he was doing. “Anyway, listen, this is important.”

He held up the mana illuminator, shining red and silver in the weak spring sunlight, and let it fall into Hestia’s open palm. “Most mages back home have a decent amount of power before they have to reach for the fade.”

“Or reach for blood magic.” Solas added, coming up to lean against the fence next to Dorian.

Dorian made a face nod acknowledged his point. “Or blood magic. Tevinter mages work very hard on their magical stamina, to allow their spells to have the greatest effect.”
“I take it southern mages don’t do that.” Hestia raised her eyebrows at Solas. Dorian could drop into academic lecturing without even realizing it, and it was very difficult to deter him once he’d started on a presentation of whatever magical theory had consumed his brain this week.

“They do not!” Dorian pressed his fingers to Hestia’s jaw, turning her head to look at Her Trainer, who was muttering to herself on the other side of the ring near Iron Bull. “Go on, look.”

With another glance at Solas, Hestia raised the mana illuminator to her eye and gazed through it. The courtyard was painted all in red and shadow, only the faintest outlines to show where people had been but a moment before. Hestia felt goosebumps rising on her skin, but she took a deep breath and pressed the memories back where they belonged. A faint silvery light was clearly the object of her attention.

“Your trainer was taught in your southern circles.” Dorian said behind her, his hand settling on her shoulder. “In the south they teach you that the fade is the source of magic, and that mages are merely conduits of it. You see lyrium as a way of strengthening your connection to the fade, yes? See how her mana is but faint lines throughout her body.”

When Hestia focused, she could see that the shining silver light was encompassed by the outline of Her Trainer, trailing throughout her body in thin tendrils from her head to her stomach and branching off into every limb. She squinted and the silver blurred nearly to nothingness. There was a small knot of silver that pulsed just where Her Trainer’s heart ought to be, but the rest was barely there.

“Your Trainer lets the magic pass through her body while leaving it untouched.” Dorian said quietly in her ear. “It’s not how I do it, but it’s one school of thought. Now, turn around and look at me.”

Hestia pulled the mana illuminator away from her eye and spun on her heel to look into the face of Dorian Pavus, shit eating grin firmly in place. Dorian took a step back and spread his hands, ever the showman. Beside him, Solas rolled his eyes and let out a small scoff.

When Hestia raised the jewel to her eye again, it was to be confronted by the strong insistant glow of mana within both Dorian and Solas. Dorian’s mana flow was clustered in different areas of his body, large swirling knots of energy in his chest, his belly, his hands and feet, at the base of his throat.

Solas on the other hand, looked similar to Her Trainer. Lines of silver flowed through his body, stretching through every limb. There were simply more of them, branching off into smaller and smaller limbs to fill nearly every part of his body, the strong rivers of power feeding into each of his toes and the tips of his fingers. The original lines were thick cords of silver, large as a sapling and filling his chest with branches.

“Well Solas.” Hestia breathed, pulling the crimson jewel away and blinking as proper colors rushed back in to claim their rightful places. “Would you like to share how you’ve mastered that much mana control?”

Solas offered her a smile. “What you see is a lifetime spent using my power as much as I am able, in waking and sleeping.” He raised a hand and sheathed in a low blue flame watching it idly as the fire licked at his fingers. “Like yourself, I am not fond of using lyrium. I often couldn’t get my hands on it so I tried my best to learn to do without. And it seems that the use of lyrium may be detrimental to the subset of magic you are trying to learn.”

“How so?” Hestia asked, handing the mana illuminator back to Dorian. “The usage of lyrium
strengthens our connection to the fade.”

“True, but only for a short time.” Solas said. He pointed to the gateyard, where the sounds of soldiers and Templars sparring could be heard. “But using magic is like any other exercise. The more you flex the muscle, the easier it becomes. For templars lyrium is an addiction. For mages, it is a crutch.”

“Only for those with little natural ability.” Vivienne said, striding over to join the conversation. “For the rest of us, lyrium is simply a tool. You’re not suggesting the Inquisitor exhaust herself and not use lyrium to keep her strength up.”

“Of course not Madame De Fer. “ Solas said, adopting that sarcastically deferential tone he used whenever speaking to Vivienne. “I was merely voicing an opinion. The Inquisitor may listen to it or discard it at her leisure.”

Hestia rolled her eyes. The one upping never stopped when the three of them were in the same place. “In this case, My Trainer agrees with Solas.” She said, cutting off whatever smug thing Vivienne was about to say. “I’m not conjuring anything from this world, I’m grabbing handfuls of the fade itself.”

A thought occurred to her and she pulled off one of her gloves and held up the Anchor. It was quiet today, glowing faintly and hissing just on the edge of hearing. “Dorian, what does the anchor look like through that thing?”

Dorian’s eyebrows shot up and he palmed the mana illuminator and brought it to his eye. He scanned her up and down, frowning as he did so before he centered on the anchor. “It looks like… it’s quite hard to describe actually. Vivienne could you?”

Vivienne took the mana illuminator when he offered it to her and held it to her eye. There was not a flicker of expression on her dark face, and after a moment she took the mana illuminator away and said, “It looks like a rip in the fade. A place where the fade overflows into the waking world.”

Hestia looked back down at the anchor. She had had her suspicions about this thing from the start but to have them confirmed was another matter altogether. “Well, that certainly explains why I can seal rifts with it.”

“Does it?” Solas asked. “I thought it raised more questions.”

“Yes, but the anchor does that every day.” Hestia flexed her fingers, closed her fist around the mark and felt the buzzing tingling sensation it gave off whenever she tried to dampen it. If she held her fist closed for too long it would begin to burn, but it was better than the alternative. Better me than Corypheus. She told herself on the nights when the anchor caused her enough pain to bring tears to her eyes and aches into her bones. “But in this case, like calls to like. Simple as that.”

“Nothing is ever as simple as that.” Solas knocked his knuckles against the wooden fence. “But I believe your break is over, Inquisitor.”

Hestia looked over her shoulder to see Iron Bull waving her over to his side of the ring with one massive hand. She grabbed up her staff, a simple rod of oak with a green gem as its focus, and crossed over to him.

“What you talking about over there boss?” Bull asked casually, stretching out his neck.

“Magical theory.”
“Learn anything interesting?”

“Not really.” She said, just to see him snicker.

“Okay then, ready to go again?” Bull asked, reaching out to pick up the shield he’d been using this morning to help her practice. She knew his preferred style was a heavier two handed weapon but the sword and board style was something she’d be more likely to run into as they journeyed further into Orlais. Everyone wanted to be a chevalier, and chevaliers used swords and shields to prove they were proper knights. “Or are you gonna be restricted by all that leather?”

Hestia looked down at the clothes she’d chosen for training today. Her pants were loose breeches with enough room for movement, and her boots were solid and old enough to be comfortable, but she’d forgone her usual gauzy blouses in favor of a tight leather training harness that stopped just below her sternum. The harness helped keep her back straight and her breasts in place during exercise and, most importantly, it covered her arms down to her wrists.

She looked back up at Bull with a saucy smile. “Are you mad that your clothes look much, much better on me?”

Bull tossed his head back and laughed. “You keep telling yourself that Boss. Square up.”

Hestia skipped back and dropped into fighting stance, drawing at the fade to light her staff with a tiny snowstorm. They had figured that a little ice was less likely to permanently hurt Iron Bull than fire or spirit. “Remember,” Her Trainer called from the sidelines, “The fist is from the fade, not the earth.”

Hestia didn’t get a chance to respond because the Iron Bull rushed her, and Hestia had to dodge to the left to keep away from his initial slash of the sword. She shot ice at his feet, hoping to slow him down enough to get away but he jumped out of the way and bore down on her, forcing her to back up again.

He had her up against the fence, with only her staff braced against his shield to keep him from crushing her entirely. “Come on Boss,” Iron Bull said jovially, bastard wasn’t even out of breath. “Break my defenses, find an opening.”

Hestia gritted her teeth and summoned a mind blast, feeling the explosion of spirit energy blow outwards from her chest, dazing the Iron Bull for a few precious seconds she needed to slip out of his grasp and get behind him.

She drew in a breath and summoned a fade fist, drawing a chunk of fade stuff around the tip of her staff and shooting it at Iron Bulls unprotected shoulder before he was finished turning to face her. The impact knocked him off his feet and against the fence but he kept his shield up to knock away the flurry of ice she threw at him next.

When Bull pushed off the fence to advance on her, Hestia skipped back, trying to keep her eyes on him and keep her footing at the same time. If she kept backing up she couldn’t attack him and if she stood her ground he would rush her. Iron Bull shook out his sword arm and the blade of the longsword glinted in the sunlight.

_Breathe, breathe and think._ Hestia told herself, keeping her eyes on Iron Bull. This staff didn’t have a blade at the base, for obvious reasons, and that wasn’t the point of this exercise anyway. _Stop thinking like an apostate. I have to defeat him, not escape._

Iron Bull was apparently tired of waiting around for her next move. He gave a yell and leapt
forward, slashing at her with the longsword once, twice. Hestia dodged the first, leapt backwards to avoid the second, and there was her opening. She quickened her feet into a misty step, ending up behind him before he had a chance to round on her.

Hestia grabbed a handful of the veil and yanked, and the veilstrike slammed Iron Bull to the ground, knocking the wind out of him. She wasted no time at all, pressing one knee into the small of his back and pressing the glowing tip of her staff to the base of his neck, snarling, “Make a sound and the next strike goes through your throat.”

Or, that’s what was supposed to happen. Instead, Iron Bull rolled onto his back before she could pin him and grabbed her knee with one huge hand and pulled her off balance. Hestia yelped and toppled to the ground, half on top of Iron Bull which might have worked in her favor if Bull wasn’t twice her size in every sense. In a struggle of limbs Bull would always have the advantage and he ended up on top of her, staff braced against her chest between them.

“Got any other sneaky tricks?” Bull asked jovially, pushing himself up to his knees and holding up his hands to prove to anyone watching that the bout was finished.

Hestia let go of the staff and pushed herself up on her elbows, panting hard. “Well, I don’t have a knife on me, so no.”

Iron Bull shrugged his massive shoulders and heaved himself into standing, careful not to put weight on his bad ankle. He leaned down and helped Hestia up, dragging her to her feet almost with no effort. “Shit Boss, what were you going to do with a knife?”

Two answers popped into mind but neither answer was right. “I… I don’t know.” Hestia said, puzzled. She went with the second one. “Stab you, I suppose.”

Iron Bull shook his head. “You’re still feral huh? Like Skinner when she first joined the Chargers. She didn’t know how to stop at first blood either.”

Hestia wasn’t sure whether she ought to be offended by that or not. “I was an apostate, not an animal.”

“Yeah, but you’re not running for your life anymore.” Iron Bull said, his voice deceptively gentle. “You can leave some people alive, some of the time. Cassandra will probably want to question them.”

Hestia blinked at that. You’re not running for your life anymore. She repeated, wondering over the thudding of her heart if that would ever feel true. But if anybody knew how that felt, it was probably Bull. he’d spent a long night this winter telling her about Seheron, about the Tevinter mages and the fog warriors and the Tal-vashoth and the people caught in between.

“I know that.” Hestia said, perhaps more to herself than to him. “I know that.”

Bull simply waited.

Hestia finally asked him, soft enough for only he to hear, “How do I remember?”

“It takes time. But it gets easier when you trust your people.” Bull told her, as though it was the simplest thing in the world. “You let them have your back. You have their back. You learn to trust yourself that way.”

“Easier said than done.” She muttered, leaning down to pick up her staff.
“Always is. And hey, your style definitely has its perks.” Iron Bull said, steering the conversation back into safer waters. “Nothing more dangerous that the desperate.”

“It’s probably not what Josephine would like me to fight like.” Hestia told him, shrugging one shoulder trying for a cheerful tone of voice. She was fighting to calm her heart, still beating too hard for a simple practice. There is no real danger here, she told herself severely. “I’m the Inquisitor, not some scraping bandit.”

“Eh, what Josie doesn’t know can’t hurt her.” Bull picked up the longsword, swung it in a circle with the bend of his wrist. When he saw her wary expression he stopped and asked, “Look, haven’t you ever had fun when you’re fighting?”

She didn’t even have to think about it. “No.”

Iron Bull blew out a breath, letting his lips flap. “Welp, then we’ll have to find a way to make it fun. Hey Chargers!” he yelled, and the heads of what Chargers were watching popped up expectantly. “Anybody who wants to help me kick the Inquisitors ass, suit up! Time to teach her what fighting in a group feels like!”

Sera had gone with Scout Harding to scout the Exalted Plains, so named for the last of the fighting during the Exalted March on the Dales. Solas had promised to meet them there, while Iron Bull had gone ahead with the Amaranthine Wardens towards the Western Approach, because there had been Venatori sighted in those deserts. Bull may be a big presence but he was still a spy, and knew how Tevinter mages thought.

Hestia knew she should have send Dorian with him, but he’d whined about how Iron Bull smelled like a garbage pile on a summer's day, and Iron Bull had made a rude comment and a gesture, and that was that.

And while they traveled by horse and by cart down into the Dales in the misty bloom of early spring, Hestia tried to fight the itch beneath her skin.

It’s these damn Inquisition people, Hestia thought. They were all too nice to her. Everywhere they went, respect and civility, even from the people who didn’t know them. She’d started answering to Your Worship and hating herself for it. She missed Seph like someone had cut a hole in her, but laughing with Varric didn’t feel like a betrayal of her memory anymore. Hestia hated herself a little for that too.

She had so much damned respect she wanted to scream.

It came to a head when they discovered that damn haunted mansion in the Emerald Graves, a great oversized Orlesian chateau with all the trimmings and all the pain and hidden secrets that implied.

Blackwall put a hand over his nose as soon as they stepped through the doors. “Something has been rotting in here for quite a while.”

“Maybe one of those oversized bears?” Varric suggested warily, eyes flicking from shadow to shadow.

A torch lit next to Hestia, and she jumped backward. Another lit as soon as Blackwall stepped out
of the entryway, and a fireplace some feet away roared to life.

“Walk very carefully,” Hestia murmured, leading the way around the grand staircase and towards what must’ve been the servants quarters. “We don’t want to get on the bad side of whoever, whatever, is here with us.”

“Are you sure we should clean this place up for the refugees?” Blackwall asked, his disbelief evident in his tone. “It doesn’t seem like a safe place to bring them.”

“Well they can’t stay in that damp cave forever, no matter how pretty the waterfall is.” Hestia opened a door and jumped back as an undead skeleton came lumbering out of it, arms no more than sinew and bone and the fading dream of life. “Maker!”

Blackwall dragged her back behind her shield while Dorian set the thing on fire with a wave of his hand and Varric pinned it to the wall with six arrows in its chest. The undead skeleton continued to struggle for a moment, then the faint spirit light flickered out of its eyes, and it slumped, once again a corpse.

“How in the world did that thing get here?” Dorian asked, eyes wide as saucers. “I mean, the place is creepy enough without corpses bursting out of doorways.”

Hestia stepped out of the circle of Blackwall’s arms, eyebrows furrowed. She could feel the ambient magic here, could feel the thinning of the veil as it tingled against her skin. The question was how much of this magic was accidental and how much was deliberate? Mages were used as entertainment for the nobility of Orlais, and often a noble family would keep their mage children home and train them in secret.

I should know. Hestia thought bitterly, pushing open the door at the end of the hall to find they had gone in a circle and were on the other side of the house, looking at the back stairs that the servants must’ve used.

They ducked through another door to find a great ballroom, bathed in light from the windows set in each wall. Hestia would never get used to the white and gold and cornflower blue that all Orlesian nobles seemed to adore in their houses, but that wasn’t what her mind was really focusing on.

The room was filled with the dead. All over the room, covered in what was probably their own blood, lay dead men and women. This wasn’t a recent incident, not if the fading of their once beautiful clothes and the decay on the bodies was any indication. It had been so long that the bodies no longer smelled of anything but dust.

“What happened here?” Blackwall was the first to speak, his words a horrified whisper.

Hestia took tentative steps to the raised floor meant for dancing, surveying the bodies with a strange sense of detachment. After all, she had seen so many dead bodies since the circles fell that it had all started to become ordinary. The mage and templar war, the Orlesian civil war, the Blight in Ferelden before that… death had become a constant companion to everyone in Thedas.

“That’s not all,” Dorian said after a moment, and raised his staff to indicate the ceiling. “Take a look.”

Hestia looked up and had to force herself not to instinctively crouch down to avoid being crushed by the dragon suspended above her. It was eerie how life like the thing was, although you could tell after a moment it was too small to be a proper high dragon.

“It’s a replica.” Dorian said, studying the dragon too. “Probably made to scale but it’s difficult to be
sure from here. Still, its exquisite.”

“I hate Orleasians.” Varric grumbled, stepping gingerly over a corpse to stand at Blackwalls side. “They never know how far is too far.”

Hestia was prevented from commenting when the dead bodies all around her suddenly flared with life, eyes glowing and struggling to their feet. Some had swords but most just reached out with clawing fingers for the living that had disturbed their rest.

She and her companions set to work putting the restless spirits back to their eternal sleep. Hestia dodged in between two gentlemen with swords and let them slash at each other, then froze them both in ice like that, entangled and angry and moaning. Varric pulled his trick of firing everything in Bianca, the force of that flipping him backwards over the railing and off the dancing floor. Blackwall charged one noblewoman skeleton, still dragging around the scraps of what must’ve been a heavy velvet gown, and knocked her through one of the floor to ceiling windows and over the steep cliff just beyond. And Dorian simply snapped his fingers and set fire to every skeleton that got anywhere near him.

Soon, the undead were once again dead, and Hestia stood in the center of the room, panting and leaning against her staff. “I don’t think I like this new armor Dagna made for me.” She said eventually, wiping the sweat from her brow. “It’s much too light, look, that last one ripped right through the back.” She turned so Varric could see the claw marks scratched through the leather of her mages coat.

“Are you looking to try some full plate? I know a few smiths in Orlais who do good work.” Blackwall said, sheathing his sword with an audible ring of the metal.

“How long did you fight in Orlais to know more than one smith?” Varric asked, eyebrows raised skeptically.

Blackwall blushed and fumbled pulling off his gloves, letting both flutter to the ground. “Er, long enough.” He muttered, bending to retrieve them.

Dorian was looking up at the stuffed dragon hanging from the ceiling. “I wonder if we can get up there?” He said. “I would love to see a high dragon up close without it trying to rip out my innards.”

“We went past the back stairs,” Hestia pointed out, already starting towards the door again, shouldering her staff and moving past Blackwall. “And it’s definitely not a real high dragon.”

“Well obviously not but can you imagine?” Dorian enthused. “I once knew a magister on Lavinia who collected dragon material and memorabilia like his life depended on it, he would pay through the nose for this.”

“Well you can get in touch with him if you like, but I don’t see how you could get it out of the house.” Hestia said over her shoulder.

They climbed the backstairs and came out in the top floor, into the snarling face of the false dragon and the snarling faces of two other undead.

“Where do these things keep coming from?” Blackwall grunted, knocking one skeleton back and slashing the arm off another.

Once the skeletons were dispatched, Dorian started moving around the high dragon, muttering to himself. He even pulled out a roll of paper and a pencil and began writing notes. He almost didn’t
notice when the other undead wandering around the upper decks caught sight of them and starting lumbering forward. Blackwall knocked them down without a flicker of attention from the tevinter mage.

One wary eye on every door, Hestia wandered down to the other end of the upper deck towards another fireplace that came alive when she was in close proximity. There was a large wingback chair in front of the fire, more a throne that a comfortable armchair, with a small table beside it. All of it was covered in dust, and she picked up a tattered book that lay face down on the chair.

“What have you got there Nomad?” Varric said, ambling up beside her.

“The private journalings of the master of this haunted house, I imagine.” Hestia said, flipping through the pages and pages of flowing script.

The last page sent a chill down her spine.

9:27 Dragon:

*That Circle templar is demanding another payment. Greedy bastard. Taking advantage of us all these years, because we wanted to preserve our good family name. He promised to silence the mage once returned to his Circle... but that doesn't protect us from the templar.*

*I wonder though. Was it enough? No. The mage was strong. Even I could sense it. It was terrifying. There is no way the child could break through. She doesn't even have training. So long as she stays inside, everything will be all right.*

*No one will ever know.*

Hestia felt the book slip from her limp fingers. Flashes of memories fluttered through her mind, too quickly for her to put away again. A steep staircase, so thin that she had to follow single file behind her mother's long warm skirts, seeing Seph running towards her, tripping over toddler feet with sores up and down her arms and legs, Elayna in the bed above hers whispering things about Armand that not even their parents knew yet, the light shining from Elayna's hands as she healed her twin brothers punctured lung…

“Nomad.” The brush of rough skin on her wrist made her jerk back, and Hestia took a few stumbling steps away from Varric to see him looking up at her with a concerned gaze. “Hey there, what's wrong? Your hands are shaking.”

Hestia drew a shaky breath and said, “I'm fine.”

Varric's brow creased. “Nomad…”

“I'm fine.” She repeated, avoiding his eyes. “I just… I think I know what happened here.”

She would say no more than that until she was absolutely sure. The door closest to the fireplace was locked, and Varric couldn’t properly try to pick the lock without a decent amount of light, so they chose a door at the opposite side of the room. Instead of the back stairs, this door led them out onto a landing, and when they turned the corner they found hallway leading to what must've been the bedrooms of whomever lived here.

The skeletons in this hallway wore the remains of roughspun skirts and trousers, so they must've been the servants. Blackwall and Dorian set to work putting them down, but Hestia hung back, her hands balled at her sides, eyes searching for signs of her terrible supposition. It was impossible to tell on the undead, but as soon as they were cleared and they entered the first bedroom, she was
It had a little girls room, for Hestia glimpsed a large dollhouse modeled after Empress Celene’s Winter Palace in Halamshiral near the end of the room before another undead brought its sword down across her chest.

She stumbled back from the door into Blackwall. The wound wasn’t deep but the shock of it woke up something long buried in her and the next few moments were a blur of violence and screams echoing in her mind.

The spell she used wasn’t something any circle mage knew, but nobody there with her could possibly know that. Dorian caught on within moments and began weaving the same spell, reaching out to tug control of the undead away from the spirits inhabiting these bodies. It was more difficult than she had expected. It didn’t feel like she was destroying individual spirits, more like she was engaging in a battle of wills with something much stronger. The effort to put down the final undead left her gasping for breath.

Varric stepped in just as her stamina was running out and put an arrow through the eye of every undead body in the room. “There, that should be the last of them. You holding up okay Nomad?”

Hestia put her hands on her knees, breathing deeply. “I’m fine,” She gasped out, holding out a thumbs up to prove it. “I just need to catch my breath.”

“Where did you pick up that spell to create undead?” Dorian asked, shouldering his staff and offering her a small blue bottle of lyrium that she waved away. “I didn’t think they taught necromancy in your southern circles.”

“They definitely don’t.” Hestia thought but she smiled up at Dorian and said, “You pick up a few things during a rebellion.”

“Not that all your magic theory isn’t interesting.” Blackwall said dryly, picking up the small leatherbound journal lying open on the bed. “But look at this, it looks like Lord D’Onterre’s daughter took after her father.”

Varric rolled his eyes at the blatantly obvious attempt to change the subject, but took the book and flicked through the pages. His face became more drawn as he got closer to the end, and he handed the book over to her with a murmured, “Shit.”

Hestia took a deep breath before she started reading what she knew would be an eerily familiar account.

It’s not fair. I want to go outside. I can hear the guests downstairs. Another party. There’s always another party. Mother and Father bought me a present to make me feel better. To make me better. They're just trying to shut me up.

Cook’s scared of me. She still calls me my sweets, but she’s scared. Still, she hasn’t told Father or Mother. She’s afraid of me more than she likes them. I don’t think Cook likes herself much either, these days.

I have a new friend now.

She understands me.

She’ll help make things fair again.
And, on the opposite page.

_I showed them. We had such fun, we did! Dancing and partying until everyone fell down; it was glorious! The best party ever! Father and Mother went to their room when we were done. Mother was crying, she was so happy. I held out the present. It made me better, just like they said._

_I have not left the house. I'm still scared of what's on the other side of the door. But... maybe I'll go out tomorrow._

And finally, the last entry before the diary ended.

_I had to make myself breakfast this morning. It wasn't very good. When I saw Mother and Father, I couldn't stop crying. I don't know what to do._

_My friend says there's a way to be less lonely. She says not to be afraid. There are other games we can try and I will feel better._

Hestia resisted the urge to hurl the book into the fireplace. “Bloody nobles with their bloody pride and treating their children like bloody toys.” She muttered, shouldering her staff and passing the book to Dorian. “I think that box we saw in the yard is the present she’s talking about.”

“Meant to do what, I wonder?” Dorian glared down at the pages with a sneer. “There’s mention of her not leaving the house, and there’s plenty of enchantments that can suppress a mage’s power.”

“Look at what her father wrote,” Hestia said, passing Lord D’Onterre’s personal journal to Blackwall. “Perhaps the box helps suppress her powers, but only works in the house?”

“Why don’t we try to get up to that balcony and see?” Dorian suggested, leading the way out of the child sized bedroom.

They found nothing out of the ordinary in the master suite, but the turn of a corner brought them to a vast library with volumes tossed all over the floor. A skeleton lumbered towards them but Blackwall stepped in the way of the sword strike and knocked the undead nobleman back far enough for Hestia to flatten it with a fade strike. Without its legs connected to its body, the undead couldn’t do much more than flail around on the floor, so Varric put an arrow through its eye and the light in the skeletons eyes immediately faded to nothingness.

“A fairly broad collection of books, doesn’t seem to be any more organized than Skyhold’s library,” Dorian mused, looking almost board as he flipped the pages of a book left open on a pedestal. “Antivan Kiss, volume 3? Sweet Maker, how many of those were written.”

“At least six.” Hestia told him, trying for cheerful nonchalance and failing. “I had a friend at the circle that read them religiously. Drove the enchanters mad that he wouldn’t share.”

“Hey look, Hard in Hightown.” Varric said, pointing out a book left open on a table. “At least we know the previous owners had taste.”

“What degree of taste are we extending to somebody who reads your books?” Dorian asked, turning a sardonic smile on Varric.

Blackwall drew nearer to Hestia, who had gone very still indeed. “Milady?” He asked, eyes wary. Hestia was staring at the book that lay open on a table, at the pages that had been left facing up to be faded by the spring sunlight.
How to Prevent Magic Formation in the Earliest Stages

Should mage blood run through your line, no matter how distant the relation, avoid conceiving in winter. While with child, sleep with dried embrium beneath your pillow to ensure good health.

Infants and most small children will show no signs of magic. However, you can purge the body of unwanted elements before they take hold. Place leeches on each of the child’s limbs. When done, burn the leeches. Be sure not to inhale the smoke. Afterwards, wrap the child’s limbs in cloth blessed by a Chantry sister.

A child showing signs of magic may be submerged in water until the breath is nearly lost. If magic is still weak within them, it will die before the child. Should the trouble persist beyond reason, certain talismans may suppress the child’s skill.

Hestia felt a scream building in her throat, could feel the heat building behind her eyes, could smell the dank attic they had left her in for years and years, smell the bird droppings and sulfur and mess from the chamber pot that probably hadn’t been changed in months before Hestia had begun her visits. She could hear the frantic praying that Auntie Clara did before every meal, at sunrise and sunset, her Seraphina’s sobbing and screams at her end of the apprentices sleeping rooms. She remembered night after night going to Seph’s bedside, holding her close, singing her nonsense songs and assuring her that Hestia would never let Seph be eaten by the demons.

With a scream of rage, Hestia threw a handful of fire at the hateful book and watched as it caught fire, curling the pages and turning the ink to ash. She didn’t even care that the fire was too strong, too hot, that it was spreading to the other papers on the table, that the table it sat on was beginning to smoke. All she could really feel were the hot tears streaming down her face, the hands holding her up, hear the rough burr of Blackwall’s voice in her ear.

“It’s all right Milady,” He told her softly, dragging her away from the fire while Dorian yelled and tried to quench the flames. “Whatever was done to you, it’s over now. You’re safe now. It’s not real, it’s not real. Please Hestia, you’re safe now.”

Hestia felt the sobs rip out of her, felt her knees buckle, could hear the pounding of her heart and the screaming in her head, and knew deep down, it would never be over. Not when it kept happening, here in Orlais and back at Ostwick. Not when the shame of having a child being a mage still led to parents mutilating and hiding their children, treating them like monsters in disguise.

“Why couldn’t they just love her?” Hestia choked out, eventually, when the tears had petered out and the flames had been suppressed. “Why couldn’t they just love us?”

“I don’t know.” Blackwall murmured, still beside her even though she’d slid to the floor. He was rubbing her back in soothing circles, and she wondered where he’d learn to calm unravelings like this. “I just don’t know.”

They hate us little one, they lock us up in cages and tell us our power is a curse. And it’s because they’re afraid.

Words whispered to her so long ago, echoed in her nightmares of the worst day of her life.

Dorian knelt in front of her, Varric’s handkerchief in his hand, and he gently wiped her tears away. “I think I know what might make you feel better.” He told her, his voice compassionate. “Setting this little girl free.”
Hestia looked up at him with eyes ringed in red and lip trembling. “She became an abomination, didn’t she?” She whispered.

Dorian nodded. “Yes, she did. But the enchantment on her ‘present’ is still active, and she is still trapped here. If we undo the enchantment, she’ll be free of this place.”

“If she’s an abomination,” Blackwall said, voice seeped in regret, “Then we have to put her down. There’s no way back from that.”

Varric shook his head sadly. “Not without 12 experienced mages and a cart load of lyrium.”

Hestia looked at Varric and managed a weak smile. “King Alistair tell you that story too?”

Varric winked at her.

“We can save her Hestia.” Dorian told her, dark eyes fixed on hers. “Even if we have to kill her, what kind of life is this?”

Trapped behind dark walls, working spells to no end, moving things in the night, terrifying all who come near you, trying anything you can to be seen or heard, so mad you can’t remember your own name or how you got there?

_I don’t want to do this Auntie!_

_You have to girl, Papa needs us to do this, don’t you want our family to be safe?_

_A demon can’t protect Grandfather, not when he’s already dead._

_A stinging slap and a snarled, shut your mouth girl! And hand me that knife._

Hestia looked up at Dorian and wiped her nose with her sleeve. “It’s no life at all.”

Chapter End Notes

_I never said Hestia was without dysfunction._

_As always, a big thank you to Illyria_Lives, without whom most of the terrible things that happen to the Trevelyan Family would not be possible. Thank you for sharing this big fucked up family with me_

_I'm susuwatarisprinkles on tumblr and sootsprites94 on twitter, if you enjoyed this please let me know!_
The screams were echoing around him, the smell of death and blood and was thick in his nose, the stone floor was cold and rough under his feet. Cullen crouched in supplication, hands clasped together, eyes squinted shut, prayers on his tongue. It wasn’t enough, it would never be enough, nothing would be enough to bring them back, to bring them justice.

The demons had torn Amell’s name from his lips but he would not reveal what he knew about the Surana twins. He hoped that Mae had found her brother, he hoped they were safe but he knew in his heart they were both dead. They were both dead and so was Amell and so were his brothers in arms and there was nothing left here, nothing at all.

“If you know this, why do you resist?” Crooned the demon of desire, pacing slowly around him, her hips rolling slowly from side to side, her frame swaying in a way that would be sensuous if not for the sores that puckered her body, red and swollen and weeping something terrible. “I am still right here boy, why do you not rest in my arms as you have longed for night after night?”

Cullen tried not to look but it was impossible, this cage she had locked him in wouldn’t let him eat, wouldn’t let him rest, wouldn’t let him stand up straight. Again and again she taunted him, changing her face and form as easily as shedding a set of clothing. Amell’s face was the one she liked best, because she had torn the infatuation from his head. Amell with her head of wild red hair, dark eyes deep as Lake Calenhad, her sweet expressive face now twisted into something sinister.

Cullen looked back at his hands and began his prayers again with more conviction. Amell could not be used to hurt him like this, Amell could never be his and never would, now that she was this thing before him, a foul and distorted ruin of the girl he’d fantasized about. A girl he could never really love, not now, not ever. She tried to kill me, he told himself. She was a blood mage and now she’s this thing, she’s gone and dead and never who you wanted. You didn’t want her then and you don’t want her now.

It was a lie, he knew it was, but he couldn’t let that out of his head. He’d lost too much to these monsters already.

The shadows were twisting and flickering again, he could smell the dried herbs and rot from the storeroom one floor below, he wasn’t sure if the screaming and weeping was real or his imagination.

“Though darkness falls around me,” Cullen whispered frantically, focusing his attention on the stones beneath him, the armor around him, the Maker… wherever he was. “Though darkness falls around me… I am shielded by flame.”

“I can make it stop.” A voice murmured and Cullen jerked his head upright.

Hestia stood there before him, swathed in white and glowing like the first touch of dawn on the horizon, a thousand million freckles speckling stars on her skin. She took one step toward him, two. Her feet were bare, her eyes were lit by the moon, her hair hung in waves around her face. Cullen wanted to cry, he wanted to bury his face in her neck and weep, wanted to pull her close to him and feel the warmth of her body, the sure and steady beating of her heart and the sweet smell of her hair in the sunlight. She settled on the stone floor, heedless of the muck dirtying her white
gown. He could see the brush of freckles across her collarbones, down her arms, across the bridge
of her nose, on her lips…

“You’re fighting so hard.” Hestia murmured, her fingers reaching out and brushing the hair back
from his face. “You must be so tired.”

Cullen forgot his balance, forgot his prayers, forgot everything that wasn’t her. The cage was gone,
the walls were gone, he was on his knees reaching for her, pressing his face into her palm, feeling
her arms twining around him. She pulled him in, holding his face as the tears spilled from his eyes
and the sobs wracked is body.

“I couldn’t stop it.” The words were wrenched from a place deep inside of him. “No matter how
hard I try, I can’t save them, I can’t protect them. I can’t.”

“I can make the pain stop, Cullen.” Hestia told him, those eyes looking at him with so much
sympathy. He rested his forehead against hers, breathing in the smell of her hair, smoke and
lemons and blood. “You must be tired. Don’t you want to lay down and rest?”

Her voice was sweet and hypnotic and everything Cullen wanted. He could feel her breath play
across his cheek, the brush of her nose and silky hair and warm smooth skin. He wanted to lose
himself in her, let her wash away his every pain and worry and ache. He wanted… he wanted.

Hestia pulled back from him and smoothed his hair out of his face, eyes dark in the flickering
firelight. Cullen could feel the press of her body against his, the softness of it, the thrumming of
her heart beating in time with his own. She rested her hands on his chest and breathed, “Tell me
what you want.”

Cullen’s words were a sigh, a groan. “You.”

Hestia smiled, and the smile grew wider and wider, revealing rows and rows of sharp glittering
teeth. With a jolt Cullen realized that her eyes were dark and purple and slit like a cats. Her hands
were tight on his neck, sharp pin pricks of pain and pressure suddenly choking the breath from his
lungs.

“Gotcha.” She hissed, and with one long talon she opened his throat.

Cullen woke, jolting into consciousness with a shout. His bed clothes were tangled around him in a
snarl of cloth and he struggled frantically to free himself from the confines of the bed.

When he’d pushed himself to standing, Cullen groaned and rubbed at his face, trying to shake away
the dream. It was just another nightmare, an intermingling of his memories and his current worries
creating something Cullen had never wanted to see. Something Cullen never wanted to see again.

Just a dream, Cullen told himself over and over as he set about getting ready for the day. Face
washed and teeth cleaned, carefully comb the wax through his hair to tame his normally curly
mess. Just a dream. Clothes and armor on next, the new set of armor Hestia had designed for him
had finally come and Cullen was careful not to scuff the leather or wrinkle the new fabric. The
greaves and vambraces were buffed until he could see his reflection in the smooth and continuous
pieces of steel, and the new breastplate was stamped with the Inquisition symbol, matching the
silver flaming sword on his back. Just a dream.
Cullen was up only a little earlier than usual, so he was the first to receive his package of letters and papers from afield that had collected overnight. More would come in throughout the day and by this evening Cullen would find a tower of paperwork threatening to engulf his desk, just like last night and the night before. Cullen knew that his wasn’t even the hardest job, since Hestia had to sign off on anything her advisors wanted to get done and Leliana was the one the Inquisitor delegated tasks to the most.

I can make the pain stop.

Cullen wanted to slap himself. He needed a cup of very bitter coffee, maybe a punch to the jaw from Cassandra to snap out of this. The last thing he wanted was to tangle Hestia into the mess that was his past. Whatever he felt for her, it could not be mixed with anything he remembered, lest it be spoilt forever.

He gave the sergeants and captains their orders, oversaw the morning inspection of the troops in the valley, noting that the number of troops stumbling out of their tents half dressed was significantly lower now that Corporal Hansen lived in the castle instead of the valley. Cullen left quietly while the army was getting their breakfast, trusting the commanding officers to do right by the Inquisition and by their men. He would be back for training in the afternoon, but for now it was time to argue with Josephine and Leliana for a few hours.

He was the first to the war room, though Josephine had told him as he passed her office that she would be just behind him. Papers addressed to him from the Inquisitor were stacked neatly next to the candlestick on the war table. Cullen took a long draught of his bitter coffee, swallowing the last of it with a sputter and a cough. Then he lifted up the first letter addressed to him in Hestia’s handwriting, and began to read.

Cullen,

I have never seen such desolation in my life. I thought Ferelden and the Marches were war torn after the Mage and Templar War, but it is nothing when compared to this bloody ridiculous civil war. The land where the last Exalted March was fought is on fire, towns and houses are destroyed, and everywhere demons walk and the dead rise from ground watered with blood.

We have wandered through three homes looted and occupied by these Freemen of the Dales, although with our help they have been rooted out of the forests and are on the run out of the plains. I almost feel sad for doing it, for I genuinely agree with the complaints of these soldiers and refugees. What does a farmer care whether his liege lord supports Celene or Gaspard? But it is they who suffer the most. But Corypheus got to them first, and we’ve caught them moving red lyrium for your old friend Samson. Perhaps the dead rising is his work as well, though it was not so difficult an enchantment when Solas and I stopped to examine it.

Still, in another time the Freemen could have really changed Orlais. Or perhaps they would’ve torn it to the ground. A satisfying end either way.

Cullen took a deep breath and put the letter down, unable to read any more. He felt the room spinning, he could smell the candle smoke and the crisp mountain air and underneath the pervasive gut twisting smell of rot. He braced his hands on the war table, eyes roving over the carefully carved lines of the map. He took another deep breath, then another, trying to calm his racing heart.

Pull it together. He thought, swallowing roughly as Josephine and Leliana walked into the room, discussing something quietly. Just get through this meeting and then talk to Cassandra about it afterwards.
The dreams weren’t new but this had shaken him much more than the usual nightmare usually would. This wasn’t an awful memory, or even a fantasy of something he could never have. The images wouldn’t leave him no matter how he tried to clear them from his mind and Cullen knew very well what happened when he dwelled on these dreams too long.

*It’s not her.* Cullen told himself sternly. *Hestia has nothing to do with what happened in Kinloch Hold, and no good will come from tangling her into that mess.*

Cullen couldn’t possibly describe how much he didn’t want Hestia to know about that particular memory, how much he didn’t want the thought of her anywhere near it.

*Tell me what you want Cullen.*

He was distracted during the entirety of the war meeting. He made the points that he thought should be made but didn’t fight back when Leliana and Josephine proposed their own arguments. The Inquisitor needed repairs on a bridge and a tunnel cleared in the Dales and Cullen suggested which of their men would be right for the job. Solas had disappeared following a bad fight with a demon and some rebel mages, leaving all enemies dead. None of them had any idea when he’d be back, or whether he was done with the Inquisition entirely.

When they broke for lunch, Cullen took a moment to collect his frayed thoughts before heading out the door to find Cassandra. She usually liked to drill through lunch and then eat alone when the number of people in the great hall had diminished, but if Cullen brought her a plate she could be persuaded to eat with him in the armory.

Cullen found her by the standing dummies, but she wasn’t alone. She was apparently deeply engaged in an argument with Ben Tamrassen.

“That is completely untrue.” Ben was telling her, dragging a hand through his gingery hair. “And not only that, it’s rude. You’re rude for saying it.”

“Do not lecture me on rudeness Tamrassen.” Cassandra ground out, hands on hips, face flushed pink. “And do not seek to tell me about a subject you do not understand, especially to someone who has trained as a warrior for almost twenty years.”

“So have I!” Ben said, and when she scoffed he said, “Very well not twenty years but I’ve been fighting my own battles a long time and I’m telling you-”

“It is safer to wear armor!” Cassandra cut him, looking like she was close to physically harm him or stamp her foot. “There is no room for discussion.”

“Armor or cloth can get caught in a wound, I’ve seen it happen!” Ben insisted, taking a step closer to Cassandra in his earnestness. “Have you seen someone die from an infected stab wound? Because I have and believe you me, it is not pretty.”

“Of course I have,” Cassandra said, scowling. “But forgoing armor that is proven to protect a soldier for fear of infection is simply madness.”

“Is it Cassandra?” Ben asked, that quick devil may care smile back in place. “Or is it genius?”

Now Cullen was completely confused and his curiosity was almost overwhelming. “What in Andraste’s name are you two talking about?” He asked, striding forward and handing Cassandra a cup of water and a plate loaded with food.

“Cullen, save me from this idiocy, If I hear another second of this drivel I will go mad.” Cassandra
told him dryly, taking one of the plates of food from him.

“Ah, an impartial bystander.” Ben clapped his hands together in what looked like earnest delight, and turned that shit eating grin to Cullen. “Hello Commander.”

“That is not what he is.” Cassandra scolded, but Cullen was sure he could see her smiling. Or at least grinning. “Don’t indulge this Cullen.”

“Hello Tamrassen.” Cullen said gamely. “What are you arguing about?”

“Armor and clothes can infect a wound can’t they?” Ben said to him, and Cullen was about to nod before he heard the next words, “So it’s better to not wear armor at all.”

Cullen opened his mouth, closed it again, opened it once more, and looked at Cassandra who threw her hands up and sat down on the bench to eat her food. Cullen looked back at Ben and said, with some confusion, “No.”

“Oh come on, it’s simple.” Ben said, that constant movement causing him to rock back on his heels and jump to foot to foot as he talked. “Armor slows you down, makes it harder to fight and use your weapons.”

“Not if you’re trained with heavy armor,” Cullen pointed out, and Cassandra pointed her spoon at him in agreement.

Ben waved that off. “Yeah yeah yeah whatever. Listen, if you fight without armor, you move much faster, have a better range of vision and there’s a much lower chance of any injuries becoming infected.”

“What?” Cullen turned to look at Cassandra, who shook her head. “Please tell me he’s not serious.”

Cassandra shrugged. He turned back to tell Tamrassen that his idea was absurd, but Ben was already shucking off his jacket and pulling off his shirt, apparently completely willing to give them a live demonstration. “Here, let me show you what I mean.”

“I would rather you didn’t.” Cullen said, raising a hand to shield his eyes. He turned to commiserate with Cassandra but he found the seeker completely absorbed in her food, face and ears turning a bright shade of red.

“Come on Commander,” Ben said brightly, pulling a wickedly sharp knife from its sheath and flipping it around in his hand. “Try and hit me.”

Cullen looked the marcher up and down, realizing not for the first time how much of a fighter he must really be. Without his shirt, Cullen could see well built abdominal muscles and shoulders, one arm traced in the same dark blue ink that streaked his face. A thick cord of scar tissue curled over his shoulder, another scraped across his ribs, and still more wrapped around his wrists from what must’ve been constant capture by the law.

He’d been looking at the man too long, for Ben’s smile slipped sideways into a saucy grin. “Like what you see Cullen?”

Cullen felt his ears get hot but he stood his ground. “I’m not sparring with you.”

“Why not? Afraid you’ll lose?” Ben taunted, then winked. “Afraid you’ll want to?”
“Afraid I’ll hit you somewhere important.” Cullen said, turning his back on the Marcher before he gave himself away.

“That’s a good point.” Cassandra said, rising as well. “What happens when you get hit?”

“I have a solution for that Seeker.” Ben directed a sunny smile at Cassandra. “I don’t get hit.”

Cassandra made a disgusted noise and headed into the armory, waving to him over her shoulder. “Goodbye Tamrassen.”

Ben shrugged, putting his knife away. “All right then, guess I’ll just go talk to Varric by myself.”

Cassandra turned on her heel, her face like a thundercloud. “You wouldn’t dare!”

Ben burst out laughing, pulling his ginger hair out of his face. “Seeker, he’s not even here. He’s still in the desert with Hestia and those Wardens.”

“Oh.” Cassandra shut her mouth, scowling at him. “Pretend you don’t know that about me.” She told Tamrassen firmly before disappearing into the armory.

Cullen made to follow her but Ben put a hand on his arm. “Hey Cullen, about what I said before,”

Cullen felt his heart drop into his stomach, this was the last thing he wanted to discuss with Ben Tamrassen of all people. Half heartedly he tried to excuse himself, “Cassandra will be waiting-”

“I just want to say there’s no shame in it.” Ben said, all mocking gone from his face. Softly, earnestly he said, “We all wonder what it’s like on the other side of the bed from time to time. There’s nothing wrong with it.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Cullen said stiffly.

Ben snorted. “Come on, you can hide from a chantry sister but you can’t hide from me. I’ve seen you look at Dorian a few times, and Barris. Barris looks back.”

That was news to Cullen, and he felt his face heating. “What?” he sputtered.

“Oh,” Tamrassen muttered, looking slightly guilty. “You didn’t know about that, forget I said anything.”

“I really have to go.” Cullen wanted to extricate himself from this conversation as quickly as possible and never ever think about it again.

“Hey, I just-” Ben scrambled to block his path. “I just meant to say there’s no shame in it. Pursue it or don’t, but what you feel or don’t feel isn’t wrong.”

Cullen looked at Ben Tamrassen, sure that this was the first time he’d seen the Marcher be completely sincere about anything. But Cullen’s throat was closing around anything he could possibly say, so he just stepped around the man and headed into the armory. The soot and firelight made him squint and could easily explain any wetness to his eyes.

He found Cassandra on the second floor of the armory, sitting at the table and almost finished with her food. Cullen barely touched his.

“What did he want to talk to you about?” Cassandra asked after a while.

“Nothing.” Cullen answered, knowing he’d answered too quickly. “What was that about Varric?”
“Nothing.” Cassandra answered just as quickly. Cullen shot her a glance, and she scowled.

After a moment, Cassandra reached over and took the bread that Cullen hadn’t been eating, tore it in half and said begrudgingly, “He caught me reading a book that Varric wrote. Swords and Shields.”

Cullen raised his eyebrows at her. He hadn’t known she liked to read, or at least not Varric’s style of books. “Is it a good book?”

Cassandra shot him a look, but when she realized he was serious she sighed, “No.” At his look, she grimaced and continued, “They’re terrible. Smutty over dramatic romance literature. I just get… caught up sometimes. It’s ridiculous, and Varric can’t know about it.” This last thought she directed at Cullen with a glare.

“Of course.” He agreed immediately, knowing better than to argue with her. Cullen looked at her plate and saw she’d picked out the carrots of the pile of vegetable mush. He picked one up and popped it in his mouth, then said, “Ben thought he saw me… looking at Dorian.”

“Looking?” Cassandra asked, and when Cullen wouldn’t meet her eyes, she said, “Oh. Looking.” After a moment she asked softly, “Were you?”

“No.” Cullen said firmly, perhaps more to himself than to her. He glanced at her than back at his plate, then he took another one of her carrots and said, “Maybe. A little. But I’m not- I’m not going to-” His throat closed around the words.

Cassandra nodded. She was quiet for a moment and then dipped her spoon into his uneaten sweet corn. She ate the spoonful and then told him, “I look at Josephine sometimes.”

Cullen looked up at her. “You do?”

Cassandra nodded and he swallowed roughly. “In the Seekers we were forbidden from relationships, so I have never-” She trailed off and took a sip of her water. “But I look. Sometimes.”

Cullen nodded. “In the Templars we were trained to put our duty above our own desires. So I’ve never- I mean I have but-” Cullen knew he was probably bright red but he struggled on nonetheless. “I’ve never had a relationship with a man. Or anyone, really.” He added ruefully. Belatedly he took another carrot from her plate.

Cassandra’s eyebrows shot up. “Really? Never? Not even before you took your vows to the Maker? I thought most templar initiates did.”

If possible Cullen felt himself blush harder. “No, Maker this is-” He dragged a hand through his hair, he was probably starting to look a mess. He could not look her in the eye when he said, “I’ve had sex before Cassandra. I’ve just never been in an adult relationship.”

Cassandra went red as well and she out her spoon back down. “Oh. I see.”

Cullen shook his head. “Maker’s breath can we speak of something else? Anything else? Please?”

“Yes, I agree.” Cassandra said shortly, picking up his bread. After a moment of tense silence, she said, “It’s too early in the day to be drinking, but-”

Cullen almost sagged in relief. “Yes I need one too.”

Cassandra went to get them something strong enough to get them through the conversation they
apparently were having, while Cullen contemplated the ham on his plate. His appetite still hadn’t come back, not since his nausea the other day. He was starting to think the healers tent might require a visit this evening. It wasn’t about men or women, he told himself. That was fine for others, it was even fine for him. It was just…

“I never found the time.” Cullen told Cassandra when she returned with something that made his eyes water with the first swallow. “In Kirkwall, or Ferelden. We were on duty all day every day, there was no time for relationships or anything more than a stolen moment here and there. And we have even less time now.”

Cassandra nodded. “I know.” She agreed. “When I joined the Seekers, I thought I would need nothing more than my training and my faith. What person could compare to my duty to the Maker?”

She didn’t sound entirely convinced, even so. Cullen searched her features for a moment before he identified the emotion she was trying so desperately to hide. Longing, for what he could not say, lent a sadness to her eyes.

“But?” Cullen said quietly.

Cassandra blinked and took a swallow from her drink, coughing at the strength of Hansen’s newest creation. “But it can be a lonely life.” She told him, resting her chin on her palm. “And I do not really see the harm in taking comfort where we can in this war. Be it Dorian or… someone else.”

Someone else. Cullen reached over and grabbed his cup of Hansen’s vintage swallowing half of it and immediately regretting it. After coughing for what seemed like forever, he told her, “I’m not interested in one night of comfort, and that’s all Dorian seems to be interested in.”

Cassandra nodded at his point, taking a sip of her drink. “Nor I, I’ve never seen the point in it.”

Cullen swallowed some of his drink and shot her a grin. “Best explain that to Tamrassen then.”

Cassandra sputtered and choked out the words, “I have no idea what you’re talking about.” while Cullen snickered.

Hestia,

We’ve received a number of letters from Gaspard De Chalons, expressing gratitude for the Inquisitions support in his efforts to give Orlais the emperor it truly deserves. Nobody has gotten around to mentioning to him that the Inquisition has remained neutral in the conflict and that you’ve called both Gaspard and Empress Celene a number of colorful names behind closed doors. Josephine is doing her best, but it would be nice if your party was complementary to Empress Celene in the next town you pass through, to help her along.

You and I know that this war is ridiculous but most of the Orlesian nobility haven’t gotten the picture yet. Given enough time, they’ll come around.

Cullen put down his quill, unsure what else he needed to tell her. She should be in the Western Approach any day, but he’d already written his orders to Rylen and there was no point in repeating them in his letter to Hestia. It would be a waste of ink, and just yesterday Josephine had been complaining about how expensive it was.
The letters from Gaspard were barely worth mentioning either, really. They were complimentary nonsense, full of flattery and innuendo that Hestia would want nothing to do with, of that Cullen was sure. Complete trash that they ought to have thrown away, and would’ve if Gaspard weren’t currently allowing the Inquisitor and her party to travel through lands that Gaspards forces had claimed early in the civil war.

Every letter from Gaspard ended the same way. Surely soon we shall meet. Ridiculous. Hestia wouldn’t waste a moment of her time on him.

Cullen put the thought from his mind and started back on the letter.

Solas has returned to Skyhold and sends his utmost apologies for the manner in which he departed the dales. He wanted me to express his thanks for your support in his grief, and that he looks forward to working at your side again soon. I imagine if things progress as you predict the will, Solas will march with the army for the Western Approach.

The firelight was stinging his eyes, so Cullen put down his quill again and moved the shift the logs on the fire. He was careful not to kneel too close to the hearth, lest the ashes dirty his new armor. He wanted to keep his gift from Hestia as nice as possible.

When he stood up his knee cracked and he nearly buckled again. He’d taken a hard hit in Kirkwall several years ago and the knee still ached now and again, usually when the weather was bad. He was only 30 but sometimes he felt like an old man nursing his old war wounds. Perhaps he should have taken Hestia up on the offer to contact her cousin.

I could tell her that, Cullen thought as he sat back down. He had the quill in his hand before he thought better of it. No, Hestia has enough to deal with without me asking for favors. Instead he told her about the soldiers training, about Ben’s ridiculous theory about armor, about Shay’s consistent defeats at chess, about Sera’s last insane prank that left custard all over the stairs.

Skyhold misses you greatly, He wrote, knowing Hestia would appreciate it. When you’re away the light goes out of this place; it becomes a house waiting to become a home.

“No, maybe that’s too much.” He muttered, reaching for a new sheet of parchment so he could rewrite the letter without anything unprofessional. “She doesn’t want to know how much I miss her.”

Cullen’s hand stopped inches from the inkwell. Did I-

Cullen looked back at the letter, he could see his feelings all over the page. Could see her face, speckled with freckles, a scar cut through her eyebrow. Those laughing eyes, heavy with knowledge and pain and caring. Could taste her name on his tongue. Couldn’t stop the smile spreading across his face at the thought of her.

Cullen didn’t know how long he could deny these feelings for Hestia. Wasn’t sure how he’d gone this far without realizing them. Perhaps, deep down, he’d known just how much Hestia meant to him but hadn’t wanted to face it. Cullen could conjure her up in his mind with nary a thought, the wild tangles of her hair blowing in the wind, that crooked smile tugging at his heartstrings, whispered words following him into the dark.

“Get a hold of yourself,” Cullen muttered, placing his palms on the desk and taking a deep breath full of wood smoke and ink. “Hestia has the whole world on her shoulders, I can’t burden her with this too.”
She was the Inquisitor, beacon of hope for most of southern Thedas. They were at war, and
distracting her with something like this would be... inappropriate. Ridiculous. Impossible. Hestia
would never feel the same way about him, of that Cullen was sure. There was so much she knew,
and even more that she didn’t.

*It’s impossible and will always be so, Cullen told himself. The sooner you put it out of your mind,
the easier everything will be.*

The ache in his heart told him the truth.

There was a light knock at the door and Cullen took a moment to collect himself before he told
whomever it was to come in.

The man who opened the door was a stranger to him, yet oddly familiar. A grey warden in the blue
and silver maile of the famous order, with deep brown skin and shining black hair pulled back in a
queue. The man had an easy smile on his face and a twinkle in his eye when he said, “Commander
Cullen, I presume?”

Cullen rose from his chair, puzzling over the tug of recognition. “Yes. Can I help you, Ser…”

The smile widened, and the man checked over his shoulder to say, “My love, you were right. It was
this way.”

A slight elven woman stepped past him through the doorway, one hand trailing across his arm in
delicate intimacy. She wore dalish leather and chainmail, with a skirt bearing the double griffons of
the wardens belted over it. Her wide elven eyes were dark and they flickered over anything and
everything, never stopping for too long, dark eyes framed with delicate dalish tattoos in brightest
white. “Why do you insist on doubting me?” She murmured, her voice so quiet that Cullen had to
strain to hear.

The warden followed her into Cullen’s office, and the look of adore on his face was almost
difficult for Cullen to look at. He took a step and closed one large hand around her wrist, tugging
her back to his side and murmuring something in her ear. Her skin was dark but Cullen could still
see the blush spreading across her face.

“How can I help you?” Cullen repeated, in part to remind them that there was somebody else in the
room.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I thought we were expected.” The warden stepped into a deep bow, while the elven
woman wandered towards Cullen’s bookshelf. When he looked up, the warden was smiling
brightly, white teeth flashing in the firelight. “I am Armand Trevelyan, of the Grey Wardens, and
this is my wife Niora.”

Trevelyan. Of course, that explained the wide jawline and the bright and deep set eyes. Their noses
were similar too, now that Cullen knew what to look for. Armand’s brow was wider, his skin was a
warm brown instead of the rose white of Hestia and Shay, or the ruddy tan Ben sported. Still, it
was a striking family resemblance.

Cullen came around his desk and shook Warden Trevelyan’s hand. “Yes, the Inquisitor asked our
people to find you, but she’s already headed to the Western Approach I’m afraid.”

Armand nodded, squeezing Cullen’s hand just a shade harder than he needed to. “Yes, we had
orders sending us that way before your spies intercepted us.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Cullen saw the elven warden turn on her heel and fix him with a
curious stare. Her eyes were slightly unfocused, as though she were looking past him rather than at
him. “We were wondering.” She asked softly, “how does the Inquisition know so much about
Warden business?”

Chapter End Notes

As always, thank you to Illyria_Lives for sharing this big fucked up family with me.
Ben is her creation and I love him to pieces.

I am susuwatarisprinkles on tumblr, sootsprites94 on twitter and I just got a patreon.
That's not set up yet, but I'll get to it eventually.
As a boulder stands before a tide:

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“In short, this may be the worst place in the entire world.” Scout Harding finished wryly.

Hestia murmured, “I never want to leave.”

Harding arched an eyebrow that went entirely ignored by the savior of the faithful who was staring around at the arid surroundings with a look of wide eyed excitement. Hestia could feel a buzzing under her skin that meant adventure was just around the corner. It was a buzz she hadn’t had the chance to feel since they’d spent an afternoon dodging giants in the Emerald Graves.

The incessant baking heat was pounding down on their heads and she could tell that Dorian was revving up for a good whining session; Hestia turned in a slow circle she tipped her head back to stare into the sky, wide and warm and intensely blue. She could hear the rustling of shifting sand and she saw the hardscrabble type of plants that had grown tough to survive out here. A perfect place to make a mistake, when there was nobody but the buzzards to judge you.

“Everything here wants to kill us, you know that right?” Varric asked, sidling up next to her.

“They’re welcome to try.” Hestia told him brightly, striding away towards Rylen who raised a hand in greeting. “Captain, have you any idea where the wardens got off to?”

“You mean the ones you recruited or the ones we’re trying to stop?” Rylen asked, one sardonic eyebrow raised. “It’s difficult to keep track with so many of them underfoot.”

“Just this minute I’d settle for any warden at all, but ideally I’d like one who isn’t actively trying to kill us.”

“You’re out of luck there Inquisitor,” Rylen grinned. “I seem to have misplaced all the wardens we’ve met. They made noises about scouting ahead to the ritual site.”

Hestia made her sigh as long suffering as she possibly could. “Well, we best go collect our wayward lambs, lest they stumble into a clutch of dragon eggs and get themselves eaten.”

“You do that Ma’am.” Rylen said, nodding seriously. “We’ll be here dealing with this sulfurous smoke problem.”

“Have fun!” Hestia twinkled as she set off down the path.

Iron Bull was bouncing on the balls of his feet as he fell into step with her. “One of the scouts saw a dragon, boss,” He said, sounding almost gleeful. “What do you say? Wanna go three for three?”

From the back of the pack, Dorian shouted, “If you two try to fight another dragon, I will leave you to die!”

“Oh, you always say that.” Hestia said over her shoulder, smile wide as the ocean.

“What’s got you in such a good mood today Nomad?” Varric asked, watching her with those storytellers eyes.

Hestia put her head to one side. “Oh, I don’t know.” She said. “I guess I just like it when
everything around us wants me dead. Makes me feel tough.”

They both knew she was lying, but it was a decent enough lie that Varric let it slide.

*Your cousin Armand sends his love,* Cullen had wrote in the letter she’d received last night, *he and his wife are on their way to the Western Approach, so doubtless he will be there soon.*

*Skyhold misses you greatly.*

Those words had kept Hestia warm and smiling through the chilly desert night.

The cheerful walk was interrupted by an earsplitting roar. Instinctively, they ducked and looked to the sky for the source of the racket. What they saw took Hestia’s breath away.

The high dragon was big enough to blot out the sun as it swooped over their heads, careening away to perch on a huge outcropping of stone, her massive claws scraping against the sandstone and knocking off pieces of rock the size of small cows. It adjusted its grip, let out another bellowing roar and spread her wings, orange and yellow against the searingly blue sky, and took off towards the south.

“Oh,” Iron Bull practically groaned, “Please tell me we’re fighting her Boss!”

Dorian let out a huff of frustration when Bull and Hestia took off at a run after the high dragon.

“This is not why we’re here!”

They couldn’t catch up to the dragon because they ran into the sulfurous smoke problem that Rylen had mentioned. They were waylaid by a group of phoenixes when they tried to backtrack, so they headed downhill into the oasis that Harding had marked on their map.

In the oasis they found elfroot, deathroot, cleanish water and a former Champion of Kirkwall. She looked up from filling a waterskin and her face split into a wide smile as soon as she saw who it was. “Varric!” She crowed, raising an arm and waving them over. “About time you got here!”

“Hey Hawke!” Varric greeted, speeding up his steps so he could give her a hug. “You guys are hiding down here?”

“No, I’m just getting some fresh water.” Hawke stood and wiped her forehead with the back of her hand. Her blondish gingerish cat came trotting daintily out of a nearby cave, licking his little jaws. “I can show you where we set up camp, it’s about a mile east of here.”

“Hey, Hawke.” Iron Bull said, squatting down and staring intently at her cat, who stared right back at him with startling blue eyes. After a moment he glanced up and her and pointed to the cat. “Can I pet him?”

Hawke chuckled low in her throat. “Ask him.” She said, nodding to the cat.

The cat moved forward warily, sniffed Bulls outstretched fingers for scritches.

Hawke led them to the campsite, just up the ridge from an apparently insane professor from the University of Orlais, who was apparently oblivious to any of the intrigue going on in the desert, including the mercenaries that were curiously ignoring him, whatever the wardens were doing in the west and the presence of tevinter magisters in the keep not five clicks away.

“He’s a professor of dragons!” Hawke told them, looking like a child on Satinalia. She was
practically bouncing up and down. “A dragon professor! I didn’t know that was something you could teach!”

“Hawke, no.” Varric told her fondly. “You may not run away to learn about dragons.”

“Are you saying I’m not smart enough to get into the University of Orlais?” Hawke demanded, a twinkle in her eye.

Varric chuckled. “They wouldn’t know what to do with you.”

They found the rest of the wardens half a mile past the professor, having taken over an empty campsite near a defunct mine.

“Finally!” Oghren greeted, not bothering to move from his seat next to a wooden table with his feet kicked up, flagon of what looked like bad ale in his lap. “Maybe one of you can drag Velanna away from the edge.”

“The edge?” Hestia echoed, setting down her pack gratefully.

Oghren hooked a thumb over his shoulder, indicating a hole in the ground several meters across with wooden steps leading down into it. “We think this was an old warden dig site, but they must’ve collapsed the tunnel. The steps stop maybe 5 meters down.”

Hestia went to the rail and sure enough, the steps leading into the vast blackness of this hole stopped not far down. Velanna sat at the end of the steps, her feet dangling off the side, swinging in the blackness without any care or worry.

Shale stumped over to the edge of the wooden platform but would not step up onto the timbers. “I told the elf if it was going to jump in, better do it now and spare us the time wondering.” The golem rasped, then gave the approximation of a laugh when Hestia turned horrified eyes at her. “Kidding. The smelly dwarf is trying to teach me about jokes.”

“No wonder Cullen’s afraid of you.” Hestia told her, then smiled when the golem laughed again.

Nathaniel mounted the steps lightly with a large heavy tome in his hand. “The White Claw Raiders have been busy.” He said, showing her the title. “I think this is from the Circle of Magi.”

Hestia took it reverently. “It is! I recognize the author. Madame De Fer has been looking for this.”

Bull stepped up on the platform and reached for the book. “I’ll take it Boss. You shouldn’t even be that close to this pit, you’ll drop the book and then fall in trying to reach for it.”

“There’s a handrail!” Hestia complained, handing over the book anyway. “I’m not that clumsy.”

“And every time you say that, another bone in your foot gets broken.”

Hestia rolled her eyes but did as he bid, heading back to the stability of the sand and sat at the table next to Oghren, stretching out her feet and tipping her head back to feel the sun on her skin.

Nathaniel remained at the railing. “Velanna, come on, you can’t feel the vibrations any better from down there.”

Almost plaintively, Velanna’s voice came drifting up from the pit. “How close do you think they got?”

“I don’t know.” Nathaniel said, “But you won’t be getting any closer if you fall to your death.”
“Velanna, if you fall to your death, I will send Shale to get you out and I promise you will find that unpleasant!” Oghren yelled, to the general amusement of all listening.

From the far end of the work site, Sigrun stood up and waved a stack of papers in the air. “I found the foreman’s journal!”

“Really?” Came Velanna’s voice from the pit, and a moment later Velanna emerged, eyes sparkling in excitement. “Let me see it!”

“Those two love old stories more than anything else,” Oghren told Hestia, sounding like a grumbly but proud father. “They’re constantly looking for Warden history. This trip is their sodding dream come true. Except for the ‘traitors to the grey’ thing.”

“Is that what Clarel will call you?” Hestia asked.

Oghren shrugged and let out a short shrill whistle. “Hey idiots! Get armed and ready, we head out in fifteen minutes.”

Sigrun and Velanna ran back over to the table and spread the ancient crumbling papers on the table. “Look at this before we go.” Sigrun said, “This pit comes out in an ancient thaig, it must still be down there!”

Hestia leaned over to read the old logbook over Velanna’s shoulder.

*So close. We nearly reached him. Made it down to what looked like a dwarven thaig where the song was actually audible, real and thrumming through the air, not just in our heads. It rattled through the lyrium pillars and shook the earth beneath our feet to its dreadful tempo. We lost thirty men in the last cave-in, and the Warden-Commander is abandoning the mission. I tried to argue for one last push, but the rock is too unstable down there. We’ll have to find another Archdemon somewhere more solid.*

Brows furrowed, she looked up to see Oghren watching her. “I’ve no idea what this means.” She told him. “Am I meant to believe there’s an archdemon down there?”

“It’s Warden business, Inquisitor.” The dwarf told her, in a tone that brooked no argument. “Don’t you worry about it.”

Hestia was about to do just that but Hawke interrupted them. She’d been standing on a rocky outcropping with a long glass, but now she pulled it away from her eye and shouted, “I’ve got movement!”

Oghren’s feet hit the stone with a thunk. “Where?”

Hawke took another moment to verify then said, “At least six people headed towards the outpost! We have to go now!”

“Wardens! Gear up!” Oghren roared, grabbing a huge battle axe that must’ve been as tall as he was. “We’re moving out now!”

Any sneaking or subtlety they might’ve tried to employ went out the window, as the wardens and Hestia’s party ran full tilt towards the site that Hawke had sighted. They passed a very confused Draconologist, a pack of hyenas, a dormant fade rift that they would have to deal with some other time, and headed towards an old stone outpost flanked by two brass statues.

The scene they came upon was not a pretty one.
Whatever the wardens were doing here, they must be nearly done with it, judging by the bodies of wardens piled in the corner. Demons and warden mages stood all along the outpost, watching the last of their number advance on a warrior. The demons must have been bound to obedience, Hestia had never seen one hold itself so still before. At the other end of the outpost, a well dressed man was watching the proceedings with hawk like eyes, a well wrought staff strapped to his back.

As the approached, the well dressed mage said, “Warden Commander Clarels orders were clear.”

“This is wrong!” Protested the warrior, looking from the mage on the steps to the warden mage holding the knife.

The one in charge rolled his eyes and said, “Remember your oath: in war, victory. In peace, vigilance,”

The warden mage grabbed the warriors shoulder and stuck the knife between his ribs, drawing the power from the blood while his brother in arms breathed his last.

“In death… sacrifice.” The mage on the steps finished with a beatific smile. “Good, now bind it just as I showed you.”

The warden mage still had hold of the sacrificial blood and Hestia felt the crackling in her bones when the demon was torn from the fade and bound to obedience. It struggled against the binding but the amount of power in the 12 or so pints of blood that filled a human body was more than enough to subdue it. With little fuss, the demon settled and the warden mage stepped back in line with his brothers, looking no worse for wear.

*He doesn’t even seem upset.* Hestia thought, looking at the warden mage’s impassive face. *He just killed a man, someone he’d fought beside, sworn an oath to. He should be feeling… something. Anything.*

The well dressed mage smiled hugely when he saw the intruders. “Inquisitor, what an unexpected pleasure. Lord Livius Erimond of Virantium at your service.” He dropped into a dramatic bow.

“You’re not a warden.” Oghren growled.

“But you are.” Erimond sighed, surveying the group. “The ones Clarel let slip. And you found the Inquisitor and came to stop me. Shall we see how that goes?”

Hestia ignored him, choosing instead to shout, “Wardens, this man is lying to you! He serves an ancient Tevinter magister who wants to unleash a Blight.”

“That’s a very serious accusation!” The magister replied, eyes widening in a show of confusion and shock. Hestia already knew he needed a swift kick to the ribs. “Let’s see what these wardens think, shall we?”

He gestured to the remaining warden mages and ordered, “Wardens, hands up!” The warden mages raised their arms to mimic Erimond, their faces expressionless. “And, hands down.” The mages continued to mimic the magister, whose smile was looking increasingly like a leer.

“It looks like they don’t think at all.” Hawke muttered.

Erimond spread his arms. “They did this to themselves. You see, the calling had the Wardens terrified. They looked *everywhere* for help. Sadly for the wardens, the binding ritual I taught their mages has a side effect. They are now my masters slaves.”
“I see.” Hestia nodded, following the thought process. “Your master puts the fear of mortality into
the Wardens, and there you are, a sympathetic ear with just the right spell to save them.”

“As two man cons go, it’s neat and simple to execute.” Varric said, crossing his arms. “Assuming
you already know how to sound a death knell in a thousand warden minds.”

“It’s too smart a plan for a second rate Altus from Virantium.” Dorian sneered at Erimond. “But it
would certainly be enough to raise a demon army to conquer the south. Still not clear on why.”

“Simple.” Velanna said from the back, her voice shaking. When she checked over her shoulder,
Hestia found the elven mages face was hard as stone. “You raise demons to bolster our numbers,
so the Grey Wardens can march into the deep roads and kill the Archdemons before they wake.”

Nathaniel’s brow creased and he turned to look at Oghren. “I might even work.” He said, sounding
a little awestruck. “We saw the mine, our brothers found at least one Old God.”

Oghren shook his head. “Looks that way at first, but no. If Clarel goes through with this, every last
one of us is going to die.” The dwarf pointed an accusing finger at Erimond, who was looking
thoroughly unnerved. “And that stone-cursed duster knows it!”

“You knew about that, did you?” Erimond sputtered for a moment, clearly he had expected to have
to spoon feed them the entire plan. Were they all that arrogant in Tevinter? “Well, good! This was
a test. Once the rest of the Warden mages complete the ritual, the army will conquer Thedas!”

“Do you really want to see the world fall to the Blight?” Sigrun shouted, one hand on her knife.
“What could you possibly get out of this?”

Erimond shrugged carelessly. “The Elder One commands the Blight. He is not commanded by it,
like the mindless darkspawn. The blight is not unstoppable or uncontrollable. It is simply a tool.”

“Somebody's certainly a tool.” Varric snorted.

“As for me: while the Elder One rules from the Golden City, we, the Venatori, will be his God-
Kings here in the world.”

Elle snorted loudly. “Wow, you actually believe that shit he fed you? You’re about as stupid as you
look.”

“I’ve had enough of this,” Hestia muttered, pulling her staff from its place on her back and starting
forward towards Erimond. “Release the Wardens from the binding and surrender. I won’t ask
twice.”

“No,” Erimond sneered, “You won’t.”

He stretched out a hand and for the second time in her life, Hestia felt the anchor responding to
someone else's will. It crackled to life in a blast of burning searing pain and Hestia belted double
from the shock and the strength of it. Dark spots danced across her vision and she could see a
crackling red miasma enveloping the magister's outstretched hand.

All mocking and theatrics were gone from Erimond now. Eyes narrowed and body still, he said,
with a hatred intense enough to melt ice, “My master showed me how to deal with you, in the
event you were foolish enough to interfere again.”

Hestia dropped to one knee, feeling the spell creeping up her arm, the hot tingling pain reaching for
her shoulder. Looking up she saw the magister through a green haze of pain and struggle… wait,
green haze of pain? She blinked her eyes and tried to focus.

“That mark you bear,” Erimond continued, adding pressure again to his spell, “The anchor that lets you pass safely through the veil? You stole that from my master. He’s been forced to seek other ways to access the Fade.”

Hestia grit her teeth and pushed herself to her feet, blocking out Erimonds driviling speech to focus on the weakness of the fade all around them. That demon hadn’t been conjured from nowhere. Hestia squinted and could barely see the silver of a tear in the veil, there, just a meter away from them.

Erimond was, incredibly, still talking. “When I bring him your head,” He declared, “His gratitude will be—”

Hestia reached out to the fade tear and yanked.

The backlash knocked Erimond off his feet and ripped the fade tear wide open. With his concentration lost, the spell wrapping around Hestia’s left arm faded away and the anchor went back to sleep, though her whole arm and upper body still sang with pain.

Finally seeing that he was at a disadvantage, Erimond scrambled to his feet shouting, “Kill them!” over his shoulder as he fled with his tail between his legs.

As one, the warden mages and their pet demons looked at her.

“Shit.” Hestia muttered, backing up quickly.

The ensuing fight was bloody but short lived, because demons were really no match for four experienced wardens and the former Champion of Kirkwall. Hestia found there wasn’t much she needed to do, which was a blessing in disguise because her left arm had simply stopped responding to her commands. She could still feel it, Maker knew she could still feel the pain, but her fingers were utter strangers to her. What the fuck did that arrogant toe rag of a mage do to me?

“Well that wasn’t nearly as satisfying as I thought It would be.” Hawke said when the last of the demons was dawn back through the rift and the last warden mage was lifeless on the outpost floor. “Did anybody see where he went?”

“More importantly, does anyone know how to close this thing?” Sigrun said, indicating the still sputtering and whispering fade rift.

Iron Bull balanced his war hammer on his shoulder and turned to Hestia, “Hey, boss, you gonna close this bastard up again?”

“I’m trying!” Hestia grit out, glaring at the anchor. “That dickless venatori dislocated my fucking shoulder!”

That got their attention, Dorian fade stepped to her side and wrapped a supportive arm around her shoulders, offering his other hand for her to squeeze, concern creasing his lovely face. “If we get you close enough will the mark activate on its own?” He asked gently, eyes flickering between her face and the mark.

“That’s always been the pattern.” Hestia grit out, sucking in a breath when Dorian’s hand got too close to her left shoulder. “Shit!”

“What the fuck is going on?” Oghren asked, looking panicked. “Why can’t she do the sodding
thing?"

“If it’s just a dislocated shoulder, I can fix it.” Bull said, worry threading through his words. “I’ve done it with Rocky. It’s gonna hurt though.”

Amid the shouting, Varric calmly moved forward and took Hestia’s left hand, unheeding of the strange glowing thing that had ravaged her palm, and led her forward until the anchor sputtered to life again. The mark spasmed and the force of it knocked Hestia to her knees with a keening cry. But that familiar buzzing connection was made, knitting together the edges of the rift until it was no longer there.

“It looks like the mage was headed to Adamant Fortress, so—” Nathaniel stopped and surveyed the scene he had apparently missed. “What’s happening? Where did Hawke go?”

“She said she had something that would help back at camp.” That was Velanna, Hestia noted in the back of her mind, because the entirety of her concentration was focused on not losing consciousness. But it was a losing battle.

“Nomad!”

“Boss!”

The dark swallowed her up.

Hestia was trapped again, the dark walls all around her unyielding no matter what she tried to do to them. Voices were echoing all around, shouting in every language that Hestia had never had time to learn, shouting her name in a thousand voices.

Elayna’s voice chased her out of the dark, the small whining of a child that didn’t want to get out of bed for lessons. No Tia, five more minutes.

Ben’s ocean blue eyes catching hers in the forest, dangers all around them, his hand in hers while another kept Levy clutched to his chest. If we live through this, I won’t tell a soul.

Cautherine’s rasping wheezing laugh when Hestia’s eyes filled with tears the first time she met a demon. Such a soft heart for a serpent.

Bull’s keen gaze on her, one hand on her back while she worked her way through pulling herself back together. In through the nose, Boss. Don’t worry about explaining to me.

Seph looking at the book on her lap, firelight flickering across her skin. You don’t even know you’re doing it. It’s like you can’t help sounding exactly like Aunt Amelia.

Cullen’s face in the dark of the kitchen, looking at her with so much warmth and emotion that it took her breath away. I don’t know what I could do to repay you.

The ghostly clank of chains, the call of the terns outside the window, the roar of the fire that burned down Tamra’s little shop, if you ever set foot in this house again I’ll call the Watch, the rattling shriek of a despair demon, Shay’s voice lifted in song and praises to the Maker, magic rituals whispered in the night, Cullen’s hushed laughter, Sera’s face red from an antivan pepper…
Hestia jerked awake, and a hand pressed down on her shoulder. “Sssshh, take it easy.” Somebody said, his face cloaked in shadow, a roaring fire at his back. “Don’t move around too much.”

She coughed and dropped her head back on the bed roll. It was the shouting that had drawn her out of sleep, but she was still too groggy to make out individual arguments. Words were a struggle, so her medic brought a water skin to her lips and she drank greedily. When swallowed, Hestia squinted at his form. “Who…?”

The man sat back to look at her, and now the firelight played across his profile. “Don’t worry too much about it.” He murmured to her.

He was tall and rail thin, with crows feet at the corners of his eyes. He had oddly familiar gingery blond hair pulled back out of his face in a half tail. His mages robes were dusty and worn at the hem, but his belt still had the Circle of Magi stamped into the buckle. He cast her a smile filled with fatigue, and Hestia knew exactly where she’d seen his face before.

“‘Anders.’” She whispered.

Anders nodded to her. “At your service Inquisitor.”

“You don’t look much like your wanted poster.” She said.

He snickered. “They just can’t get my nose right.”

“Where did you come from?” She furrowed her brows. “I thought Hawke left you behind to come to Skyhold.”

Anders nodded. “Yes, she did say that.”

Someone got up from the fire and their shadow passed across them before disappearing again. When it became clear to Hestia that nothing more was forthcoming, she tried to sit up from her cot. It hurt to push herself up on her elbows and Anders pressed her back down again.

“I said not to move around.” Anders told her firmly, “I will sedate you if I have to.”

“You’d be welcome to try but you’d probably be arrested.” Hestia told him, allowing herself to be tended to. It was kind of nice, actually. It made profoundly homesick, for Elayna’s healers hands and Skyhold both. Skyhold misses you greatly. Warmth filled her chest as she asked, “What did the magister do to me?”

“It’s not very clear.” Anders said, reaching for a bowl of herbs and the waterskin. “Your tevinter friend thinks he was trying to remove the mark, the anchor, you called it? But instead it became disconnected from your mana flow.”

Hestia frowned. “That doesn’t sound very good.”

“Quite the understatement.” Anders cast her a faint smile. He added water to the bowl and called on the fade, filling his fist with the soft white light of healing magic. “Once disconnected, your body thought the anchor was a foreign invader, and reacted the way the body does when it senses something wrong; your immune system started to attack it.”
She wrinkled her nose. “That sounds even worse.”

“Fortunately, closing that rift seems to have reminded your body that the anchor is supposed to be there, so that won’t be happening again any time soon.”

“Then why do I have to keep still?”

“Because,” Anders told her calmly, eyes on his work, “Before you closed the fade tear, the anchor was burning up your mana pathways. You might have suffered nerve damage, which is why I’m making you this pain relief salve to get you through the night. And your shoulder was dislocated, for what looks like the second time.” He cast her an amused look. “Just how often do you get yourself maimed Inquisitor?”

Hestia sighed and closed her eyes. “You sound like Layna.”

“Who’s Layna?”

“My cousin. She’s a healer too.” Hestia turned on her side so she could look out at the campsite. The wardens were sitting grouped around the campfire, heads bent close in conversation.

Anders spun the bowl on his lap, the diffused white light of the healing magic playing across his face, bringing to light the grey hair at his temples, the scruff of his unshaven jaw. She knew she ought to be… angry with him, judging him, demanding that he turn himself in for his crimes or something of that nature. But right now she was so tired, and she had a nagging feeling that he’d saved her life this afternoon.

“Did you fix anything else while I was unconscious?” Hestia asked, fighting down a yawn. “Did I break another bone without noticing?”

“Not that I could see.” Anders lifted the bowl to the light, measuring something she couldn’t understand. “Your right shoulder is permanently fucked up I’m afraid, but I think I pulled out some of the tension in your muscles. Now, this is going to taste absolutely foul, but swallow as much as you can stomach for me?”

Hestia sat up slowly, feeling both shoulders and the whole of her left arm protesting. That stinging burning pain was creeping up her arm again so she swallowed a gulp of the salve, spilling much of it down her front. He spoke truthfully, the mixture did taste woefully dreadful but she drank as much as she could and then pulled up her legs and rested her arms on her knees, wincing as she did so. Anders took hold of her wrist, pressing two fingers against her pulse.

“I smoothed some of the scar tissue too.” Anders told her softly, dark eyes on her face, gauging her reactions.

Hestia felt her heart skip a beat, and he probably felt it too. “Where?” She whispered, cold fear slipping through her, churning her already unsettled stomach.

“Anywhere I could see. The oldest ones are gone, save the scars on your stomach. The newer ones are fading nicely.”

The oldest ones were gone. Hestia thought she’d never be rid of them, but now they were just gone. Would that the memories could be wiped away that easily. She thought, taking a shaky breath. “Well, that’s one way to keep me from arresting you.”

Anders snickered, shook his head. “I have no plans to blackmail you if that’s what you mean. Whatever else I have done, I am first and foremost a healer. You are my patient and anything you
choose to tell me about your body stays between us.”

Hestia narrowed her eyes at him. “Why don’t I believe you?”

He shrugged. “Because I’m famously good at keeping secrets from the people I love most?” In the firelight, his face became sorrowful.

“That must be it.”

There was a burst of shouting around the fire that drew both their attention. “I don’t care if they’ll start here, I’m telling you it won’t work!” Sigrun yelled, leaping to her feet in her anger. “Not unless you hunt down every last broodmother, and stop the darkspawn creating more!”

“Without the threat of the blight hanging over our heads, it would be a simpler job!” Nathaniel shot back. “Don’t you want to live in a world without darkspawn?”

“Of course I do! But killing the Old Gods is only half the job!” Sigrun looked close to stamping her foot, but she settled for pacing back and forth in front of the fire instead.

“What are they talking about?” Hestia asked.

“Warden business.” Anders said, eyes wandering away from the firelight and into the shadows of the campsite. “I wouldn’t worry about it.”

Hestia scoffed. “Do all wardens say that?”

“I wouldn’t know.” Anders dropped his hand from her wrist, suddenly very stiff. “I’m not a warden anymore.”

“I… never got the impression that’s how it worked.” Hestia said, casting back to those waking dreams with Elayna and Armand, those stories he wasn’t meant to share becoming fewer and fewer as his dreams got more strange. “It’s not like a shield you can return when you’re done with it. It’s a life sentence.”

Anders scoffed but he was smiling again. “Interesting turn of phrase. How did a circle mage come to know so much about the Wardens?”

Hestia smiled serenely. “I have approximate knowledge of many things.”

“Will you sodding idiots listen to me!” Oghren shouted, his gravelly voice roaring the others into silence. “If you replace the warriors with demons you’ve already fractured your fighting force, so the warriors no longer trust their mages, not that it matters if the mages don’t have any control over their own minds. Even if this nug-thumper were sincere, he’s too soft to deal with darkspawn. He’d get overwhelmed a few weeks in and the blood magic would fall apart.” He dusted off his hands and shook them out. “Nope. It won’t work. Clarel’s going to get all of her wardens killed.”

Velanna put her head in her hands before flopping down on the stone, staring up at the stars. One of her legs ended up in Nathaniel’s lap, but he didn’t comment, he just rested his hand on her ankle absentmindedly. “You know, I know this is serious and I’m meant to be upset,” The elven mage said, her words almost drunken. “But I’m just so grateful that the Calling isn’t real. Not truly.”

“Yeah.” Nathaniel agreed. He tipped his head back to stare up at the wide expanse of stars spread from horizon to horizon. “It’s nice to know we’re not dying.”

“Not dying any faster than we already are.” Oghren corrected with an expressive belch.
Hestia’s gaze was drawn by Varric who had walked up to her tent with a plate of food. “Hey Nomad,” He said gently, sitting down on the edge of her cot. “How’s Blondie treating you?”

“I’m fine, never been better.” Hestia told him, rolling her eyes expansively. “And were you ever going to tell me about Hawke’s furry little secret?”

Varric and Anders snickered. “Told you she’d figure it out.” Varric said to the mage. “She’s smart like Hawke is.”

Anders rolled his eyes and took the plate of food from Varric. “Yes yes, you were right for the one hundred thousandth time. And my patient cannot eat anything until tomorrow morning.”

Hestia looked at Varric. “You know Cullen and Cassandra are going to kill you, right?”

Varric shrugged, easy smile on his face. “The Seeker can’t kill me until I finish the next Swords and Shields book, and Cullen is used to disappointment.”

Hestia looked between Varric and Anders, and made her decision. “Varric, will you write a letter for me?” She asked, leaning her cheek against her knees.

Varric glanced at Anders, but didn’t change from his easy going tone when he said, “Sure thing Nomad. Who am I writing to?”


Chapter End Notes

I love the Western Approach and I will not feel ashamed about that.

A debt of gratitude to Illyria_Lives for sharing this big fucked up family with me.

I’m on tumblr at spookyscarysusuwatarisprinkles, and on twitter at sootsprites94, love to hear your thoughts.
That peace bore a heavy price which must be paid in blood

Cullen stepped out of the stirrup with a groan and stretched out his neck before signaling to Cassandra for her to stop her horse. The army had been riding for two weeks, making achingly slow progress across Orlais towards the Warden fortress. All he really wanted was a long bath and a warm bed, but that was not in his future, not for weeks.

Cassandra shouted to another rider, then dismounted her own horse and came to stand beside Cullen, reins in hand. The two horses nudged at each other’s faces before going back to kicking their hooves and testing out this new sandy ground.

“At least we’ve made it to the Approach,” Cassandra pointed out, wiping the sweat from her forehead with the back of her hand. “It should be an easier ride without having to negotiate so many battlegrounds.”

“You’d think so,” Cullen said, taking a damp cloth from the passing farrier and running it along the horse’s neck while the farrier started to work on the saddle. “But judging from Rylen’s letters, there’s a dangerous animal every few meters in the deserts. I don’t imagine our speed will be increasing any time soon.”

“And one wonders why this place is abandoned,” Cassandra said wryly, beginning to wipe down her horse as well. “How many can make it through that pass, do you think?”

Cullen looked over his shoulder at the pass that was the reason he’d halted the Inquisition army. It was wide enough, but Rylen had explained that it dog-legged back and forth several times as it descended into the basin, and the forward camp was tucked between two large rock formations that needed to be negotiated carefully. The siege weapons that had been loaned to them by the allies Josephine had acquired would be an altogether different matter.

“Four or five riders at a time, I think,” Cullen said, jerking his head back to avoid his mare licking his ear. The chestnut was an even tempered mount, but she liked to invade his personal space when she was hungry, and Cullen knew from experience that she wouldn’t stop until an apple or a feed bag was produced. “I don’t know if our plan for the trebuchets will work. Hestia’s reports of her progress here were light on geographical details.”

“Why don’t we simply ask her?” Cassandra said, tilting her head to indicate something behind his back.

Cullen forgot all about rubbing down his horse and turned to see Hestia climbing up the ridge, sun browned and glowing, one arm in a sling. Months in the field had worn away the last of her soft curves to replace them with lean muscle and taut lines that filled out her armor in the shoulders. Her hair had been lightened in the sun, looking nearly white in the heat of the day. Hestia strode toward them, legs long and steps sure. Seeing her face was like the first rays of dawn after a moonless night.

“Hestia,” he murmured, eyes nearly dazzled by her.

Then his chestnut licked the back of his head.

Cassandra did not point and laugh at him, but he could tell she stopped just short of it. She doubled
over with a snorting laugh that was almost worth the awful mess that his horse had just made of his hair. Cullen did his best to smooth it back before anybody noticed, but it was hard to tell what Hestia really knew when she had that laughing smile on her face, as if she were fondly amused by the whole world.

A body streaked past him and Sera nearly tackled Hestia with a hug, shouting, “Quizzy!”

Hestia was just barely able to keep her footing, but her delighted laugh filtered over to Cullen and filled his chest with warmth. Get it together, he told himself, passing the reins of his mare over to the farrier and raising an eyebrow at Cassandra, who was only now getting control of her snickering.

“I see there something funny, Cassandra?” he deadpanned, and walked away with a sigh when she was once again overwhelmed with laughter.

Sera had been joined by Blackwall and Shay Borchard by the time Cullen was in earshot of them. Hestia put a fond hand on Shay’s cheek and said, “Well, lay brother, unless you want to take up a sword and fight at my side, I don’t see a solution to this problem.”

Shay pressed a kiss to her cheek and pulled her in for another hug. “I’ll think of something.”

When they parted, Hestia turned her face to him, her smile softening into something that could only be fondness.

Cullen cleared his throat and inclined his head in a small bow, greeting her with a soft, “Inquisitor.”

“Commander,” she said in that warning tone, but her eyes were laughing.

Cullen allowed himself a grin. “Hello, Hestia.”

Hestia nodded in approval. “Hello, Cullen.”

Cullen schooled his features with difficulty, lest he start grinning like a fool each time she said his name. Get it together, Rutherford. You’re here for a reason and it isn’t to make eyes at your commanding officer.

Thankfully, they were interrupted by Ben Tamrassen before Cullen could make an even bigger fool of himself.

“Tia!” shouted the marcher, waving his arm as he approached at a stroll, Wardens Trevelyan and Lavellan just behind him. “Look who came to visit!”

“Cousin!” Armand greeted with a bright smile.

Hestia’s eyes widened, and she gasped in surprise and delight. She took off and ran the distance between herself and Armand Trevelyan, who braced himself and picked her up in a spinning embrace, both of them laughing.

“Armand! When did you arrive?” Hestia asked, looking up into her cousin’s face as he set her down. Cullen didn’t usually think of Hestia as a short woman, but Armand Trevelyan was at least a head taller than her. She reached up and tugged on the tail he’d put his hair in that morning. “And when did you stop cutting your hair?”

“We got to Skyhold just before you ordered your army to march,” Armand told her, reaching out to
brush the hair out of Hestia’s face. “Layna misses you.”

“I miss her too,” Hestia said, and there was a real longing in her voice.

Cullen made a note to tell Josephine, then furrowed his brow. *Stop it,* he told himself, deliberately turning his face away from her and tuning out the sounds of Armand introducing Hestia to his lovely elven wife. He meant to start directing his men, only to find Sera and Shay watching him with identical smiles.

“What?” he snapped at them.

The only response was Sera’s snickering.

Hestia had been busy in the few weeks it had taken the army to travel across Orlais to the Approach. Even injured, Hestia hated to sit still and had taken it upon herself to clear out all the Venatori in this Blighted wasteland. In two weeks, she and her party had taken two keeps, discovered three ancient Tevinter structures, fought two giants that the Venatori had been using for labor, met and subsequently recruited a draconologist when she had fought and killed the high dragon the professor had been studying.

“Couldn’t do anything about the wildlife?” Ben had asked, slinging an arm over her shoulders with familiar ease. “It looks like everything here wants to kill us.”

“I know,” Hestia nearly gushed, elbowing her cousin in the side. “Isn’t it wonderful?”

“‘Wonderful’ isn’t the word I would use,” Cassandra groused, wiping the blood from a quillback off her sword.

Rylen had taken over the running of Griffon Wing Keep after the Venatori had been cleared out. It was positioned right at the edge of the Abyssal Rift, lending a perfect vantage point for miles and miles of sandy wastes. They even had a prisoner to look after, something Cullen learned only after a night spent in the blissfully cool keep.

“His name is Servis,” Hestia told him, hands on her hips, surveying the magister behind bars in a tiny cell they’d found in the keep. “From the Circle of Magi in Minrathous. He *claims* he’s not a follower of Corypheus...”

“But we only have his word?” Cullen asked, arching an eyebrow at her.

Hestia tossed him a grin and nodded. “I’m inclined to believe it actually. We found this at his desk.” She held out a piece of paper, a sheet much finer than anything the Inquisition had been using. “I think he was planning on leaving their ranks some time very soon.”

Cullen took the paper and read it.

*Magister Nanterius*

*Vyrantium Office of the Praetor*

*Dear Madam,*
I have been informed that you are looking for an experienced administrator to organize your lead mining enterprises in four kingdoms. I humbly present myself as a candidate for the vacancy. I have extensive experience as the overseer of multiple archaeological digs in the Western Approach, and have successfully managed several mercenary army ventures simultaneously. At present, I am seeking new employment opportunities in less arid climes and as far as possible from the Inquisition. Please see my attached résumé for further credentials.

Yours,

Crassius Servis

Cullen looked at the note, then at the magister sitting slumped in the cell. “You do realize that if we hadn’t caught you, Corypheus would?” he asked, hoping he was keeping a straight face. “And he’s not known for being merciful to deserters.”

Rylen stood behind him, arms crossed and looking absurdly smug. “He admitted to using his connections to smuggle artifacts out of the desert right under Corypheus’s nose. He’s got nerve, I’ll give him that.”

Hestia turned an incredulous face on the magister. “You stole from Corypheus?” she asked, sounding almost delighted. “I don’t know if that’s stupidly brave or bravely stupid.”

“I was hired by a third party!” the magister hastened to say, seizing his chance. “I have no loyalty to him!” Almost slyly, he added, “Might you find that useful, Your Worship?”

Cullen was taken aback by the audacity of this man. “Are you actually attempting to bargain with us?” he asked, his words coming out harsher than he’d intended.

“Bargain? I plead!” Servis said, his hands gripping the bars that separated his cell from the leaders of the Inquisition. “I throw myself upon your mercy! I also have friends in Tevinter that owe me large debts,” he added, looking back up at Hestia with what Cullen could only describe as a beguiling look. “Leave what happened at Echoback Fort behind us, Inquisitor, and I can put them all at your disposal.”

Hestia snorted at his words, but she had that look on her face that told those who knew her that she was definitely considering it. She caught Cullen’s eye and gestured for him to move away from the cell with her. Rylen fell in step behind them silently, and Cullen nodded to Lysette as they passed by her and mounted the steps out of the small prison.

“What do you think?” Hestia asked Cullen once they were out of earshot.

Cullen rested his hand on the pommel of his sword. “We can certainly question him,” he said thoughtfully. “I don’t know if we should trust him enough to let him smuggle artifacts for us, not without watching him closely.”

Hestia drummed her fingers on her thigh, considering his words. “Rylen?” she asked, seeking the gaze of Cullen’s second in command. “Any thoughts?”

Rylen shrugged, glancing at Cullen for a moment. “I agree with the Commander. He’s a slippery character and shouldn’t be left alone. I daresay the Nightingale could use his information well enough.”

Hestia nodded sharply. “Put him on a horse with a templar or two watching him, take him back to Leliana. If he’s forthright, we’ll loosen his shackles, maybe even give him a job. The Inquisition could always use a talented smuggler.” She grinned at Cullen.
He chuckled, falling in step with her as she started out into the bustling courtyard. “You do like to turn enemies into assets, don’t you?”

Hestia rolled her neck out and smiled at Cullen. “And why not? Death is entirely too final for a crime like this. If he wants to do some good, or at least if he wants to continue to be alive, why not let it be in our benefit?”

“Just be sure he’s not only benefiting himself,” Cullen warned gently. “He’s stolen from a leader far more ruthless than you.”

Hestia’s answering laugh made his knees go weak. “Am I not ruthless enough for you, Cullen?” she asked, batting her eyelashes at him. “Shall I stomp around, threatening anybody who disobeys my edicts on torture or fair treatment of elves with death?”

“It’s the Nightingale who’s the ruthless one,” Rylen answered. “Next to her, you’re practically a Chantry Mother.”

Hestia turned on her heel at the bottom of the stairs and said to Rylen with a delighted smile, “That’s probably the worst thing you’ve ever said about me, Rylen.”

Rylen ducked into a bow. “I aim to please.”

Hestia laughed and continued leading them up the stairs to the parapets. She must have a good amount of restless energy pent up, given she had been restricted to one handed magic for the last few weeks. Iron Bull had taken the lion's share of the credit for killing the dragon, but Cullen knew for a fact that mana shields and healing spells could be cast with one hand if the mage was determined enough.

She stopped at the wall to survey the sea of tents and horses spread out around the keep. Cullen could see the bonfires for cooking had been lit, and knew that later that night the men would cluster around them for warmth and companionship. The army had been nearly without grumbling and mischief on the long ride across Orlais, so much so that Cullen was becoming worried about the soldiers. Moaning was what soldiers did; it's how they passed the time.

Hestia’s face was still mirthful as she stood looking out at the tents, but Cullen could see the tension there. “So,” she said finally, turning around and leaning against the stone. “What plans did the three of you come up with at Skyhold? Will the bulk of our forces be enough to breach the walls of Adamant Fortress? It’s stood against the darkspawn since the Second Blight.”

Cullen glanced at Rylen. They would’ve had to do this eventually, Cullen had just hoped that they would be well away from prying ears when they discussed strategy. “Fortunately for us, that means it was built before the age of modern siege equipment. A good trebuchet will do major damage to those ancient walls. And thanks to our Lady Ambassador, we have the sappers to spare.”

“Just who did Lady Montilyet trick into givin' us fifteen men and the workin’s for five trebuchets?” Rylen asked, one eyebrow raised.

One side of Hestia's mouth quirked up in a grin. “It was someone from Jader, wasn't it?”

Cullen nodded, remembering Josephine's muttering about the Inquisitor’s reckless choices in Orlais making her job more difficult. “Yes, Lady Seryl of Jader. Apparently she supports Celene and took quite a lot of convincing.”

“So do I.” Hestia said, bringing up a hand as if to say, ‘What can I do? Gaspard has most of the
west, we had to move through it’. “And that’s hardly important at this point. Will the Inquisition Army and siege equipment be enough against the most elite warriors in Thedas? Especially if their numbers are bolstered by demons?”

Cullen would’ve been offended if the same thoughts hadn’t been filtering through his mind for the past few days. Still, he felt he owed it to his men to stand at their defense. “Your army stands ready, Hestia. They’ve trained for this, and they will not disappoint you.”

“The Nightingale found records of Adamant’s construction,” Rylen said, lowering his voice when a group of soldiers jogged by below them, led by the rhythmic shouts of their sergeant. “There are choke points we can use to limit the field of battle. We may not be able to defeat ‘em outright, but if we cut off reinforcements, we can carve ya a path straight to Warden Commander Clarel.”

The mirth had slid from Hestia’s eyes while Rylen briefed, and when she next spoke, the words were tinged with solemnity. “Taking this fortress is going to get a lot of good soldiers killed.”

Cullen felt the unease in his chest that had been brewing since they set out from Skyhold. Niora Lavellan had spent a long evening explaining the many ways that Wardens were different from the rest of the warriors in Thedas, while her husband looked on uncomfortably in the background. With each admission, Cullen saw their advantage growing slimmer and slimmer.

“Our soldiers know the risks,” Cullen said, looking out at the many lines of tents, at the men and women he had spent day and night training for this moment. “Was it enough? Would it ever be? And they know what they’re fighting for. It’ll be hard fought, no way around it, but we’ll get that gate open.”

Hestia took in his words and the conviction behind them, but Cullen was never sure how much she believed him, how much she could see through him. Her quicksilver eyes strayed back to the tents, horses, and campfires. “Is it childish to hope that some of the wardens could be sympathetic to our cause?” she asked, trying and failing to keep the desperate hope from her voice. “I mean, Armand and Niora were very understanding once we explained to them what was actually happening.”

Cullen considered it, but Rylen was first to voice an opinion. “The warriors might listen to reason, but I doubt they’ll turn against the Warden Commander directly.”

Cullen thought of Meredith and murmured, “Stranger things have happened.” About five years too late, he added to himself.

Rylen nodded at this and continued, “But you saw first hand, Inquisitor. The mages are slaves to Corypheus. They’ll fight to the death.”

Hestia’s forehead was creased with worry, but she nodded. “Very well, gentlemen,” she said, clapping her hands together sharply to signal the end of the meeting. “Three days to rest and resupply, then we march on Adamant.”
at the Wardens instead of the walls of their own keep.

Hestia wanted to go over the battle plan each night, questioning every step of the process as it was laid out on the makeshift war table. Most of the wardens got pissed off at her questions by the sixth night, and stopped coming to the briefings. Cassandra held out longer, nearly twelve days, but she too got tired of the interrogations and stopped coming to the command tent.

Finally, when they were a day away from Adamant, Cullen gave up wondering and simply asked, “Why do you feel the need to memorize the battle strategies?”

Hestia looked up from where she was bending over the outline of Adamant Fortress. “I just… I want to make sure we get this right,” she said, dragging a hand through her hair. “I’m not used to this sort of battle, this form of warfare. During the rebellion, we did our best to avoid casualties at all costs, I’m not used to… treating them like an inevitability.”

Cullen felt his heart pang as he understood. The Mage and Templar conflict hadn’t been that kind of war, it was true. It hadn’t ever been a war of attrition, where each side took territory, stood in ranks with their colors presented, and tested their mettle against men on the other side of the field. It had been an asymmetric war, one where mages were forced to rely on ambush tactics or hired swords to keep themselves alive. They had been outnumbered and facing a vastly more experienced enemy, with no reason to expect any allies to come forward.

It was no wonder that Hestia and Ben fought like their lives were on the line in every skirmish. It had been true.

Cullen felt his pulse pick up, could hear the sounds of the explosion, the screaming and chaos of the city that didn’t stop for weeks, the endless nights, the dead and broken bodies taken out of rubble and tossed on the bonfires. The people who were trapped but alive in smashed buildings, no way to get out but crying and screaming for help. Cullen had hated Anders so much, but he hated himself more, for not seeing, for not doing what had to be done.

If I had just done my Blighted job, all of this could have been avoided.

“With the wardens dug in like this,” he began slowly, trying to find words over the frantic rhythm of his heart. “In a fortress that can sustain them for months or more, a frontal assault is really the only way. If we can gain a foothold on the battlements,” he came over to her side and pointed to the rudimentary blueprints of Adamant that Oghren had sketched out for them, “we can distract their attention, thin their ranks and use these choke points to our advantage, giving you time to reach Warden Commander Clarel.”

Hestia sighed, tugging her shawl back up around her shoulders. “And if I tarry too long or fail to convince Clarel, countless lives will be lost.”

“Lives have already been lost,” Cullen said quietly, looking at her profile, at her face so drawn and despairing. “The wardens started this by using blood sacrifice. They won't stop unless they are made to stop. They have to be shown the betrayal before they will believe it. That’s what happens when blood magic is involved.”

Hestia shivered, placing her hands flat on the table. “Why does it have to be blood magic?” she murmured, almost too low for him to hear. “Why does it always come back to this?”

“I don’t know,” he answered softly, his hand coming to rest close to hers on the maps. “I wish it weren’t the case.”
Hestia sighed and raised her head, staring into the blank canvas of the tent, her eyes hazy and unfocused. “So do I,” she murmured.

Cullen contained what he was going to say next, and instead took this chance to just look at her. Her hair falling around her face in tousled waves, curling just slightly where she’d tucked it behind one ear. More freckles than he could count sprinkled across her skin, the rose white of her cheek beneath. The faint radiance of the Anchor, glowing through the back of her palm, a faint scar trailing up the back of her hand before disappearing beneath her shirtsleeve.

Her eyes, deep and crafty and beautiful as the moon, staring back into his with a strange intensity.


*Could it?*

“Hey, Boss!” Bull’s voice was loud and cheerful outside the tent, and a moment later he pulled back the tent flap and ducked his head in to see Cullen and Hestia with a meter between them, studiously not looking at each other. “Boss, your cousin has requested your help at the bonfire. There’s a corporal who won’t let us have more wine and Ben said you could convince him.”

“Right, Bull, I’ll be there.” Hestia said, her voice breathless. Cullen darted a glance at her out of the corner of his eye, saw that she was flushed and fixing her hair with distracted hands. “Just… give me a moment.”

Bull looked between her and Cullen, that one eye seeing anything that they would want to hide simply by instinct. Whatever he gleaned did not show on the craggy face, and he ducked back out of the tent, trailing the end of one flap on his horns for a moment before he fixed it.

There was a tense silence before each of them spoke at what seemed to be the same moment.

“Well, I should-” Hestia began, gesturing to the exit.

“Yes, I’ve got to-” Cullen started, before falling silent.

Hestia watched him for another moment, something deep and curious in those knowing eyes, before she scurried from the tent.

Cullen wiped a hand across his face, and leaned back against the makeshift war table, then jumped back up when it creaked unsteadily.

*Stupid, stupid, stupid*, he told himself. *Two weeks in her presence and I lose all control of my actions. You’re an adult Rutherford, act like it.*

He left the war tent, meaning to head straight to his own tent and throw recriminations into the dark until he fell asleep, but he was waylaid by Sera appearing from nowhere and yanking his arm.

“Pssssh, Jackboot, are you going to hide in your tent all night?” the elf asked, the red in her cheeks making it clear that she was already drunk on whatever ale the soldiers hadn’t imbibed on the way to the Approach. “Come on, we could all die tomorrow.”

Cullen began shaking his head before the words even registered. “No, Sera, I’m going to--wait, what did you just call me?”

Sera snickered, giving another fruitless tug on his arm before giving up. “Come ooooon , Curly.”
She dragged out the word until it was almost a whine. “It’s the last night before it all becomes real. Do you really want to go to sleep and let it happen immediately?”

“Who’s saying we’re all going to die tomorrow?” Cullen asked, suddenly worried for morale. “And what do you mean, ‘before it becomes real’? It’s been real the whole time, Sera.”

Sera scoffed, leaning one of her hands on his arm so she didn’t fall over completely. “Dunno, the wardens are saying it. The ones helping us, I mean. I s’pose the wardens we’re fighting are saying it too. That’s the whole thing, right? The song in their heads means they’re gonna die soon.” She giggled a bit before her face dropped, and her eyes were suddenly very sad. “That sounds like a shite way to die, don’t it? Whoops, bingle de bing bong... you’re dead.”

“Yeah,” Cullen agreed, looking down at Sera and not for the first time wondering if she was the sanest person in the Inquisition. “That does sound like a shite way to die.”

Sera screwed up her face and shook her head hard, like she was physically trying to shake the morose thoughts from her skin. “So, come on!” she said, both hands yanking on his arm again. She was much stronger than she looked, and this time Cullen allowed himself to be dragged over to one of the bonfires. “If it’s our last night before we die, don’t you wanna enjoy it?”

“The problem there is,” Cullen said, helping Sera sit down in the sand next to Dorian, or at least keeping her from falling arsefirst into the firepit. “There you go. The problem is that we’re not all dying tomorrow.”

“That’s the spirit!” Dorian agreed jovially, raising a bottle of Maker knows what in greeting to Cullen. “I’ve been telling her that all night, but does she listen?”

Cullen sat down next to Sera and surveyed the group that had claimed this particular bonfire. The Amaranthine Wardens were there, sitting next to Hawke and Varric, laughing heartily at a story the two of them were telling, voices overlapping. Ben Tamrassen was there, sitting next to Wardens Trevelyan and Lavellan. Ben and Armand had their heads together, discussing who knows what. Most of the Inner Circle were here, the many varied and disparate individuals Hestia had charmed into loving her. Cullen seriously doubted that so many of them would have dedicated almost a year of their lives and put themselves into danger day after day if it weren’t for her.

And speaking of Hestia, he saw her approaching from the other side of the bonfire, two bottles of alcohol in each hand, the dancing firelight casting shadows across her body. She saw him too, Cullen knew, for she averted her gaze from his face almost immediately to smile at something Blackwall was saying.

Cullen looked back down at the bottle Dorian had passed him, the one he had been idly rolling between his hands. He took a swig from it, regretted it as soon as the liquor hit his tongue, but he swallowed it, feeling it burn all the way down to his stomach.

“Dorian, what in Andraste’s name are you drinking?” he asked, turning to look at Dorian and Sera, only to find them both watching him with similar eyes. As this was the fourth or fifth time he’s caught Sera looking at him like that, Cullen let the irritation he’d been feeling filter into his voice when he demanded, “What?”

“You have feelings for our Lady Inquisitor,” Dorian drawled, his eyes sly and crafty.

Cullen felt his face turn red. “What?” he sputtered. “No, you’re being ridiculous.”

“You wanna do naughty things with Hestia,” Sera singsonged, before Cullen reached out and
fumbled to put his hand over her mouth. He regretted it immediately when she bit the heel of his hand. “Ah, shit!”

“You’re both being ridiculous,” Cullen said, shaking his hand out and trying to see if she’d broken the skin. “I don’t--she’s not--”

“You were thinking about it, though,” Sera said matter-of-factly. “Else your face wouldn’t be that pink color right now.” She snickered a bit. “It’s like you ate one of those peppers from Rivain.”

“For what it’s worth, she’d probably say yes,” Dorian said before he took another sip from his bottle, feigning indifference, but Cullen saw the man watching him out of the corner of his eye. “If you asked her.”

“That’s never going to happen,” Cullen told them both severely. “She’s the Inquisitor and we are all at war. It’s not… it’s not feasible or appropriate for me to--for she and I--” He trailed off, puzzling over how to phrase this. Eventually he settled on, “It’s never going to happen.”

“All right, keep your hair on,” Dorian said, shrugging artfully. There was a burst of laughter from the other side of the bonfire that drew attention for a moment, and while others were looking at the wardens, Dorian leaned back and said to Cullen, “But I didn’t actually hear a ‘no’.”

Cullen made a face at Dorian and said nothing.

Across the bonfire, Ben Tamrassen kicked out his legs and leaned back on his hands, the picture of boneless ease. He rolled his head to the side and said to Hestia, “Hey Tia, why don’t you sing anymore?”

“What?” she answered, looking distracted for a moment before turning to her cousin. “Did you say something, Ben?”

“Yeah.” He nudged Hestia with his elbow, and in the firelight his smile was so affectionate that it nearly plummeted into adoring. “You used to sing all the time in taverns, when we could afford them. You used to hang out in the tavern in Haven, too.”

Iron Bull looked over at her and grinned. “He’s got a point. My boys went to all that trouble finding a name for the tavern and painting a sign, and you don’t even come down anymore.”

“As soon as she got her own quarters, she decided that we were beneath her,” Blackwall said, with that guffawing laugh you could hear across rooms.

“Nah, she just couldn’t make it down the stairs without breaking her leg for the fourth time!” Sera yelled, cackling so hard she fell over on her back in the sand.

“Don’t pretend you’re worried for my health,” Hestia shot back. “You pointed and laughed when I fell on my face the other day.”

“It’s an improvement,” Dorian called, and Varric barked out a laugh.

Cullen bit his lip to keep from laughing when others piled on with the insults while Hestia’s face turned redder and redder, until she buried her face in her hands in a peal of laughter. Iron Bull pitched his head back and laughed long and hard, even Vivienne had cracked a smile.

“I’m so sorry everyone,” Hestia said, wiping a dramatic tear from her eye. “I didn’t realize you needed me to come down to the tavern and get shitfaced with you in order for you to think we’re friends.”
“Like you know how to get shitfaced,” Iron Bull drawled, legs spread out in front of him, empty bottles strewn around him in the sand. “You couldn’t drink Krem under the table and he’s a lightweight if I've ever seen one.”

“To be fair to Krem,” Varric raised his bottle in a toast to the absent lieutenant, “he’s only a lightweight by Chargers’ standards. The amount of alcohol your mercenaries go through on any given day could stun a team of horses.”

“That sounds like a challenge,” Dorian said, raising the bottle of wine he'd obtained from where, Cullen did not know. "How easily can you get a horse drunk, anyway?"

"You can find out some other night," Varric said, a tired grin on his face. "The Chargers aren't even here to defend their honor."

At his side, Cole sat quietly, petting Hawke’s blondish gingerish cat and whispering things to it. Whatever the spirit boy was saying must’ve made the cat happy, for it was purring loudly and insistently.

"I still say we should've brought my boys along," Bull grumbled, but his voice was pitched to carry. "Wardens wouldn't be any match for Skinner and Grim flanking them."

Cullen rolled his eyes and plunked the bottle in his hands down in the sand. Sera picked it up and emptied it. "It was either The Chargers stay back to defend the keep or Rylen and his best sergeants do it."

"Or you could've stayed behind," Hawke shot at him, eyes narrowed. Cullen looked at her through the flames of the bonfire, at the golden light playing on her tawny brown skin and turning her cloud of red hair into fire. She leaned back on one hand, the picture of ease. But Cullen knew how fast she was, knew that her repose was the ease of a coiled snake ready to strike. “Wouldn’t be the first time you’d sent better men to fight and die against a horde of warriors.”

Cullen curled his lip, feeling that simmering blood-boiling anger that always appeared when she was in earshot. “Yes, yes, I remember. You killed the Arishok in single combat and won the day, why even bother to have templars at all?” he snapped, for he remembered vividly her boasting after being named Champion of Kirkwall. “Never mind the fact that my men saved hundreds of innocent people from conversion and execution, while you wasted time defending the honor of a pirate raider, if there ever was such a thing.”

He saw Hawke puffing up with righteous indignation, but before she could say anything else, Varric put a calming hand on her arm. “Come on, Hawke, you promised,” he said, that raspy voice calming her the way nobody else's could. “No fights tonight.”

Hawke held onto it another moment, then blew her breath out and settled back down again. “Fine, for you,” she told Varric, mouth still twisted into a snarl. “But if he says anything else about Isabela, I will be forced to fuck up his face.”

Again. Cullen and Varric heard the unspoken addition, but hopefully nobody else did. Cullen reached for the bottle Dorian offered and tried not to reach up and touch the scar on his mouth she’d given him just after Meredith died. She’ll be forced to fuck up my face again.

“Isabela can take care of herself,” Varric told her. "I'm pretty sure that she likes it when Curly insults her.”

Thankfully, the conversation moved on to more remote subjects and Cullen didn’t have to think
about the aftermath the Qunari invasion, when everything had begun to slip through his fingers like sand. He shuddered and took another drink of Dorian's wine, half listening to some filthy story Warden Commander Oghren and Shale were telling, something about breaking into Fort Drakon during the Blight to rescue the Hero Of Ferelden and Alistair Theirin. Cullen could see the boy he'd known in the story Oghren told, right down to the sarcastic remarks Alistair had used to cover his fear.

The night wore on and people bowed out and headed to their tents. Ben got to his feet and squeezed Hestia's shoulder as he left. Dorian went to bed a bit after Iron Bull left, and Blackwall went soon after. Sera whined but went off with Blackwall with the minimum of complaining. Hawke eventually wandered off, bending to press a kiss to the head of her blondish cat before heading to bed.

“Shouldn’t you be getting to bed too, Hestia?” Armand asked, his hand gently stroking the arm of his wife, who had fallen asleep in his lap. “Savior of the faithful and all that?”

“Oh, I can’t go to bed yet,” Hestia said, taking another sip from the bottle before passing it to Cassandra. “My tent is currently occupied.”

Cassandra furrowed her brow. “Aren’t you sharing your tent with your brother? Of course it will be occupied.”

“Yes.” Hestia nodded sagely, but Cullen could see the twinkle in her eye all the way from here. She waited until Cassandra had the bottle halfway to her lips to say, “But Shay is currently sharing my tent with Rylen.”

Cassandra spewed out her mouthful in an alcoholic mist while every Trevelyan burst into peals of laughter. Cullen couldn’t keep from joining in even after Cassandra shot him a murderous glare.

Softly, Cole began humming a song, still petting the cat. After a moment, Sigrun perked up. “Hey, I know that one!” she declared, before starting into the song in a slightly off tune alto.

“As we go marching, marching, In the beauty of the day
A million darkened kitchens, A thousand mill lofts grey.”

Hestia’s smile was soft and fond, and Cullen felt his heart skip a beat when she joined in, singing in her wonderful lilting soprano.

“As touched with all the radiance, That a sudden sun discloses
For the people hear us singing, Bread and Roses, bread and roses.”

Cullen felt his muscles relax, and had to put a hand over his mouth to stop the no doubt ridiculous smile spreading across his face. It had been several months since Cullen had first heard her sing, and Hestia’s voice was just as lovely as it had been the night before they closed the Breach. The night before everything changed.

“I, uh,” Sigrun trailed off and looked around. She shrugged with a guilty smile. “I don’t know any more verses, actually,” she said with a little laugh.

“Hestia does.” Cole said, smiling softly across the fire at Hestia, who nodded with a fond smile to the spirit boy.

“Armand, will you help me?” she asked her cousin.

Armand Trevelyan looked up from smiling fondly at his slumbering wife, to say, “Of course dear
cousin, it would be my pleasure.”

Cullen’s eyebrows shot up when the warden took a breath and began in a warm and melting baritone. Hestia’s voice matched his in harmony to create a breathtaking duet.

“As we go marching, marching, We battle too for men
For they are women's children, And we mother them again
Our lives shall not be sweetened, From birth until life closes
Hearts starve as well as bodies, Give us bread, but give us roses.”

One by one, those who knew the words began to join in, following the lead of the most talented singers in the group. Cullen looked around in wonder, feeling something unclenching in his chest that had squatted there for days, keeping him from catching his breath. Tomorrow, everything is going to change, Cullen thought, could feel it there in his heart, as true and real as anything he’d ever believed in. We’ve been pushing back against the tide, but this fight will surely decide if the Inquisition will stand the test of time.

He looked at Hestia, could feel something more than loyalty overtake him. It wasn’t romantic, not really. It was more than that. It was faith. He looked back at Cassandra, and she caught his eye with her eyes shining with the same light his must be reflecting. Cullen had had cause to question everything about his life, every decision he had ever made that had taken him to the point of standing against his Knight Commander, of seeing that all he had believed in was built of sand.

Hestia reached over and clasped Vivienne’s hand on her own, a teasing smile on her face that Madame De Fer softly returned.

I will never regret believing in her, Cullen thought, and he joined in the song.

“Small art and love and beauty their trudging spirits knew—
Yes, it is Bread we fight for—but we fight for Roses, too.”

Chapter End Notes

If it isn't apparent yet, I love union songs.

as always, a big hug and a kiss for Illyria_Lives, for sharing this big fucked up family with me. An enormous thank you to RileySFS for beta reading this chapter and fixing literally every grammar mistake, I owe you my life.

Right now i’m verymerrysusuwatarisprinkles on tumblr and sootsprites94 on twitter, comments and kudos feed the fanfic machine!
Happy Holidays everyone, your gift this year is an earth shattering reveal!

As always, thanks is owed to Illyria_Lives, for sharing this big fucked up family with me. You are the best of my life

right now i'm verymerrysuswatarisprinkles on tumblr, and i'm always @sootprites94 on twitter. Comments feed the fanfic machine!

This is like some kind of nightmare, Hestia thought, charging forward with the Amaranthine Wardens through the broken gates. She’d watched her men die to get here to this very point and she felt those deaths like something sharp in her heart. She saw demons fighting side by side with warden mages, and the sheer wrongness of it was enough to turn anybody's stomach.

Iron Bull let out a mighty laugh as he downed the last shade. “One down!” He shouted, turning a feral smile to Hestia. “Three silver I can get more demons than the rest of you!”

“Not bloody likely!” Shouted Nathaniel, flipping a knife and neatly throwing it between the eyes of a warden mage, who dropped like a stone. When he retrieved the knife, it was with a quick prayer to the Maker.

“We'll compare numbers after this is over!” Oghren said with that loud and distinctive snigger. “Come on, you ugly nug-thumpers!” This he addressed to the rage demons that had come round the corner to bear down on them.

“Well I’m glad somebody is enjoying themselves.” Hestia muttered close enough for Vivienne to hear her, if the delicate snort was any indication.

Up a flight of stairs and around a bend and Hestia was already hopelessly turned around. The smell of smoke was everywhere, the screams of demons mixed with the shouts of warriors and the crash of sword against shield. The endless rooms and stairs blended together into one moonlit corridor, filled with rubble from flying stones and abandoned helmets, eagle wings spread out from the ears in defiance.

For a heartstopping instant, Hestia was sure that Seph was fighting among the warden mages. A moment later, the mage was bested and it became clear that the elven man was not her cousin.

Hestia swallowed back her worry at the sight of three warden mages that had turned on their brothers in arms, setting the demons after the senior wardens. She pulled back her lips in a snarl and kicked herself into a fade step, coming to stand between a warden archer and a shade that had been bearing down on her. With a twist of a hand she slammed the staff on the baked flagstones and froze the shade into a solid block of demon, then followed that by bringing up the butt of the staff, and the heavy metal club Dagna had fitted there, to hit the icicle hard enough to shatter.

Hestia blew a lock of hair from her face and looked over her shoulder at the Warden, who stood there with an arrow nocked, looking entirely nonplussed. “You’re welcome.” Hestia told her,
covering the warden with a shield with a flick of her wrist before fade stepping away.

Once the demons were dead, the remaining wardens looked at Hestia and her companions warily, weapons still drawn. “Keep your distance!” Snapped a warrior, but he was puffing for breath.

Oghren cleared his throat and stepped forward, ignoring or not seeing Hestia’s raised eyebrow. “We’re here to stop Clarel from making the biggest mistake of her life, not to shed more warden blood.”

“If you fall back, you won’t be harmed.” Hestia agreed, gaze flickering from one warden to the next. Even at rest, these were the best trained warriors in Thedas, it was best to be on your guard.

The warriors considered this, but quickly laid down their arms. “All right,” The archer said, slackening the bow string. “We’ll stay clear. I don’t want any part of this.”

“Thank you for that Hestia,” Armand said to her when he came to her side, wiping sweat from his forehead. “I don’t relish the thought of killing more of my brothers.”

“Believe me Armand,” Hestia told him, reaching into her pack and passing a lyrium flask to Velanna, “The less blood shed tonight, the better.”

But blood was being shed everywhere she turned. They ducked as another stone the size of a small cow was hurled across the sky, landing with a bone shaking thud and tossing rubble over their heads. They followed the lead of Armand and Oghren, both warriors having been in the keep at least once before. The smell of smoke choked her nose, the rattle of swords and screams of demons echoed all around them, noises tossed around by the ancient echoing flagstones.

The face of Corliss loomed out of the darkness, eyes wild and face covered in blood. Hestia blinked the sweat from her eyes and the warden backed up, dropping her knives and nodding to Nathaniel, her face lined with duster tattoos.

**Focus.** Hestia told herself, pressing her back against the stone, barely avoiding the stream of ice and pain the despair demon had aimed at her. *Keep them safe. Keep them alive.* She glanced at the anchor, sitting there in the middle of her palm, quiet and innocuous. *Time for this thing to do some good.*

“Don’t let her get away!” She shouted around the corner, using the weight at the end of her staff to scrape a new sigil across the stone, green and yellow light shining in her hands as the little details filled themselves in with writing, following the pattern in her mind. It took but moments but it felt like a lifetime before Hestia could confidently shout, “Get clear!”

She planted her feet, shook out her left hand and forced the anchor awake. The sky rained down on them, tossing men and dwarfs from their feet, crushing demons and soldiers beneath stones the size of large pigs that slammed into the flagstones. The dying shriek of the despair demon was the small consolation for the look on Niora Lavellans face when the whole wall collapsed inward, sending all of them scrambling for stable ground.

“How are we meant to find our way back to honor if we destroy the path behind us?” Niora asked, when Armand came to her side and gently led his wife away.

“Focus my love.” Armand told her softly, chucking her under the chin, raising her dark eyes to meet his. “We can save them after this fighting is done.”

Hestia wasn’t sure she could share Armand’s confidence.
The battlements were a mess of blocked paths and demons and Inquisition soldiers, each of her men fighting with more ferocity than a dragon. They found Hawke at a choke point, gleefully setting a pride demon on fire to keep its attention of Anders, who was covertly healing the other men, Inquisition and Warden alike. His skin was crackling with blue fire, but as soon as he saw Nathaniel and Sigrun charging in, he poofed back into a blondish gingerish cat and streaked out of harm's way.

And always, always, the frantic beat of her heart that told Hestia she was running out of time. _Too much to do, not enough time_, she thought, watching good men and women cut down by warden warriors, by warden mages, by demons of every shape and color. _Can’t save them, can’t save them all, the sooner we get to Clarel the sooner all this stops._

When they reached the courtyard, for one heartstopping instant Hestia thought they were too late. The shimmering tear in the fade dominated the keeps courtyard, and Hestia could see dozens of wardens turning towards them, each one armed to the teeth. The haze of incense and the sizzling smell of ozone told her just how much magic had been brought to bear to thin the veil this much, that is was just a spell or two away from spilling over into the waking world.

At the far end of the courtyard, Hestia could see the weaselly face of Lord Erimond, still in his fine leathers, his features twisted into an annoyed scowl. The woman next to him, tall and slim with a shorn head and tired eyes, must’ve been Warden Commander Clarel herself. The swirling red around her arms could only mean that Clarel was moments from having her mind stolen by Corypheus.

Hestia didn’t think; she simply acted. She kicked herself into a fade step, bypassing the first line of warden warriors between them and the mindless mages, and skidded to a stop on the other side, trying to fight down the nausea she had come to expect from moving through a fade tear.

“Stop!” Hestia all but screamed, drawing the attention of Clarel and Erimond. “Clarel, stop! Before it’s too late!”

“Seize her!” Erimond cried, his face falling somewhere between surprise and fear. “We must complete the ritual!”

Hestia ignored him, never took her eyes off the Warden Commander, off the face lined with every bloody battle and every forgotten thanks. “Clarel, if you do this, you will leave your men and the world undefended!” She shouted, desperation and fatigue turning her voice hoarse.

“Doing nothing at all leaves the world undefended!” Erimond returned, doing his best to shout over her, as if he could make what Hestia was saying any less true with volume alone. “Then the Blight rises with no Wardens to stop it, and the whole world dies! Is that what you want?”

The rasping gravelly voice of Oghren cut off whatever the man was going to say next. “Aww shut up you sodding nug-thumper!” The dwarf roared, with more rage and volume than Hestia would’ve thought possible. “The only thing you care about is yourself and the attention of Corypheus!”

_That_ got Clarel’s attention. “Corypheus?” She repeated, brows furrowing. “But he’s dead.”

Hawke leapt up on a low wall and raised her fist in the air, fire dancing merrily around it. “I was there Clarel!” She shouted, drawing the eyes of the warden warriors, moths to a flame. “He can twist minds, conjure images that were never there, stir the taint in a wardens blood!” Seeing the hesitation on the warden commander’s face, Elle pressed her advantage. “Why imprison him to begin with, unless he can’t be killed by normal means?”
With so many eyes on Hawke, Hestia took a chance and mounted the steps one at a time, voice calm, eyes soft, as soothing as if Clarel were a skittish horse. “I’ve seen him with my own eyes,” she told the warden enchanter. “I’ve seen the things that he can do. Is it so far-fetched to suppose the Calling in your head is his work?”

Clarel looked at Hestia with the eyes of a tactician, the eyes of a scholar. Hestia had read the file Leliana had compiled on Clarel de Chason back to front, and Hestia knew this woman had not always been a warrior, she had been an Enchanter at the White Spire for years before taking the Grey.

“What else but a creature of Blight benefits from the deaths of Wardens?” Hestia asked her, desperately hoping that scholars mind was still there under the years of war and bloody tactics. “Especially if it leaves two hundred talented mages with pet demons, and no minds of their own.”

“Don’t listen to her Clarel!” Erimond hissed. “These people are jealous of your strength! Of your place in history!”

But in a flash Hestia could see that Erimond had overplayed his hand. Hestia had read that file backwards and forwards, and Warden Commander Clarel’s biggest flaw had never been vanity.

“Wardens have no place in history, magister.” A low soothing voice cut across the courtyard, from where Niora Lavellan had nimbly leapt up on a pile of rubble. “We stand as the bulwark between the Blight and the innocents it would destroy. We lay down our lives for the world and call it good.” Her wide dark eyes surveyed the crowd of Wardens, her brothers and sisters in arms drinking in her voice and her conviction as sailors becalmed in the saltiest seas. “We don’t ask for thanks. We don’t require them.”

“If you need more proof, I have it.” Hestia told Clarel, stopping halfway up the steps. “Tell me the truth Clarel, if you weren’t convinced that your time in this world was ending, would you ever have considered a ritual like this? One that has left your fellow mages so changed? One that would cost you the lives of your brothers, your friends?”

And for one small moment, Hestia was sure it had worked. Clarel put a hand to her brow, saying, “Perhaps... we could test the truth of these charges, to avoid further bloodshed.”

Erimond sneered at Clarel, grabbing up his staff and began banging it rhythmically against the flagstones, a sickeningly familiar red miasma rising from the red. “Or perhaps I should bring in a more reliable ally!”

With the rattling scream that had haunted her nightmares for months, the archdemon that Corypheus had brought into this world to scour and destroy announced its presence. Hestia whipped around to see her largest enemy wing her way across the sky, opening her jaws to breath her terrible flames. With a clatter of stonework she landed on the parapet, sending a griffon statue crashing to the ground.

Chaos erupted in the courtyard; shouting and screaming adding to the din as the dragon roared again. The mages continued their ritual to tear open the veil, a scream from beyond when something peered through with entirely too many eyes. Erimond pounded the butt of his staff on the flagstones, the miasma curling up and up to envelop his hands and feet, and all through it Hestia could hear the distant clanging of sword against shield, the crash of stones flung from trebuchets as they collided again with the stone, men fighting and dying for no reason at all...

And right there, in the eye of the storm, was Warden Commander Clarel. Hestia saw the enchanter’s eyes narrow as she put the pieces together, finally seeing what Erimond had been after all along.
With a shout like an enraged animal, Clarel gathered her power and filled Erimond with lighting.

It was definitely satisfying to see Erimond convulse and crumple to the ground, but unfortunately it meant that the archdemon’s focus shifted and centered on Clarel. Hestia reached for a shield but she was too late, the archdemon let loose a gout of fire that the Warden Commander just barely dodged in time. Erimond regained himself and ran for cover, heading up the steps and out of sight in moments.

Clarel turned to her assembled wardens, staff in hand, shouting, “Help the Inquisitor,” before she gave chase after the mutinous magister.

The ensuing fight was mostly a blur. Demons tumbled from the rift, the archdemon took to the air and screamed, breathing fire at anything that moved too much. Hestia regretted having to kill the warden mages, but they fought tooth and nail against their own brothers and it was surely kinder for her to stop them than force Armand or Sigrun to do it.

When the last of the demons were dead, Hestia gave chase after Clarel, a fade step putting her at the top of the stairs. She didn’t wait for the others to catch up to her, the most important thing was finding Clarel before Erimond had that infernal archdemon tear her apart. Hestia didn’t know how many senior wardens had died for that blood ritual, but one thing she knew for certain. A leaderless force was just as dangerous as one with corrupt leadership; Seeker Lambert had been assassinated and the templars had fallen into Corypheus’s waiting arms.

It could not be allowed to happen again.

It was Nathaniel that caught up to her first, puffing like an angry bull. "What was plan B meant to be?" He shouted over the din of screaming and the flapping of enormous wings, sounding strangely like the rippling of sails in a storm.

“Stop the fighting, stop the archdemon, save Clarel.” Hestia told him shortly, casting a shield over the both of them with a flick of her wrist.

“I like it.” The Iron Bull said from behind them, his heavy steps strangely comforting to her right now. “Simple, easy to remember.”

“Where’s Velanna?” Oghren demanded, glaring up at Nathaniel. “Where’s Sigrun?”

“They did a runner.” Nathaniel told him, gasping out the words. “I sent them to tell the other Warden officers that the fighting stopped. Just us against the demons and mages now.”

“Never thought I’d say this,” Oghren grunted, “But I could really use that witches weird magic right about now.”

Hestia didn’t have the time to ask him what he meant, because with a screech and a clatter of stones, the archdemon lit on the side of Adaments walls. How the ancient keep was supporting her weight like that Hestia didn’t know but there wasn’t really time to wonder about it. The great beast stuck her head between two columns and sucked in a breath, and Hestia could see those flames burning in the back of her throat.

Hestia tripped over herself trying to reverse her steps and Iron Bull dragged her back into an alcove to avoid the mouthful of flame. Oghren diving in behind them just in time to avoid his eyebrows being burnt off. Hestia brought up a shield over the four of them just a moment too late, and the heat threatened to crack her skin across her bones. But they lived.

Hestia didn’t have time to ask after the others, Sera was there streaking past their hiding place,
Vivienne at her heels. Hestia kicked herself into a fade step in order to keep up with them, she came out of it just ahead and glimpsed Clarel’s departing back.

By the time they mounted the stairs and rounded the bend, Clarel had disappeared around another corner but now Nathaniel took the lead, and they came out on the highest watchtower, a wide open area that overlooked the Abyssal Rift. The haze of incense and magic could be seen from here, rising like smoke from a house fire.

Erimond was curled up on the flagstones, rocking himself gently while Clarel bore down on him, lightning dancing around her hands. The look on her face was something to behold.

“You could have served a new god.” Erimond moaned.

“I will never serve the blight!” Clarel snarled at him.

And that’s when the archdemon dropped out of the sky and closed those great jaws around her.

Hestia watched in horror as those long sharp teeth closed around Clarel’s midsection and dug in. The archdemon flapped her wings once, the air pressure forcing them all to their knees, and lifted herself and her prize into the air. She settled on a tower and shook Clarel like a ragdoll, back and forth before finally letting go and letting the limp body sail through the air and crash hard on the baked flagstones.

“Clarel!” Niora yelled, starting towards the Warden Commander.

But the archdemon was advancing toward them now, her beady malevolent eyes fixed on them. Her jaws were open, those teeth dripping with blood and pain, and Armand picked his wife up around the middle and dragged her back to the safety of the group.

They all backed away, thought Hestia was conscious of just how little room there was to back up into, before they were each of them forced to jump from the ledge into the black abyss that, legend has it, went all the way down the Deep Roads and into ancient darkspawn warrens. The rattling growl of the dragon was almost familiar as her own breath at this point, and Hestia braced herself for the fight of her life.

*The wardens are experts at killing archdemons,* Hestia thought wildly, stamping down the hysterical laughter that the panic was forcing up her throat. *She picked the perfect place to die.*

With a roar, the archdemon leapt, Hestia felt three mana shields snap up around them and fumbled for her own, eyes filled with the image of teeth and blood and death.

But Clarel was there beneath the archdemon, still clinging to life, and strong enough for one last spell, and what a spell it was. She hit the dragon with all the lightning the enchanter could bring to bear, striking at a weak point between the front legs of the beast and drawing enough blood to send the dragon into the sky, shrieking and flailing its long terrible claws.

The impact of the creature broke the stones beneath her, and the archdemon went spiraling downwards into the Abyssal Rift, still flailing and shrieking. Unfortunately, the impact broke the stones beneath Hestia too, and she and her friends struggled towards safety as the watchtower crumbled below them and flagstones disappeared below their feet.

Hestia heard a cry behind her and checked over her shoulder to see Armand struggling at the edge of the break, only his grip on the stone keeping him from dropping down down down into the endless blackness below. Hestia threw herself toward him, grasping his arm and hauling him back over the side. But the stones were still shifting and there was no time to stop, and no chance of
safety and suddenly there was no ground beneath her feet.

The fortress had stood on this perch for more than four hundred years, a testament to the strength and commitment of the Grey Wardens. The stones were steeped in warmth and history and blood and death. Nothing had been strong enough to break it since 1:75 Divine, not darkspawn, not griffons, not the waning faith of the world. But tonight, the stones broke beneath her feet, and Hestia felt herself falling…

Falling...

falling...

falling...

and then-

“This is like some kind of nightmare.” Hestia said, picking herself up from the ground she’d landed on.

“If this is the afterlife, the chantry owes me an apology.” Hawke said, turning on the spot. Her spot was upside down on a floating chunk of stone, but she otherwise looked entirely the same. “This looks nothing like the Makers bosom.”

“You know,” said a new voice that had Hestia whipping around to find him, “Once in a while you do have to take things seriously Hawke.”

A tall man stood a few meters behind her. Tall, rail thin with a tired smile, bags under his eyes and curiously familiar gingery blonde hair. But it was the staff and crackles of blue lightning dancing over his skin that truly gave him away.

“What would be the point?” Elle asked, jumping down from where she stood and taking her place next to him. “You’re serious enough for the both of us.”

“Now dear, this is no time for filthy lies.” Anders responded, looking at the redheaded spitfire with exasperated affection.

“And here I thought awful vomit inducing sights were behind us when we killed that Broodmother.” Nathaniel Howe commented brightly, hopping nimbly down from his perch upside down on a stone that seemed to be dripping some sort of liquid. Oghren stood next to him, looking incredibly unimpressed.

“Suddenly I’m sodding happy dwarves don’t dream.” He said, tugging on his beard with one hand. “This is what Velanna has to look at every night?”

“Well, this is certainly interesting.” Armand said, reaching out to tug his wife closer to his side. “Hestia did something with that mark of hers. If I’m not wrong-”

“This is the Fade.” Niora finished, her wide elven eyes staring around, trying to see everything at once. After a moment, she frowned. “But, it's not right.”

“What do you mean?” Armand asked her.
“No, I feel it too.” Anders said quietly, pressing his hand to his forehead. The blue lightning was still crackling over his skin but it didn’t seem to affect him. “There’s something…”

“Whatever creature has hold of this place, it’s very strong.” Niora said, turning in circles before centering her gaze on the Black City. The warden mage swallowed and said gravely, “It’s not here to help us.”

“The Fade itself is reacting to our presence here, much more strongly than I have ever seen before.” Vivienne mused, her scholars mind taking the forefront before a sneer curled her lips. “But before we get too caught up in how and why we’re here now, I feel the need to point out the elephant in the room, so to speak.”

She turned on her heel and stared directly at Hawke and Anders, who looked back at her blankly. Eventually, Hawke arched an eyebrow. “Is there something on my face?”

“You expect us to traverse this unknown place with a known malificar?!” Vivienne sneered, ice beginning to crackle around the head of her staff.

“Well if you’d rather get eaten by demons alone, be my fucking guest.” Hawke put herself physically between Vivienne and Anders, flames beginning to lick at her fingers.

On the other side of the clearing, Sera was not very quietly having a breakdown. Every curse she apparently knew was falling out of her mouth, and Hestia didn’t blame her. Iron Bull was muttering to himself, something about demons and Krem being an asshole.

Hestia moved closer to Sera, who was shaking visibly now. “Sera, Sera look at me.” She said. Sera looked up with wide frightened eyes. “Where in the fuck did you put us Hestia?” she yelped. “We were falling right? Are- are- are- are- are we dead? Is this it? We died?”

“I don’t think so.” Hestia chafed her hands up and down Sera’s arms, trying to help the girl focus. “I opened a rift, I think. We’re not dead, we’re in the Fade.”

“That’s not better!” Sera yelled. “That’s the opposite of better!”

“It’s going to be okay Sera.” Hestia took hold of the girl’s hands and squeezed, willing her voice to remain calm. In truth, she wasn’t much happier than Sera was about this, but that wouldn’t do either of them any good right now. “I promise you, we are going to make it out of this. We are going to be fine.”

A commotion behind them drew Sera’s attention, and Hestia turned around just in time to snap up a barrier to protect them both from the clash of fire and ice that was taking place between Vivienne and Hawke. Anders was behind them, his feet encased in ice and blue lighting crackling wildly, purple and white mana growing in the tip of his staff.

“No! Vivienne knock it off!” Iron Bull ran forward and picked up Vivienne, hauling her backwards and knocking the staff from her hands.

“Hold it now girlie!” Oghren leapt between two ice glyphs and knocked Hawke to the ground, interrupting a spell Hawke had been growing and sending the magic spiraling off into the abyss.

The backlash of the spent power blew Hestia’s hair back, but it was the snarl on Hawke’s face that really gave her pause when she rushed between the two brawling mages. And it had been a brawl, though short lived. Hawke’s lip was bloodied and Vivienne was spitting mad.
"The Iron Bull, you have three seconds to get out of my way," Vivienne growled, her clenched fists slowly turning to blocks of ice. "Or you will be very sorry indeed."

Iron Bull stood before her, a wall of a man, solid and immovable. "I’m certain I would Ma’am." He told her, that deep voice deceptively soft and soothing. "But you really shouldn’t be attacking our allies when we’re in hostile territory. And it don’t get much more hostile than this."

"He is not our ally!" Vivienne spat, one shaking hand pointing at Anders, murder in her eyes. She looked to be building another ice glyph or some such magic, so Hestia summoned her power and blew out a mind blast, and thankfully she was close enough that the spell affected Hawke as well.

It was taking two wardens and Anders to hold Elle Hawke back, and they were struggling heavily. Fire mages usually ran hot, and her boots were smoking. Her hair looked even more red, if at all possible, and her eyes had been filled with the golden color of the flames she favored so heavily.

Anders stood before her with unnerving calm, his hands cupping Hawke’s face with a gentleness that hurt to look at. "Love, I need you to be calm." He said to her, in that tired voice Hestia recognized. "We can’t both be flying off the handle."

“I’m not going to stand here and let this coddled circle snob talk to you like that.” Elle snapped, struggling against the combined strength of Armand and Nathaniel. They looked to be straining to hold her in place, and it was no wonder. Elle Hawke was a tall woman, powerfully built, with the magical talent to match.

No wonder Cullen hates her. Hestia thought, watching this display out of the corner of her eye. He’s scared of her, and hates that he’s scared. He knows she could beat him if it came to that. The anger of a woman like that garners anger and fear in equal measure.

Vivienne’s chin jerked up in response to insult, but she refrained from snapping back any of the caustic words that barbed tongue could produce. Instead, her glittering eyes found Hestia’s face. It took Madame De Fer the barest of moments to understand, and when she did those glittering eyes narrowed.

“How long have you known about this?” Vivienne demanded in a furious whisper.

Bull was the better liar, but he said nothing. So Hestia stooped to collect the staff Vivienne had lost, and when she straightened she told the enchanter, “Four weeks.”

Sera had shied away from the wardens, eyes still darting every which way. "How did you manage to keep it a secret from Cully and the Shadow of Birds for so long?"

Hestia felt her heart clench at the thought of her decision to keep Cullen in the dark. It had been necessary, or so she thought at the time. Cullen and Hawke could not be within ten meters of each other without getting into a shouting match. Putting Anders into the equation seemed doomed to disaster. Even so, lying to Cullen hadn’t been easy.

“You have been harboring Thedas’s most wanted for four weeks?” Vivienne looked as though steam would shoot from her ears at any moment.

“Are you angry she did it or that she didn’t tell you?” Sera narrowed her eyes at Vivienne.

“Spare me your judgement little Sera.” Vivienne snapped, more than eager to fight with someone, anyone. “If you had any idea of the ramifications of what he did.”
Hestia checked over her shoulder, more than used to Sera and Vivienne’s little arguments. Hawke was still talking to Anders but she was no longer struggling and the smoke had cleared away.

“We can’t reduce all our enemies to ash, love.” Anders told her.

“I don’t see why not,” Hawke said, but she was smiling as she said it.

At a look from Hestia, Armand let go of Hawke and stepped away, moving immediately to Niora’s side, whispering in her ear and looping his fingers loosely around her wrist. She’d wandered away from the group while the rest of them argued, but as soon as Armand spoke to her she looked up and nodded.

Hestia tuned in to what Sera and Vivienne were fighting about just in time to hear the enchanter say, “All the progress I had made, the respect I had garnered for the Circle, all my hard work vanished in a single afternoon.”

She turned to the enchanter and wordlessly held out the staff, which Vivienne took with the maximum amount of glaring.

“Inquisitor.” Vivienne said, that fury still alive in her eyes. “Do you honestly believe that we can trust these people not to leave us to die the first chance they get?”

“Since my dear cousin is the only one who could possibly get us out of here, I say it’s a good bet.” Armand said dryly, walking over to stand at Hestia’s shoulder. “I think ‘enemy of my enemy’ is a good enough excuse to work together, don’t you?”

Vivienne’s glare could have melted the snow off the spine of the Frostbacks. She cut her eyes to Hestia and said only for her to hear, “We will discuss this. Later.”

Hestia nodded to her, and did not look away until Vivienne took a breath and shook off the last of her gathered power.

“If it means us getting out of here, yeah fine.” Sera snapped, her arms wrapped around her midsection. “Let’s bloody go.”

“Go where?” Nathaniel asked irritably. “It’s not like there’s a map of the Fade just lying around.”

“Nobody can map the Fade.” Niora murmured, still staring around at everything and anything. “The paths are ever changing.”

“I… think he was being sarcastic, my love.” Armand told her gently.

Niora frowned absently, then nodded at her husband. “Thank you,” She told him softly, “I forget sometimes that other people don’t speak as sincerely as you do.”

“Look,” Anders pointed one hand sheathed in flickering light, indicating a swirling rift in the sky. “The Inquisitor opened a rift, but there was another in the courtyard. Perhaps that’s it?”

“Lavellan just said nobody can map the Fade.” Nathaniel gestured to the swirling tear. “What if we can’t reach it? What if it spits us out thousands of miles away?”


Anders pressed two fingers to the bridge of his nose, his face contorting in pain. “Justice is… I can’t hear him.” He said, looking down at Hawke with fear in his eyes. “He’s here, I know he is
"This is new." Hawke murmured, her eyes wide and confused. "I thought he’d be more stable after we left Kirkwall. Is he hurting you again?"

"No, I don’t think so." Anders eyes were frightened as Oghren and Nathaniel moved closer, faces concerned. "He… he can’t be gone, can he?"

Hestia had expected him to be happy about the prospect of being free of his demon. But on the contrary, Anders looked positively terrified of the prospect of losing Justice, and he wasn’t the only one. Oghren and Nathaniel looked just as worried and Hestia had not the faintest idea why.

*If I could free myself from this curse,* Saskia had whispered to her, deep in the dark, *I would do it in a heartbeat.*

"We can discuss this while walking, can’t we?" Hestia snapped, seeing Vivienne beginning to puff up in indignation. "The sooner we find a way out of here, the better. Madame De Fer, if you would take point?"

She shouldered her staff and led her way across the nightmarish marsh, not even checking to see if they were following her, knowing with certainty that they would fall in behind her. After almost a year of leading scouting parties, some things were simply habit.

The wide bog they had landed themselves in was unlike any place Hestia had ever known. Rocky outcroppings jutted in every direction, some great formations simply hanging in the air. The air was rank with mold and rot and Maker knows what else, and perhaps only he did know. This was not the dream world that Elayna shaped so freely on the occasions she had dragged Hestia and Seraphina into her waking dreamstate. This wasn’t even the strange twisting paths of the ocean beds Hestia found on the rare occasion she dreamed on her own.

This place was the true face of the Fade, murky and dark and hostile to all of them. Hestia could not get out of there fast enough.

Bull was still muttering. "'Hey chief, let’s join the Inquisition! Good fights for a good cause!' I don’t know Krem. I hear there are demons. ‘Ah, don’t worry about the demons chief! I’m sure we won’t see many!’" He grumbled to himself. “Asshole. Everyone, if I get possessed, feint on my blind side, then go low. Cullen says I leave myself open.”

Hestia swallowed roughly. The thought of Cullen left an ache in her chest, sharper than she’d thought it would be. Had it been only two days ago he’d nearly kissed her? Had they sat at the fire and sang marching songs, voices twining in harmony? Had that been a dream? It seemed like a completely different woman than whoever she was now.

"That’s a good idea." She heard herself say. “Sera, take my knife now. If you have to take me out, get my staff away from me. I’m still not great with magic without a foci."

"What are you on about?" Sera snapped, her hands were still shaking. Hestia handed off the knife all the same.

"Mine too." Elle agreed, handing a boot knife to Anders, who took one look at the thing and threw it away to parts unknown. “Hey!” She protested without any real heat. “I wanted that back!”

"You know how I feel about blood magic." Anders told her sternly, though he couldn’t help the affection that warmed his words.
Elle looked up at him with dark beguiling eyes. “That it’s reprehensible for any good Circle mage but perfectly fine for me?” She wheedled, teasing a smile onto her lover’s worried face.

“Something like that.” Anders muttered, tangling long thin fingers with Elle’s darker hand, both seemingly unafraid of the arcs of blue lighting that flashed soundlessly across Anders’ skin.

Vivienne took a breath to comment or antagonize, but Hestia put a hand on her shoulder and squeezed hard, and so Vivienne desisted.

Instead, the enchanter turned her head and murmured to Hestia, “And what are we meant to do with them when we return to the waking world? Surely you’re not simply letting them leave.”

Hestia swallowed. She had thought about that very thing almost constantly since Anders had relocated her shoulder four weeks ago. During the Mage and Templar war, Hestia had admired Anders greatly. The romance of the runaway apostate, sacrificing himself and doing what must be done for his fellow mages had been very attractive indeed. But as the fighting wore on, as the casualties mounted and the everyday realities of being on the run set in, violence began to fill her with fatigue.

Hestia thought of her apprentices and the elderly enchanters that must’ve suffered greatly, the tranquil that would follow orders to the letter and forget to feed themselves if they were left alone, of Elayna and her healing hands who flinched if someone shouted too loud.

*There is more than one way to look at a stone wall. I saw a prison, but others saw protection. Were any of us right?*

But at the thought of the Ostwick Circle, Hestia began to hear the rattle of library chains and the weeping of scared children. The sounds were real too; Armand flinched when he heard the cry of the baby they took away from Seraphina’s friend despite the girl’s protests. The templar that begot the child was sent away but the girl didn’t blame the babe for his trespasses, and she wept into the night when the little boy was stolen from her arms.

“We have to survive this place first.” Hestia told Vivienne, hoping her voice did not shake.

Vivienne sneered at that, but she only replied, “By your leave Inquisitor. But make a decision soon, before the choice is made for you.”

The path twisted and turned, with great jutting rocks blocking their view, metal spires taken from the Free Marches and great wooden thrones from Ferelden. Dripping candles floated upside down about an altar to Andraste, but the statue was nothing like any Andraste Hestia had ever seen. It was splintered in the middle, as if someone had taken a greataxe to it but found themselves too weak or unskilled to split the wood completely. The face had been worn away but she held a sword in one hand and the other was sheathed in bright blue flames.

*In Tevinter, we believe Andraste was a mortal woman. A mage. Hestia recalled Dorian’s long ago words when he and Shay had been comparing ideologies. Makes what we did to her less damning, I suppose.*

*Wouldn’t that make it more so? Or was she considered a runaway slave, and thus deserving of punishment?* Shay had asked. Dorian had coughed and looked away.

Hestia was about to remark upon the figure when Armand touched her shoulder gently. When she looked, he pointed behind her. “Is that who I think it is?” He murmured, sounding awestruck.

Hestia had never met the Divine. She hadn’t had the chance at the Conclave, not that a rebel mage
and smuggler would have ever been granted an audience with the Most Holy leader of the Chantry in all its smugness. But Hestia had listened to the Left and Right Hands speak of the Divine many times, had heard Leliana’s grief and Cassandra’s admiration. Divine Justinia had changed their lives, had changed Hestia’s in an indirect way.

They never told her Justinia had kind eyes.

“By the Maker.” Armand murmured, blue eyes transfixed by the woman in chantry finery. “Could that be…”

Justinia’s smile was like the first rays of dawn breaking over the horizon. “I greet you, Wardens.” Her eyes found Elle Hawke, she nodded slightly. “And you, Champion.”

Elle furrowed her brows. “There’s no way it’s really her. It’s got to be a demon, right?” She glanced up at Anders for confirmation.

"I concur." Vivienne murmured, her eyes narrowing in thought, though Hestia noted that the normal unshakeable confidence was absent from her voice. "Be cautious Inquisitor."

When Justinia spoke again, Hestia could hear the reverberation of the words in her mind. “You think my survival impossible, yet here you stand alive in the Fade yourselves. In truth, proving my existence either way would require time we do not have.”

“It’s not a very difficult question.” Elle snorted, one hand already reaching for her staff. “I’m a human, and you are…?"

Justinia simply said, “I am here to help you,” and something tight in Hestia’s chest relaxed. She was still terrified, but at least they had one ally in this place. “You do not remember what happened at the Temple of Sacred Ashes, Inquisitor.”

Behind her, Hestia heard Iron Bull muttering something about ‘impossible for the real divine to know that' but she paid him no mind.

Justinia heard him too. "I know because I have examined memories like yours, stolen by the demon that serves Corypheus. It is the Nightmare you forget upon waking. It feeds off memories of fear and darkness, growing fat upon the terror. The false calling that terrified the Wardens into making such grave mistakes? Its work."

Oghren’s face darkened. “Then it doesn’t sodding matter what it eats.” He growled. “It has to die.”

“You shall have your chance, brave warden.” Justinia inclined her head to him. “This place of darkness is it’s lair.”

Hestia could feel the group shift uncomfortably behind her. It was bad enough to be trapped here with the barest chance of escape, but now…

“The demon from the courtyard.” Niora said firmly, sounding more sure than she had all week. “Nothing happens here without it knowing. It’s blocking your demon from speaking to you.”

“Justice isn’t a demon.” said Anders, with echoed sentiments coming from Hawke, Oghren and Nathaniel. At the various confused looks, Anders crossed his arms. “Justice is a spirit, not a demon. He’s saved my life more than once.”

“First Therinfal Redoubt, and now again.” Bull said, exchanging a glance with Vivienne. “What do you think ma’am?”
Hestia remembered the report they had written of the Envy demon that had been in charge of corrupting the templar order. It had taken Iron Bull and the Chargers days to track it down and kill it, even with Madame De Fer’s help. She turned to look at the two of them, seeing the worried look they shared.

“Corypheus seems to have a lot of demons at his disposal.” Vivienne murmured, her quick eyes finding Hestias. “How does he come to command so many, I wonder?”

“I know not how he commands his army of demons,” Justinia answered, causing Vivienne to recoil even further away from the seemingly harmless figure. “His power may come from the blight itself. But the Nightmare serves willingly, for Corypheus has brought much terror to this world.” At the confusion on their faces, Justinia raised a hand and said, “He was one of the magisters who unleashed the first blight upon the world, was he not? Every child’s cry as the archdemon circles, every dwarf’s whimper in the deep roads. The Nightmare has fed well.”

The words chilled Hestia to the bone, and all she could do was say, “Well, shit.” Behind her, Sera whimpered.

Justinia looked right at Hestia once again. “When you entered the fade at Haven, the demon took a piece of you. Before you do anything else, you must recover it.” With one smooth motion, Justinia waved a hand and a wraith appeared in the clearing just beyond where they were standing.

“These are your memories, Inquisitor.” Justinia told her.

At first, Hestia couldn’t move. She stood rooted to the spot, trying to calm her racing heart. The wraith floated aimlessly, a wispy vaguely human shape moving silently in the dark. The faint glow from the center of its chest the same color as the anchor. The same color as the Breach. Everything Hestia had ever been taught of spirits and demons told her she should banish the spirit for her own good. And yet...

“Don’t touch them!” Sera hissed when Hestia took a small step forward. “It’s a demon, it’s gonna break open your head and do a dance!”

“This thing isn’t going to leave until you do.” Hawke hissed, though her eyes were still trained on the Divine.

“Be cautious.” Vivienne warned again, but Hestia felt the change when her friend put a protection spell over her. It shimmered for a moment before descending over her like a shroud.

Hestia shivered, the weight of the spell was entirely too familiar to her and those memories were far too close for comfort at the moment. The Anchor buzzed like a hive of angry wasps but it was better than the alternative.

Behind them, Niora had drifted towards the Divine, her serene demeanor not changing a whit in this strange and hostile place, and was trying to gain more details about the Nightmare. Armand was with her, one hand on the small of Niora’s back, his eyes searching the Divine’s face, trying to fix whether she was genuine or a fake. Hestia couldn’t help but listen, it was better than the other awful sounds of this place.

“What is the Nightmare?” Niora asked softly.

“It is not simply fear. It is the terror you cannot remember, the horror your mind erases to protect you.” The Divine told her in grave tones. “When old memories no longer make the veteran soldiers
hand tremble, it is because the Nightmare has taken them. Most people avoid their fears. It is simple for the demon to steal the darkest fragments. They forget, and it feeds. Corypheus has helped it grow monstrous.

“It makes people forget the worst parts of their fears?” Armand said, probably only to Niora but they were all very quiet indeed after the Divine’s words. “It almost sounds like the nightmare is helping people.”

Justinia inclined her head, then said, “Perhaps it was, once. But now it helps none but Corypheus. By his hand it creates more fear and grows even stronger.” She shook her head. “In any case, robbing people of their fears is never a kindness. At best it is a mistake borne of compassion. Without fear, pain and failure, we cannot learn. We cannot grow.”

_We cannot learn._ Hestia took a deep breath and approached the wraith.

It twirled around and began to mirror her movements as she came closer, cocking its head when Hestia did, raising and lowering a shoulder as she did so. Hestia slowly moved around the wraith, never taking her eyes off it as the wraith began to circle her in response. The blank featureless face was unnerving to say the least, but more so was the sensation that Hestia was getting that this wraith had a heartbeat that was matching hers. That its chest was moving up and down at the same pace hers was, though it had no lungs nor a need to breathe this acrid air.

Hestia raised a hand and the wraith matched her. She stretched out her fingers and-

She was running down a passageway, one of the endless twisting corridors that threaded through the Temple of Sacred Ashes. She hadn’t meant to get so turned around but Seph was sure that the Conclave was going nowhere and was bound to break up any day. Seph was bound and determined to get her staff back before then, it had been a gift from one of her friends in the Ostwick Circle and they were both convinced that she’d never get it back if it was up to the chantry mothers or templars to find it for her. Weapons weren’t allowed in the temple but they had to be kept somewhere.

Hestia had stopped for just a moment to catch her breath and admire an ancient suit of armor and Seph had disappeared around a corner. Now they were both lost and had no way back to the main atrium. Hestia turned another corner and thought, _Fuck it, what can they do that we haven’t already suffered at Templar hands,_ so she put her hands to her mouth and shouted, “Seph! Where are you?”

From down the hall, a faint voice shouted in answer, “Somebody, help me!”

Hestia’s heart thudded, her adrenaline kicked into overdrive and she almost fell over herself sprinting halfway down the hallway. A faint light glimmering from beneath the door caught her eye and Hestia shoved her whole weight against it and forced it open.

“What’s going on here?” Hestia shouted before she had really registered what she was seeing, because what she was seeing made no fucking sense.

Four Wardens were arrayed in a circle, a red magical miasma flowing from their hands as they held a chantry sister, trapped in a binding circle. The binding had lifted the sister up into the air,
something that only happened if the spell was particularly strong. But she didn’t recognise the chantry robes or the finery… was that the Divine?

Divine Justina turned wide frightened eyes to Hestia, the binding she was under making any movement a great effort, and shouted, “Run while you can! Warn them!”

A deep and terrible voice said, “Slay the mage.”

Hestia’s eyes followed the sound and here her mind revolted at the image of the creature that had spoken. Taller than an avarr warrior, taller even than a qunari, it was as gruesome a creature as Hestia had ever seen. Strange red crystals grew from parts of its body and its skin was pulled tight as leather on a tanners rack. In one long taloned hand - Surely this can’t be real, she thought frantically, surely this cannot be real - this thing held a large orb made of metal, ridges waving all along it like still water in the harbor.

One warden turned to look at Hestia with blank eyes, and at that moment Divine Justinia summoned a strength that Hestia would not have expected of a woman her age. She wrenched her arm out of the binding and slapped the metal orb out of the creatures hand, sending it rolling across the floor.

Hestia didn’t think; she simply acted. She went after the orb before it could roll out the door, grabbing out on a bounce and immediately buckling to her knees as a sharp sizzling pain shot up her arm to her shoulder. She screamed in pain and heard a snarl of rage from the creature, saw the blinding light and then-

She came back to herself and found that she was hunched on the ground, hands on her head with a headache that threatened to split her skull in two. After a moment listening to the ringing in her ears, she became aware of the shouting all around her, of the faces peering into hers, of the hands on her.

Hestia jerked away, shouting, “Don’t touch me!” and the hands were gone.

Iron Bull’s face swam into focus, his hands raised to his shoulders as proof. “Okay Boss. Are you okay?”

Hestia swallowed roughly, head pounding, but she managed to gasp out the most important thing. “It was me.” She said, looking into his craggy face. “I caused the explosion.”

“What do you mean?” Bull asked, worried eyes scanning her up and down. He gripped her shoulders and helped her slowly to her feet, and she was grateful for the help. “Boss, you’re not makin’ any sense.”

Haltingly, Hestia imparted all she had seen, all the memories that were suddenly fresh in her mind. She’d forgotten all about that staff, Seph had loved that staff, it was smooth and polished with a drakestone focus point that looked a little like an egg; Seph had taken time out of every night to look after it.

How can I have forgotten that? Hestia wondered, feeling the guilt building like bile in her throat. How could I have let the Nightmare steal that from me?
Once she was finished with her explanations, Armand said, “So the mark didn’t come from Andraste. It was from the ritual that Corypheus was enacting.” He looked so downtrodden at the words that Niora moved to his side and took his hand gently.

“We knew it was a possibility.” She murmured to her husband, to no avail. Armand was a good Chantry boy, though his wife was Dalish and probably didn’t believe anything the Chantry taught. “You wanted to keep an open mind.”

“I wanted it to be real too.” Anders murmured, his eyes soft and so so sad.

Justinia came to stand closer to them, her face just as soft and concerned. “Corypheus intended to rip open the Veil, use the Anchor to enter the Fade, and throw open the doors to the Black City, not for the Old Gods, but for himself. When you disrupted his plan, the orb bestowed the anchor upon you instead.”

“So the explosion was my fault.” Hestia said, feeling her eyes becoming hot.

The Divine shook her head. “An unintended consequence, but the Breach and the deaths that followed were not your doing. You cannot escape the lair of the Nightmare until you regain all that it took from you.” She said, her tone brooking no argument. “You have recovered some of yourself, but now it knows you are here.”

“A spider crouching in a web,” Niora murmured, “it can tell by the tremors of the silk just where the prey is hiding.”

“Shut it with that creepy stuff!” Sera snapped at her. “It’s bad enough without you going all elfy in the middle of it!”

A chill went down Hestia’s spine. “It knows we’re here?” She echoed.

“You must make haste.” Divine Justinia said to them all. “I will prepare the way ahead.”

With that, she vanished.

“Definitely a demon, then,” said Vivienne, a glimmer of vindication in her dark eyes.

“Maybe she’s a ghost.” Niora said.

“Seems like a spirit to me.” Anders said, glancing at Hawke. “A demon would have asked for payment for its aid by now.”

“Demons know how to bide their time.” Hawke pointed out. “Remember what happened with Isabela?”

“No I do not, but Justice told me it was embarrassing.” Anders smiled lightly at the thought. “We need better friends.”

Nathaniel had moved to speak to Hestia, now that the worst of the headache had ebbed and she could stand on her own again. “Those were Grey Wardens restraining the Divine?” He asked eyebrows drawn low and voice urgent. “Are you certain?”

“Very certain.” Hestia told him, glancing once at Armand before looking away again.

Nathaniel looked shaken. “Then, their actions led to the Divine’s death.”

Oghren grunted, tugging on his beard. “We know he can influence Wardens minds.” He grunted.
“It must’ve been the same trick again.”

He didn’t sound very convinced.

“Where do we go from here Boss?” Iron Bull asked her.

Hestia took a deep breath, looking around at the varied and disparate people that she had dragged into this terrible place. Armand had a hangdog look to him, and Niora had her hands on his face and was whispering to him gently. Sera was frantically looking in every direction at once, Vivienne was staring off ahead with a flinty expression on her face, the kind she got when they fought dragons and she was sure that death was near.

*I’m the reason we’re stuck here.* Hestia told herself, grabbing at the shreds of her composure and doing her best to pull them back into place. *It’s my responsibility to bring them home again.*

She held onto that thought, wrapped her resolve around it, and straightened up.

“We keep heading towards the rift.” Hestia declared, loud enough to draw the attention of the rest. “It’s the only thing we can do.”

“What about that demon... spirit... thing?” Sera asked, pointing to where the Divine had been standing moments before. “It’s gonna come back.”

“I don’t know if it’s the Divine or not.” Hestia said, keeping her thoughts to herself. “But it wants to help us. I say we let it.”

There was some minor grumbling but they fell in behind her. Hestia hoped her utterly false confidence would be enough to fool the wardens, at least for now. One glance at Iron Bull told her that her charade had failed to convince him, but when had she ever been able to hide anything from Bull anyway?

There were more demons around the next bend but they were quickly dispatched. Hestia gripped her staff as hard as she could to mask the shaking of her hands, reached for her water flask to explain away the cold sweat she could feel breaking out on her brow. She squeezed Armand’s hand when he offered it to her, and if her grip was tighter than it normally would have been, he did not comment.

Up a set of stairs and then down another, the path twisting and turning with no discernible reasoning behind it. A dining table set for twelve hung on a wall, table covered in wine glasses and untouched food. When Hawke reached out to touch a roast boar, the whole mess began to rot before their eyes, mold growing over the bread like moss creeping across the ground, the roast boar caving in on itself and filled with maggots while they recoiled from the smell.

And then a voice like rumbling thunder made the hairs on the back of Hestia’s neck stand up.

“Ah, we have a visitor. Some silly little girl comes to steal the fear that I have so kindly lifted from her shoulders.”

Sera whimpered. Hestia squeezed her shaking hands together.

“You should have thanked me and left your fears where they lay, forgotten,” rumbled the Nightmare, an amused smile coloring the words. “You think pain will make you stronger? What fool filled your mind with such drivel. The only one who grows stronger from your fear is me. But you are a guest in my home, so by all means, let me return what you have forgotten.”
More demons appeared on the path before them, but these were not content to wander around unless Nathaniel got too close to them. These demons zeroed in on the collected interlopers with speed and set about trying to rip them all apart. Hestia froze one and electrocuted another but they seemed to be endless.

Halfway down another set of stairs, Hestia saw her.

Dark lank hair hung in ropes about her face, scars crawled up her skinny arms and down her skinny legs, the eyes peered out at the world with a malice and distrust that could only come from a lifetime spent hurting others, blood spattered the nightdress, dripped from her fingertips, and in one gnarled hand she clutched a bone handled knife. Hestia knew that knife, had seen the blade flash in her darkest nightmares, had hungered after it too.

She pointed a crooked finger at Hestia and let out a long keening cry.

There was no composure, there was no dignity, there was no control. Hestia fell back against the stairs and screamed and screamed and screamed.

Bull didn’t even break his stride, he went charging down the stairs and knocked Cautherine across the clearing, back into the arms of two more women shrouded in dirty linens and holding bone handled knives. Oghren came next, shouting his war cry and bum rushing two women, knocking them both to the ground and bringing his warhammer down on Cautherine’s head. Hestia flinched as the bone cracked like an eggshell, spilling blood and worse across the ground.

Five of them were dispatched before Hestia could catch her breath, and by then Armand was there, shield up and face full of concern. “Tia, Tia look at me.” He murmured. “Don’t let it hurt you Tia. Whatever it is, it can’t hurt you unless you let it.”

Vivienne shoved the corpse of… were they demons? spirits? away from her with a foot and sneered, “Minor demons, content to do the Nightmare’s bidding and feed on its scraps.”

“And of course they take the form of giant spiders,” Hawke said breathlessly, “Which are feared by so many.”

“Didn’t see no spiders.” Sera’s voice shook. “I’d have taken bloody spiders!”

“Demons have no imagination.” Niora said, kneeling at Armand’s side and stretching out a hand to Hestia, healing a cut on her face with the touch of a cool palm. “They pluck their forms straight from your thoughts.”

“Well, now I feel better.” Bull snapped, sword still drawn, watching the shadows while the rest of them gathered themselves. He looked at Hestia, concern outweighed by fear in his face. “Boss, you good to go?”

Hestia could not remember how to speak, her breath was coming in short shallow gasps, she could not stop seeing the terrible mess that Oghren had made of her head, the blood on her clothes, the flapping birds at the windowsill, the sigils scraped into the floor…

“Tia!” Armand grasped her by the shoulders and shook her, gently enough yet she still flinched back. “Tia, focus your mind! You are in the here and now!”

**Focus your mind.** Hestia heard the words, heard the voice, but all she could see was the body, slumped on the ground, arms bent at unnatural angles, knife still clutched in her crooked hand. Before her eyes, the body and the nightclothes and the blood and the knife faded away, leaving behind the remnants of a fade creature. But that was impossible. Cautherine wasn’t a fade creature,
was she? Had that been the root of all her wickedness?

Hestia blinked, her chest still heaving, but it was Armand's face that swam before her, eyes deep and blue and full of worry. Good and kind Armand, always searching for something bigger to believe in. First the Maker, then the Wardens, then a love so true it burns to look at.

“Tia?” Armand murmured, squeezing her shoulder. “Tia please.”

Hestia tried to speak, couldn’t, swallowed, tried again. “It’s not really her.” She whispered, eyes stinging with tears. “She’s not really real.”

Behind him, Howe looked at Niora. “What did you see Lavellan?” he asked. “Darkspawn?”

Niora nodded. “Of course. We both did, right Armand?”

Armand did not answer her, continued to look at Hestia with those steady, guilty eyes. “Who’s not real, Tia? Who did you see?” He asked softly, brows furrowed.

“Spiders.” Hestia grit her teeth and said, “I saw spiders.”

It was a lie of course. But Armand could not check her on it without revealing his own deception, and so he said nothing.

She forced herself to her feet and moved shakily to the front of the pack, trying to keep her footing when her knees felt like they were made of jelly. Without a glance at Iron Bull, Hestia let them on.

Through another clearing and past still more demons, past a mirror that was surrounded by frozen burned corpses just like at Haven. When Niora got too close to the mirror, each body burst into flames and attacked them, tearing at their armor and shrieking like despair demons.

And all along, the Nightmare taunted them.

“Perhaps I should be afraid, facing the most powerful members of the Inquisition.” The cruel laughter echoed around them and Hestia willed herself not to cry.

“The qunari will make a lovely host for one of my minions. Or maybe I will ride his body myself.”

Much softer than expected, Bull muttered, “I’d like to see you try.”

Hestia wanted to reach out to him, swear to him that she would never let that happen, but her hands were shaking so badly that it was all she could do to keep hold of her staff.

“What’s it like living as an apostate Vivienne? Do you really think you’ll reclaim your power in the circle… at your age?”

So low that she barely heard it, Vivienne gritted out, “Not one word.” The demon laughed in response.

“Sera, Sera, Sera. If you shoot an arrow at me, I’ll know where you are.”

“Out of my head, Bitch-balls!” Snapped Sera, turning her head this way and that, hoping to catch a glimpse of an enemy she could kill.

“You failed then and you’re failing now Oghren of the Warrior caste. Cousland should have left you on the floor of that tavern, where you couldn’t disappoint anyone.”
The dwarf snickered and cracked his neck. “Yeah yeah, and my feet smell bad in the morning too. You’re starting to sound like my wife.”

“Nothing you do will ever bring your family any redemption now. The Howes will be steeped in blood for the rest of their lives.”

Nathaniel nocked an arrow and tried to pinpoint the direction the voice was coming from, growling in frustration when he was forced to relax his grip. “This thing really doesn’t know when to shut up does it?”

“Did you think you mattered Hawke? Did you think anything you ever did mattered? You couldn’t even save your city. How could you expect to strike down a god? Anders is going to die, just like your family, and everyone you ever cared about.”

“Well,” Hawke said, trying for brisk amusement and failing to hide the fear those words had inspired in her. “That's going to grow tiresome quickly.”

“Justice was right Anders.” The nightmare whispered silkily. “You never should have brought her into your life. You’re going to get her killed.”

“I know.” Anders murmured, gripping his staff until his knuckles turned white. “It doesn’t matter in the end. I would sooner tear apart a city than keep away from her.”

“You did that.” Vivienne grumbled, shooting a murderous glare over her shoulder at him.

“Not now Madame De Fer.” Hestia snapped, harsher than she’d meant to.

That was the opportunity the Nightmare was waiting for, for it turned its claws on Hestia without pause for breath. “You fool them all, little maleficar, but not me. You'll end up where you began, locked in that attic and killing people to further your Bann’s ambitions.”

Now the tears did come, a pathetic whimper tumbling from her lips. Hestia pressed her palm against her mouth, doing her best to muffle the sound before it drew too much attention. She couldn’t escape the watchful eyes of Iron Bull, for a moment later the weight of his hand settled on her shoulder.

“Oh Armand, and it is Armand, isn’t it? For a moment there I mistook you for your father.” The Nightmare whispered, and Armand’s sword rattled in his sheath when he drew it out.

Whatever he was going to say was preempted by the elven woman at his side. “It probes like a blind thing, searching for weaknesses.” Niora said, her smooth voice a balm on Hestia’s frazzled nerves. “It doesn’t know you, doesn’t know your strength.”

Armand took in a breath of stale air and let it out in a rush. “Thank you my love.” He murmured to her, and his wife reached out and touched her fingertips to Armand’s bloodied cheek, wiping away a bruise with the brush of her hand.

“And what are you doing here, you broken thing?” The Nightmare snarled. Niora flinched. “Don’t you know that the Wardens have no use for a mistake of a girl?”

“Say it again and I’ll cut the tongue from your head villain!” Armand snapped, stepping forward as if to shield his wife from the caustic words swirling all around them.

The only response was cruel laughter.
Finally, they reached a space that wasn’t ringed with tall and softly dripping walls, they could see back up into the smoky green vastness that was the raw fade. Chunks of stone hung in the air, pieces of dragon statues stood upside down in the blackness, surrounded by ever-burning candles. And, standing in a patch of light, worry in every line in her face, the Divine was waiting.

“The Nightmare is closer now.” She told them with some urgency. “It knows you seek escape. With each moment, it grows stronger.”

More demons encroached, but a sharp glance from the Divine kept most of them at bay. Once again, a wraith appeared nearby, its featureless face turned towards Hestias.

I can’t. Hestia shook her head, stumbling backwards into Anders and Hawke. The last thing she wanted was to stir up more terrible memories. Already things that Hestia would rather have forgotten were darkening her door, and she was not interested in bringing up any more. Did I see Seph die? Did she call my name? Did she blame me?

Hawke and Anders moved out of the way but Armand was there, settling his hands on her shoulders. “Tia, you have to do this.” He murmured to her.

“I… I can’t.” Hestia whispered. She couldn’t take her eyes off the wraith, and now she could tell exactly what it was meant for. Could see the magic pulsing at its heart, could see its head turn towards her. “Armand I can’t do this.”

“You have to.” He repeated, and then he gave her a little shove.

Hestia stumbled forward, pitching herself through the wraith and falling and-

They had fallen down, down, down into the worst place that Hestia could imagine. There was no sky above them, no stone below them, only broken pitted rock and swirling smoky green above their heads. Hestia had taken one look and understood in her mage’s heart that this was the fade.

“We have to get out of here.” She told her companion, reaching out to help Divine Justinia to her feet. Hestia wasn’t sure that she was allowed to touch the Divine, but the last few years had been filled with new experiences. She was probably due one more before she died. “Up you get your Radiance.”

“Dorothea,” the Divine told her, her limbs were shaking but she still managed a wry smile. “If we live through this, you must call me Dorathea.”

“I’m Hestia,” she replied, pulling the old woman's arm over her shoulders to support her. “A pleasure to meet you.”

They didn’t stop to look at their surroundings, Hestia just kept them moving forward, because certainly standing still was worse in a place like this. Sometimes, not knowing what was hunting you was just as bad as knowing.

They found a bridge and on the other side of it… “Is that a rip in the veil?” Hestia murmured, glancing at Divine Justinia then back. “What is that doing here?”

“From what I understood, it was only possible to reach the fade when dreaming, and then only
mages could make the journey before death.” The Divine said breathlessly. “Not since the Magisters tried to breach the Golden City has anybody walked the fade in the flesh.”

“Could it be that we’re in the flesh now?” Hestia asked, eyeing the shining green tear with some trepidation. “I’ve been in the fade in dreams, and most often something like this is a trick or trap set by a demon.”

“Is this at all similar to when you were dreaming?” The Divine asked.

Perhaps the woman already knew the answer, but Hestia told her anyway. “No, this is nothing like a dream. My dreams let me change the sky, for a start.”

“Then I posit that we are walking here with our own feet.” The Divine said. “And that we must leave as soon as possible.”

Hestia agreed readily, and they began to cross the bridge.

Almost as soon as they stepped on it, Hestia heard the chattering screeching screaming noises that heralded the arrival of demons. She checked over her shoulder once and picked up the pace, for she could see a swarm of terrible spiders beginning to crest the hill behind them, a chitinous hide covering their great thoraxes and many many legs.

The Divine looked too and Hestia heard the hitch in her breath. “What are they?”

“Demons take many forms Your Radiance.” Hestia told her, turning back and breaking into a real run now. “You don’t want to see them any closer, trust me.”

Divine Justinia took her arm away from Hestia and they both sprinted to the other side of the bridge, hearing the chattering noises and the rumbling beneath their feet. Wherever they were in the fade, it was certainly more dangerous than any place Hestia had ever seen before.

The Divine reached the rift first and Hestia was hot on her heels when the ground beneath her feet gave way with a great thunderous cracking sound. Hestia screamed as she fell, reaching out her hands desperately, kicking her feet, trying to grab for something, anything. Her palms skated across the rough stone, bloodying her fingertips and cracking open old wounds but at last, at last her grasping fingers found purchase and her boots skidded to a halt on the stone.

Hestia held on for dear life, her breath coming in short gasps, too terrified to look down or up or anywhere away from where her hands held fast to the rock.

“The demons!” The Divine shouted from far above her. “Hestia, you must climb now, before they return!”

Hestia took a breath and looked up, where the Divine stood on solid ground far above her. “Go through the fade tear!” She shouted up at the leader of the Southern Chantry. “You need to get out of here!”

“Not without you!” Divine Justinia shouted back. “Now climb!”

Hestia wanted to argue, but honestly she was more than happy to leave this place. She got her feet underneath her and began to climb, feeling in her shoulders and arms that while she had gotten much stronger during the Mage and Templar war, this was certainly something that she would regret tomorrow.

She dragged herself over the lip of the bridge with the help of the Divine, but they didn’t even have
time to let her catch her breath or thank a silent Maker that Hestia hadn’t fallen to her death in a place that nobody could ever find her. They had to get moving because the terrible demon spiders were climbing the broken bridge too and they were just behind her.

“Keep running!” Hestia shouted, grabbing Divine Justinia’s arm and pulling her into a run toward the shining fade tear, which she now regarded as their only hope for safety and salvation. “Don’t stop!”

Hestia felt it when Divine Justinia’s arm was wrenched from her grip, heard the scream, wheeled around to see the Divine sprawled out on the ground, demon spiders tearing at the hem of her robes and dragging her backwards, back towards the edge and the abyss that lay beyond.

She reached for Divine Justinia’s arm, but the collected strength of five or six of those huge terrible spiders was too much for her, especially after that climb. Still, Hestia dug in her heels and held fast to the Divine, the Maker would have to return to the world before Hestia just let somebody die to save her own skin.

Divine Justinia could see it in her face, as they were both dragged slowly and inexorably toward the edge.

Hestia saw it in her face, when Dorathea decided to let go.

“Go.”

Hestia came to on her hands and knees, coughing and vomiting up what meager foodstuffs she had been able to choke down so many hours ago. The lyrium and water she drank was coming up too, burning its way up her throat the way lyrium burned on the way down. She nearly choked on it, trying to get air in and everything else out at the same time.

When she could gather enough breath, Hestia looked up into the face of the Divine. “She saved me.” Hestia gasped out, shifting her balance to kneel on the damp awful stone, perhaps the same kind of stone she had forced herself to climb so so long ago. “She sacrificed herself so I could get away. You… she died.”

Haltingly, Hestia related all she saw to the rest of them. When she was finished, Armand turned his eyes to the Divine. “They said it was Andraste, but it was the Divine that saved you.”

The Divine looked at him and nodded. “Yes.”

“So, it’s a demon after all.” Hawke said, narrowing her dark eyes at the Divine.

“I thought we were all together on that.” Oghren grunted.

“I am sorry if I disappoint you.” The Divine told them, and she seemed to mean it too.

Armand looked taken aback and he hastened to say, “No! No, I didn’t mean that.”

“It’s a spirit, Trevelyan.” Vivienne told him, although her face had softened at the words too. “You don’t have to apologize to it.”

“We expected something different.” Niora told the Divine, gazing up with her wide dark eyes.
As they watched, the Divine... changed. She closed her eyes and the whole of her was lit from within, a light that filled her chest and body and lifted her from the ground, blotting away her features and clothing to be subsumed by a golden light, soft and warm as a candle flame.

Hestia picked herself up off the ground, eyes stinging with tears and said bitterly, “I suppose you’re a spirit of Faith, like the one who reached out to Cassandra.”

The golden Divine said, “If that is the story you wish to tell, it is not a bad one.”

“It’s not a good one either.” Hestia shook her head, frustration growing in her chest, making her hands shake and prickle with ice crystals. “Why would you show me this? For that matter, why did the Nightmare take it in the first place? How does it help me to know that the wrong person walked out of the fade that day?!?”

Behind her Bull said, “Boss.”

Hestia turned to snap at him too, feeling a wave of anger rising to crash down on everyone and everything, but then she saw behind them, the bodies and the faces and the bone handled knives.

“The Nightmare has found us.” The golden divine said urgently, lifting up into the air and disappearing in a flash of shining yellow light.

Hestia wanted to scream, she wanted to curl into a ball and put her hands over her ears, she wanted to burn something to the ground. But all she could really do was turn towards the demons bearing down on them and unleash her fury on them instead, on something that didn’t have a family or anyone to miss them.

But they had been fighting almost nonstop for four or more hours and Hestia could sense that she was reaching the end of her limit. The fire she threw had barely any heat and most of her ice melted before it could do any real damage. Twice she threw fade fists at the demons bearing down on her, and twice they shrugged the impact off with a hiss and a cackle.

Hestia wasn’t much of a fighter, wasn’t much of a healer, wasn’t much of a scholar or an artificer or an alchemist or a teacher. But there was one thing she was very, very good at.

A tear trickled down her face and Hestia let out a cry of anguish and frustration, grabbing her staff with one hand and snatching Nathaniel Howe’s knife off his belt. Over her shoulder, Hestia caught Armands eye and said, “Don’t tell Layna!”

Then she slid the knife across her palm.

Blood magic did not feel like lyrium. That was the biggest shock Hestia had when she entered the Ostwick Circle, when she had been dispensed to use lyrium for the first time. She had expected the hot rush of strength, the feeling of connection with her own heartbeat, the awareness that spread out from her chest and touched everything she could see, the blood and bones of everything around her. Of course, demons didn’t have bones, but the demons in front of her today had taken the form of a human woman. And Hestia knew this woman's heartbeat in her very marrow.

Hestia screamed, and the fearlings were upon them, and Hestia twisted and ducked and threw fire and reached into the bones of the woman who lived in her nightmares, who lived in her mind, who turned her into the monster that she was today, and Hestia grabbed hold and Hestia twisted.

One by one, the demons fell, cursing her name in the raspy ragged voice of her aunt.

When it was all over, Hestia dropped to her knees, felt the anger and fear overtake her. Someone
was grabbing her, their arms around her like iron bands and Hestia was too far gone to even fight, she simply let the tears fall and let the screaming and sobbing rip out of her until there was nothing left inside. Hestia felt the blood on her hands, the blood that no amount of soap and lye would ever scrub away.

When she came back to herself, all the demons were dead, and the eyes on her back were eerily familiar. They watched Linnea like this too. She was so angry, so loud, so hungry for strength and respect and freedom that she would’ve torn down anyone and anything that stood in her way. I watched her turn into an abomination once, in the future that never was. How thin is the line between her and I? How far can I go until there is nothing left of me to return?

She picked herself up, clenching her still dripping right hand into a fist to staunch the bleeding. Nobody spoke, but eventually she heard the voice of Anders. Calm, tired, strained, but still gentle when he told her, “Inquisitor, you should let me close that wound before-”

“Out of the question.” Vivienne snapped before he could finish. She stepped up and handed her staff to Bull, who took it without a word. Vivienne took Hestia’s hands in her own, turning them over in cursory examination before she pressed her fingers to the pulse at Hestia’s wrist. “Do you feel faint my dear?”

The words were brisk and efficient, but Hestia heard what wasn’t there as well. With other people Vivienne was smug, confident to the point of arrogance, and dismissive of anybody’s ideas but her own. But not with Hestia, not for months now. She had taken Hestia into her confidence as soon as they had arrived in Skyhold, had made Hestia’s welfare and appearance her pet project.

Vivienne was only cold with those she disliked, and she had not been so with Hestia for quite a while now.

“Vivienne, just let him.” Hestia told her softly.

“Absolutely not.”

“He’s a healer.”

“So am I.”

“You’re an alchemist. Please,” Hestia put her hand on Vivienne’s arm, stilling the quick and rote examination Vivienne had been doing. “I’m sorry.”

Vivienne stood as if rooted to the spot, everything about her quiet and still. Everything about Madame De Fer was poise itself, staff polished until it shone, clothes matching and impeccable, skin dark and flawless and smooth. Everything controlled and perfect, as if by keeping her appearance flawless, Vivienne could extend that perfection inward. Hestia knew better than most just how deep those waters ran, and just how difficult it had been for her to gain Vivienne’s trust in the first place.

“I’m sorry.” Hestia repeated, hoping she could convey with two words the vastness of her guilt.

*I’m sorry. Sorry for lying, sorry for disagreeing with you, sorry for hiding Anders, sorry for joining the rebels, sorry for the blood magic, sorry for the pain, sorry for the death, sorry for letting you believe I was something I wasn’t, sorry for believing it myself. I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry.*

Vivienne searched her face for a moment. She must’ve come to a conclusion because she murmured, “You need to make a decision about Anders, before it’s made for you.”
Hestia nodded and moved away from her, still a bit shaky on her feet but bound and determined to not embarrass herself any more than she already had. “How far away is the rift?” She asked, hearing how rough her voice had become.

“Pretty close, we think.” Nathaniel said, coming to stand between Vivienne and Hawke, arms crossed. “There’s some sort of barrier between this area and the next, but none of us can get past it, and demons show up every time we try.”

“Think your magic hand can do anything about that?” Oghren grunted, and only then did Hestia notice that Sera’s arm was slung over his shoulder and that her face was bloodied.

Anders healing hands were slowly moving up Sera’s bow arm while she held herself stiff, her jaw clenched, her eyes squeezed shut. There was blood on all of them, but Sera looked the worst off, her skin was pale beneath the grime and when she opened her eyes again they were glassy.

“Sera.” Hestia took one step toward her, but Sera flinched back.

Hestia raised her hands slowly, aware that someone had wrapped a bandage around her right hand to staunch the flow of blood. She could still feel the power of it, beating under her skin, banging in her wrist and at the throats of every person here. She could almost see them sometimes, the pulse points on the bodies of the people she knew well. Sera’s heart was going a mile a minute, Hestia could tell that much from here.

“Sera,” she repeated quietly. “I promised you that we’d get out of here, and I mean to keep that promise. What you do after that is up to you.”

“How’s that?” Sera asked, her voice shaking. “You could just blood magic my mind to make me do what you want.”

Tears pricked in her eyes and Hestia had to swallow the lump that rose in her throat in order to say in a quavering voice, “I would never, ever do that to you.”

Sera was quiet, but there wasn’t really time for more than that, not with the screams of the demons and Oghren looking like he’d broken a rib or two. Even Hawke was looking a little ragged around the edges.

Hestia studiously avoided Armand’s eyes, and in doing so she almost didn’t hear what Iron Bull was saying. She turned back in when she heard him ask, “That sound good Boss?”

Hestia jumped and looked up at him, aware of all their eyes on her. This was a sensation she was familiar with but it had been so long since she’d been watched like this that it rankled, almost as much as the first time the Templars watched her progress through the Ostwick Circle Tower. It was the same look, the wary expression that darted back down to her hands every few moments, as if she were a skittish animal that may bite at any moment.

Reminds me of my harrowing. Hestia thought bitterly, but she looked up at Bull and said, “Sorry I didn’t catch that.”

Bull nodded and told her, “That magic barrier is the last thing between us and the rift. You gotta be the one to close the rift, so you’re bringing up the rear. If you’re gonna fall apart on me again, tell me now.”

Hestia was about to protest, but the shriek of a demon close at hand made her jump. She clenched her hands, feeling the angry buzzing in her left and the throbbing pain in her right, and knew this was no time for her pride to get in the way of their safety. The screaming was still there inside her,
trapped in her lungs, crawling its way up her throat. She knew her hands were still shaking.

“I don’t know if I’m going to fall apart again,” she whispered, and Bull looked at her a long moment before nodding.

“Fine. Lavellan, you and the Mr. will hang back and keep an eye on Hestia, make sure she doesn’t kill us all. Ma’am you’re taking point with Oghren, Hawke and Anders guard out backs.” Bull said this all sharply and clearly, and his tone brooked no argument.

They must’ve been close, because the waves of demons and wraiths were almost constant now. Hestia fought to keep her footing in the stinking bog they found themselves in, bordered by an enormous lake of still black water that went on as far as the eye could see. At one point, Anders was knocked off balance and she tripped over him, sending both of them sprawling across the ground, soaking them both to the skin. Armand yanked them both up and pulled his shield up to protect the three of them from a despair demons icy breath.

Hestia could barely focus enough to cast her spells, all she could hear was the rattling of chains, the scraping voice of the shade that nearly killed them, the garbled nonsense that Cautherine would shout on the days where she couldn’t remember Hestia’s face or name. She could smell the tang of blood, feel the throbbing pain in her right hand, hear the bones of the ravens crack...

The Golden Divine returned to their side as the onslaught ebbed, and her shining sparkling light caused the last of the gibbering horrors to shy away and scamper back from whence they came. “You must get to the rift,” She told them, a panicked urgency coloring her words. “Go through it, and then slam it closed with all your strength. That will banish the Nightmare to the furthest reaches of the fade!”

Hawke grit her teeth and grunted, “Somehow, I just don’t think it works like that!”

Hestia opened her mouth, unsure even what she was about to say, but the words died in her throat when they rounded a bend and saw the rift.

The rift sat almost innocuously on the edge of a cliff, shining with that sickly green and yellow light, but right at this moment that light was like a familiar shore after months at sea. Beyond it, Hestia fancied that she could see the warden fortress, maybe even the sound of voices shouting their names. It was so close, maybe 30 meters away, and it beckoned with gentle shining light.

But it might as well be on the other end of Thedas, because squatting between them and the rift was the Nightmare.

Hestia’s whole mind revolted at the image of the monster before her. She couldn’t see the Nightmare, not really. It was all too terrible for her eyes to handle, and so Hestia’s mind began to break it down into little digestible parts. It was bigger than a high dragon, bigger than anything she’d ever seen in her life (Maker hear my prayer) it had eyes in places that eyes had no right to be (it’s looking at me it’s looking through me, the Nightmare can see into my mind), many jointed legs that dangled in places where they could be of no use. (Why are there eyes on the legs it’s looking at me!)

Bull seemed as stunned as her, his mouth opening and closing without any sound escaping, Niora’s eyes were the size of saucers, Armand was murmuring prayers under his breath, even Oghren looked awfully scared.

We’re going to die here. Hestia thought, the sound of her pounding heart drowning out anything else. I hate breaking promises.
The Golden Divine began to shine, brighter and brighter until you had to shield your eyes to look at her. She rose up and up, her radiance growing until the light filled their eyes and chased away the terrible darkness, chased away the demons and monsters, chased away the fear. Hestia felt her chest filling with clean air, a proper deep breath, and it smelled faintly of Andraste’s Grace. The light played on her skin, warm as the summer sun and twice as bright.

Her last words echoed in Hestia’s mind. “Please tell Leliana; I’m sorry, I failed you too.”

With that, she attacked the Nightmare, the strength of her light and heat burning it and forcing it away from the Rift. It screamed, louder than any of them would have imagined possible, and the screams of the demons in this terrible Maker forsaken place echoed with it, a chorus of pain and rage and terror.

The sound of it broke whatever spell the Nightmare had put them under, and they ran flat out as if the Archdemon were on their heels.

The Nightmare was too huge to be driven back completely, and they had to dodge beneath dancing pincers and legs with shifting eyes and awful bristling hairs. Hestia felt a stray tendril grab at her hair, but Nathaniel’s knife was still on her belt and she stabbed the thing without looking back and wrenched herself free, probably losing a hank of hair in the process. She didn’t care, the only priority now was to get away.

She saw them reach the rift and leap through it, one after the other. Niora and Armand, Oghren, Bull and Sera, Vivienne and Nathaniel had turned to give cover to the rest. Hestia knew Hawke and Anders were behind her, right on her heels, she could hear the panting behind her. She didn’t look back, not even when she heard that terrible keening cry.

And then she was through, leaping to safety in the cool desert night, her momentum carrying her forward, her stumbling feet bringing her to meet the baked flagstones, now blessedly cool under her hands. Hestia felt the tears on her face, she heard the gasps and shrieks of the surrounding soldiers and what demons still remained in Adamant Fortress. She didn’t care, it didn’t matter, no pathetic shade or weak pride demon would scare her ever again.

“Close it Hestia!” Vivienne shouted, her long legs streaking past her.

Hestia turned in her crouch and reached out to the fade rift with the Anchor. She could still see the Nightmare through the shimmering doorway, could hear the shrieks of demons and the screaming of the terrors left behind. With all the strength left in her body, Hestia yanked.

The rift didn’t fight her, it gave one last shudder and then sealed. As if it were never there. As if it all never happened.

All Hestia really wanted to do was crumple on those flagstones and cry, but she ever so slowly got to her feet, leaning heavily on her staff. She looked around and the soldiers in the courtyard, a mix of Wardens and Inquisition soldiers, many were injured but most had their weapons sheathed and all were looking at her with that awestruck stare that she had come to expect from her men.

Hestia was too exhausted to hate the look. They had fallen into the fade and lived to tell the tale, in her book that qualified as a miracle.

Varric elbowed his way through the crowd and ran up to her, a bandage on his head above his right eye. “Where’s Hawke?” He asked.

Where’s Hawke? Hestia looked round, expecting to see Hawke’s formidable presence standing
behind her, gingerish cat twining between her feet. *For that matter, where’s Nathaniel? Where is—*

Her eyes fell on Vivienne, who was standing oh so still. With a chill down her spine, Hestia understood what had happened.

“Madame De Fer,” Hestia murmured, the horror coming over her in a wave. “What have you done?”

Vivienne met her gaze with a face carved from stone. “I made a decision.” She said with finality.
After a few days in Griffon Wing Keep, they reached an agreement with the Senior Wardens that suited all parties. The Inquisition would welcome any wardens who volunteered their services, but the bulk of the Warden Army would head off to Weisshaupt Fortress in the Anderfels. According to Oghren, there were things that needed looking after there, and he figured the Wardens had messed around in Orlais enough for one or two lifetimes.

“Send a bird when you need us, Commander,” The dwarf said on the night before they parted ways. “But somehow I got a feeling you won’t need us.”

“What did he mean by that, do you think?” Rylen remarked to Warden Trevelyan once Oghren had left the room.

Armand shrugged. “How would I know? I only met him a few weeks ago.”

“You won’t need all the Grey Wardens to defeat your monster.” Niora answered softly, her wide eyes focused on the letter she was writing. “We are the best of the best. Only a few of us will be required to strike the beast down.”

Rylen and Cullen shared a look. Cullen had spent enough time with Warden Lavellan to realize that she fully believed every word she said, about wardens or magic or anything else she cared enough to remark on. She believed it with a single minded intensity that was almost unnerving; one got the feeling that without Armand there to keep her anchored to reality, Niora would believe herself into an early grave.

“I hope that’s so Lavellan.” Rylen said, watching Niora’s dark and shining face in the flickering firelight, the red and golden flames catching the small pearl ornaments that Niora had set in her fluffy cloud of hair, making them flash and dance behind their eyes. “I certainly do.”

“Don’t have to hope for it.” Niora muttered, dipping her quill in the inkwell and resuming her scribbling. “It’ll come to pass.”

Rylen looked like he might say something more but Armand intervened. He leaned close to his wife, one hand between her shoulder blades, to look at the letter she was scribbling at. “Another letter to Thisbe?” He asked.

Niora shook her head, squirming away from his touch. “Sorry, no touching,” she told him quietly. Armand sat back and obediently put his hands flat on the table. Once he did, she relaxed again and said, “I’m writing to Isalath. If the darkspawn magister is sending his templars to elven ruins, Isa’s sisters and their clans might be in danger. I don’t know all their names or even where they all are, so Isa has to tell them.”

Cullen glanced at Armand, who shrugged. “Something to consider, I suppose.” Armand said.

It was at that. But Cullen had so many worries these days, that he could hardly afford to borrow more.

“That’s the last of the injured tended to,” Shay Borchard said, looking up from the list of supplies in his hands. “And the wardens are ready to see the back of Griffon Wing Keep. Warden Velanna
wanted an answer on where they’re meant to be headed.”

“Tell her that I will get back to her as soon as I can.” Cullen told the lay brother, almost peevishly. Velanna had been asking that question at least twice a day since the archdemon disappeared. “Those of the injured that can ride will take the last of the horses back to Skyhold, and those that cannot will ride in the carts.”

“Very good Commander.” Shay said, rolling up the list and tucking his hands behind his back. “And you’ll be happy to learn that your strategy worked, and Ben has agreed to head back to Skyhold with Cassandra’s riding party.”

Cullen sent a silent prayer to the Maker for small miracles. Ben Tamrassen had been prowling around the camp in the foulest of moods, snapping at anybody who tried to speak to him. It was nearly impossible to tell where he was at any given moment, but most likely he’d be getting underfoot of the healers in the injured tents, demanding to know if anything at all had changed in the Inquisitors condition, and then whining that she was still refusing to see anyone.

Cullen’s eyes strayed back to the Inquisitors tent, just past the paddock they had erected for the horses. The paddock was nearly empty now, but for the dozen horses that had tasked with dragging back the carts full of timber that had once been their trebuchets and battering rams. Great beasts they were, work horses with long white feathers about their hooves, although the feathers were now dusty and had taken on the colors of the desert sand. Against the dark coats of the work horses, Hestia’s bright white mare stood out like… well, like the Breach against the sky. Like the anchor’s radiance in the shadows of the night. Like her smile in the dark.

“Commander?”

“Yes?” Cullen snapped back to himself, looked back into the concerned eyes of Shay Borchard, the man who could see all and said nothing. “Was there anything else?”

“No Commander.” Shay told him. “If you’ll excuse me.”

He started away, back towards the last healers tent. Cullen felt the words tear out of his mouth before he could stop them. “Shay, is she-”

“There’s no change Commander.” Shay cut him off, looking back at Cullen with that infinite patience that alternately soothed and grated on his frazzled nerves. “I sat with her this morning, and she still hasn’t spoken. If you don’t believe me, go look for yourself.”

Cullen swallowed, and it took all of his considerable self control to stop himself looking at the Inquisitors tent again. “The last of the injured are ready to be moved.” He said, knowing he was simply repeating what Shay had just told him. “We can’t just leave her here in this wasteland.”

“I have no more solutions than you do Commander.” Shay said, but there was tension threaded through his words. “She won’t listen to me. Perhaps you’ll have better luck.”

Cullen wanted to deny it but Shay was already walking away, back to the healers tent. Cullen watched him for a moment, wondering how a man like that could’ve been raised in the same house as Hestia. Shay was perfectly balanced, so poised it bordered on graceful, his each word chosen with care for maximum effectiveness, everything about him economical. Hestia was all restless energy and bright flashes of emotion, unpredictable movements leading to her tripping on her own stride or losing her already contentious battle with gravity. Nobody knew what Hestia was about to do next, least of all Hestia.
Cullen found himself drifting towards the Inquisitors tent, almost without realizing it. To the untrained eye, it would seem that Josephine had conceded her war with Hestia’s simple tastes, because the Inquisitors tent was spare almost in the extreme. From a distance, only a small red and black flag at the peak of the tent indicated that this tent was anything other than perfectly ordinary. You would take in the plain canvas and rope holding up this shelter and think it belonged to a soldier, maybe even a trader.

The untrained eye would be wrong. Josephine had made sure the tent was made with the finest linen, that every stitch was checked and double checked to avoid any nature from accidentally intruding where it wasn’t invited, that the stakes were made from the hearts of peach trees that would let off a sweet scent when exposed to sunlight, that the Inquisition flag that sat atop Hestia’s tent was made of the finest silks and golden embroidery thread. Every last detail had been accounted for, just like everything else Lady Montilyet set her mind to.

Cullen had never expected Josephine to be so underhanded in her gift giving.

He stopped just outside the tent, wondering if he was intruding where he wasn’t meant to be. The healers had said she was more or less uninjured, she had simply exhausted her mana during the ordeal in the fade. The only real cure for mana exhaustion was rest, Cullen knew that better than most. Nobody had been able to agree on when was the appropriate amount of time to rest however, but Vivienne had maintained that Hestia would wake when she was ready. Cullen was never sure if Madame De Fer was telling the truth or not, but there had been enough to occupy his attention without worrying about Hestia’s health on top of it.

Cullen worried about her anyway.

That worry only mounted when he stepped inside the tent, the shadows deep and golden and smelling of peaches and baked stuffy heat. On the right side of the tent was a small table with a bowl and a jug of water resting in it, a set of clothes folded neatly underneath the table. Her armor sat on the armor rack, someone had shined it and done their best to mend the rips in the leather; it was the best that could be done until Dagna could see to it back at Skyhold. Her staff leaned innocently against a small chair, the blade sunk an inch or so into the dirt, the gem at the head of the staff dull and quiet in the shade.

On the left side of the tent, there was a cot. On the cot was Hestia, curled into as tight a ball as someone her size could contract. Despite the heat, the sheet was pulled over her head, and one of the pillows had been knocked to the ground. Cullen slowly moved to pick it up and brush the dirt from the pillowcase, taking in the details that his eye could not stop noticing. The sheet tucked so tightly around her like a turtle hiding in its shell. The tousle of blond hair that escaped and lay in a tangle against her sheets. The curve of her back outlined against the sheet, the knots of her spine rising against the fabric like a stone path in a chantry garden.

Cullen gently put the pillow at the end of the cot. He chose to forgo the chair and instead went down to one knee in the sand. He clasped his hands together and closed his eyes, trying to feel the Maker in this blighted wasteland. It wasn’t what he’d planned to do but Cullen wasn’t really sure what he’d planned to do here. If Hestia didn’t want to speak to her brother or Ben or even Sera, those people she loved so dearly, there was no real reason why she would want to speak to him.

“Maker hear my cry,” Cullen murmured, recalling the verses he’d learnt by heart when he was just a boy. “Guide me through the blackest nights. Steel my heart against the temptations of the wicked. Make me rest in the warmest places.”

“Are you praying?”
He eyes snapped open, he nearly lost his balance and toppled out of the crouch, but all Cullen could really see was Hestia’s face, looking at him from under her sheets. She looked tired and bewildered and her eyes were rimmed in red. The sheets had left the indent of a crease on her cheek. Her left hand peeked out from under the fabric, the faint glow of the anchor muffled by the bandages wrapped around her hand.

“Hestia,” Cullen murmured, all of these details collecting in his mind as he said, “Did I wake you?”

She rubbed the sleep from her eyes, and there was something childlike about the motion, the way she’d balled her hand into a fist to knuckle against her eyes, the way she’d pulled her knees to her chest, the way she burrowed her head into the flat cot, squinting against the light.

“I was dreaming, I think,” she murmured, her brows furrowing, confusion in her voice. “It was all of us at the bonfire. Auggie was singing with us, but he was... taller than I was, a fully grown man. But that’s... that would be impossible.”

It took Cullen a moment to understand, and then he remembered. August Trevelyan, her younger brother, had died of the blight sickness after an ill timed trip to Amaranthine with several relatives, only days after the darkspawn had descended on Ferelden.

August had been twelve when he died.

“How do you feel?” he asked, hoping to get her mind off this painful subject.

She shifted her arm, perhaps it was a shrug. “It hurts,” she said it matter of factly, as if she were speaking of the weather. “It hurts, but I’ve been injured so many times that... I’ve forgotten how much pain is too much.” Hestia bit her lip and then those eyes found his again, searching for something that Cullen wasn’t sure he could provide. “Do you think the Maker intended us to hurt so much? Did he bake in the pain when he made us, or was it something we came up with? Do we hurt because we think we should?”

Cullen felt something in his heart clench. How many times had he entertained similar thoughts, when the aches in his bones made him wish for a hot bath and the chance to sleep through the night, when the migraines made him wince at the sunlight and the nausea knocked him off his feet? How many times in Kirkwall had he endured another malificar slipping through his grasp, another mage screaming for mercy as the tranquil brand was applied to their forehead, another templar deserting or hurting the tranquil or the apprentices?

How many times had he asked the Maker to show him the purpose of this, only to hear nothing at all?

“I don’t know Hestia.” Cullen answered, as honestly as he could. “I wish I could tell you.”

Hestia nodded, and her left hand disappeared beneath the sheets again. She kept looking at him, not that there was anything else in this tent to look at. The feeling of her eyes watching him, drifting over his tired and dirty face, was enough to send a shiver over his skin. Cullen didn’t know what she saw there, or if there was anything about him worth looking at. But as long as she was still enough to look at him, it meant he could look at her.

And Cullen found that he really liked to look at her. The slant on light across the pillow that made her hair shine, the rose white of her skin beneath the freckles, her short spiky eyelashes that fanned black and brown against her cheek when she blinked. Her fingernails were short and bitten to the quick, and the bandage wrapped around her left hand was stained with dirt and blood where it
crumpled between finger and thumb.

“How goes the war effort Commander?” Hestia whispered, shifting under her sheet again.

Cullen blinked and pulled himself back to the here and now. “The Wardens have all packed up and cleared out of Griffon Wing Keep.” He told her, slowly shifting into a sitting position on the ground. Her face was above him now but he had no real problem with that. It was a metaphor for their relationship. “Warden Commander Oghren has offered their services to the Inquisition if we need them.”

Hestia moved closer to the edge of the bed, moving so her chin was propped up on her arm. The smooth skin of her left arm was sprinkled with freckles and criss crossed with scars, but none but the bandages on her hand seemed fresh. “Is that a good idea?” she asked. “If Corypheus can still influence warden minds, how much can they help us?”

Cullen shrugged, the same thoughts had occurred to him as well. “We can turn down their offer, but they are one of the most elite fighting forces in Thedas. With the Templars so diminished—”

“Let Barris worry about the templars.” Hestia told him, her head lolling to one side, her eyes crinkling as she smiled at him. “If you think we need more veterans in our ranks, we could ask for demonstrations from the senior Wardens. Are they still hearing the calling?”

Cullen shook his head. “Apparently not. When you battled that Nightmare demon in the fade, it apparently disrupted whatever Corypheus and the demon were doing to the wardens. No more songs in their heads. Warden Lavellan thinks that the demon was the one creating the Calling, not Corypheus.”

The mention of Warden Lavellan must’ve been a reminder because Hestia asked with some urgency, “Armand and Niora, are they okay?”

“They’re fine.” Cullen hastened to soothe her. “Bumps and bruises for the most part. Sera broke her arm but that was the worst of it.”

Hestia breathed a sigh of relief, then retreated a bit back into her cocoon of blankets. “That wasn’t the worst of it,” she murmured, shaking her head a bit. “Not by a long shot.”

Cullen nodded, looking down at his hands. While it was true that he and Hawke had never gotten along—fine they despised each other and Hawke had more than once professed the hope that Cullen would die in a ditch somewhere— but that didn’t mean he had wanted her dead. He didn’t feel the loss as keenly as some others, Varric came to mind almost immediately, but it was a loss all the same. Hawke, Warden Howe and countless others had been casualties of the siege, and Cullen could feel those lives and the weight of their absence as he went to bed each night.

But Hestia had never fought in this kind of war before.

“Josephine and Leliana are arranging a proper tribute for Hawke and all the Inquisition casualties back at Skyhold.” Cullen told her, knowing it would not be enough.

“What good does that do?” Hestia asked plaintively. She sat up from her pile of sheets quickly, her hair a tousled mess, one strap of her nightgown slipping off her shoulder. “What good does it do for the ones we’ve lost, what good does it do their families? A funeral, a tribute we honor for an afternoon and then back to our lives? How am I supposed to face Varric, or Oghren? How can I stand here and justify these lives I took, these people I led into harm's way? They trusted me and I—”
She cut herself off with a choked gasp.

Cullen had a sudden flash of memory, of the night before they closed the breach. So much had happened the next day and he’d nearly forgotten. But now it returned to him in a rush, the image of Hestia climbing up on a chair and leading them in song, mages and soldiers and templars alike, using the song to fight back against the encroaching darkness.

Cullen remembered her face that night. It had been the first time he’d ever looked at her and seen something more than a colleague or a friend or another runaway mage. She’d been radiant and confident and glowing like a sunset, and he’d watched the light drain from her eyes to be replaced by fear and shame, with panic so great that it drove her out into the night.

*What if it kills me?*

*I led her into harm's way.*

*What if I fail you too?*

“Hestia,” Cullen said, risking a hand on her arm. Despite the desert heat, she was chilled to the bone, shivering beneath his fingers. “Look at me.”

In the stillness of this tent, with her eyes bright with tears, Hestia looked at him.

“What happened to Hawke, and Warden Howe, it wasn’t your fault,” he told her, even as she began to shake her head and shy away from his touch. “It wasn’t, just like what happened to Seph is not your fault.”

Hestia shook her head; one tear spilled down her cheek. “It was my fault.” she said firmly.

“Nathaniel, and Hawke, and-” she swallowed and took in a ragged breath. “I left them there. I don’t care what Armand or Sera told you, they didn’t stay behind to cover our escape, they didn’t sacrifice themselves for our safety. I closed the rift, and they were trapped. I left them there.”

Cullen wanted to take her in his arms and console her, to dry her tears and promise her that all of this pain would fade away. He wanted to run his fingers through her hair and let her know that he would never blame her, he would always forgive her, that he would always protect her. That no matter what others thought, no matter how harshly she judged herself, that Cullen would never agree, could never agree because he-

“How am I supposed to face Varric again?” Hestia asked. Perhaps she wasn’t asking him, perhaps she was simply letting the words out into the empty air, to hear what the shape would be. But when Cullen looked up, her eyes found his. “Cullen,” She whispered, “How am I supposed to face any of them?”

“You… you tell them that you regret this. You tell them you’re sorry.” Cullen told her what Cassandra had offered him, just before that terrible day at the Conclave, where everything went wrong. When Cullen’s biggest worry had been facing the Divine and what Templars that still came when she called. It wasn’t much, and it hadn’t worked for him, but perhaps it would help her. “You tell them that if you could go back and change things, you would do it all differently. You would save them. And you promise to do better, to be better, to keep this from happening again.”

“Is that what you did?” she asked. It was almost a whisper.

“I’m trying.” Cullen told her, just as quietly. “I hope I’ll succeed, someday.”

She furiously wiped the tears from her eyes and Cullen had to clench his hands to stop himself
from reaching out and brushing her hair back from her face. After a moment, Hestia took her hands away and offered him a watery smile. Her nightgown was thin and sleeveless and he could see the pale expanse of her skin in the half light of the tent, the breadth of her collarbone, the hollow of her throat, the freckles on her mouth…

“I’m sorry.” Hestia whispered to him, reaching out to brush her fingers over his face. Her fingertips left trails of fire wherever she touched him, but it was a fire he’d gladly submit himself to if it meant she would keep doing it. Her thumb brushed against the sensitive skin just below his eye and Cullen shivered. “You work so hard, Cullen,” she whispered, either unaware of what she was doing to him or perfectly happy with the results, it was difficult to tell. “I never meant to add to your burdens.”

“You don’t.” Cullen said, shaking his head. How could she think that? “You never have.”

Hestia shook her head and looked away, disbelieving. Her hand fell away from his face but he caught it in his own before she could retreat from him again. Her hands were cold but his were not, and this moment was so much like a dream that it seemed only natural for Cullen to lift her hand to his mouth and kiss the tips of her fingers.

He heard it when her breath caught in her throat.

O Creator, see me kneel, Cullen thought, For I walk only where You would bid me. Stand only in places You have blessed. Sing only the words You place in my throat.

The stillness of the tent was absolute. He could hear the nickering of the horses outside, the susurrus of sand against sand, the far off voices in the camp, their words indistinguishable. Hestia seemed impossibly close, so close that the details began to blur. She licked her lips, pink and chapped and freckled and oh, Cullen longed for the strength of a braver man, a stronger man, a man with the assurance that if he closed the distance, if he drew her close enough to taste...

“Cullen,” she whispered. “I-”

The tent flap was sharply pulled back, flooding the space with light, and the exquisitely dressed Madame De Fer strode into the tent, a bowl of water in her hands and a towel thrown over her shoulder.

“That’s enough lying about Inquisitor,” Vivienne said briskly, turning to pour the water carefully into the basin on the table. “The whole camp is packing up and heading back to Skyhold in less than a day, and I shall not have you looking like a flu ridden mercenary on the ride back.” When she was finished she dropped the bowl in the dirt and turned to look at them both. She arched a perfect eyebrow. “Am I interrupting something important?”

Hestia, who had jumped away from him as soon as Vivienne entered, squinted in the sudden brightness and said, “Would it matter to you if you were Madame De Fer?”

Vivienne gave the barest approximation of contemplating her answer, and Cullen wiped a hand across his jaw in an attempt to get himself together before the enchanter chose to acknowledge his presence.

He rose to his feet while behind him Vivienne said, “Not overmuch, no. Commander, could you give us a bit of privacy please?”

“Of course Madame De Fer.” Cullen said, his voice as close to normal as he could make it. He nodded to the enchanter and stopped at the entrance to the tent to look back at Hestia. She’d drawn
the sheet around her like a cloak, and she was once again bathed in sunlight, studiously looking anywhere but at him. “By your leave Inquisitor. We’ll begin travel preparations once you’re ready.”

“Thank you Cullen.” Hestia said, glancing back up at him, those eyes nearly knocking him flat.

Cullen left the tent and headed to inform Shay of his sister’s condition. Behind him, the words growing faint as he moved away, he heard, “Now dear Inquisitor, I think that we shall talk a bit.”

He tried to keep an eye on her as they started back across Orlais with the army and the wardens that had volunteered. Armand Trevelyan and Niora Lavellan were with them of course, but a number of senior wardens had approached Cullen about joining the Inquisition army for a time. With Hestia’s health so delicate it seemed like all the decisions she would be making had fallen to him, and that meant he had twice as many things to deal with. There was information about Corypheus’s venatori commander to follow up on, there was the matter of the assassins that were after Josephine, there was a warden who wanted a public execution for her mistakes before Adamant, and all of it was falling squarely on his shoulders.

*And I thought I was busy before.* Cullen thought, his exhausted eyes staring at the guttering end of his candle deep in the shadows of the night. *No wonder Cassandra didn’t want the job at Haven. I’m amazed that none of us have cracked under the pressure of running this Inquisition.

The thought put a twist of unease in his gut. But of course, Hestia hadn’t shifted all her duties to him, she was simply taking it easy while her health recovered. Every day she was stronger, her hours spent working were longer, her smile appearing more often. The ordeal in the fade had been more than anybody should be asked to bear, but Hestia had bounced back in a remarkably short time.

Hadn’t she?

Had she?

That thought chased him through the night into the next morning, when he left his tent, bangs under his eyes, to see Armand Trevelyan and Blackwall taking turns hitting The Iron Bull with a stick.

“Come on!” Iron Bull grunted, making a face at Blackwall who was holding a club the size of a small tree. “Cassandra could hit harder than that.”

“If it hasn't been perfectly evident to you before Bull,” Blackwall grunted, stepping back and dropping the club to the muddy ground, “I am not Seeker Cassandra.”

“Don’t sell yourself short Blackwall.” Armand said cheerfully, leaning against a barrel. “Trim that beard and you could be her sister.”

“What?” The word fell from Cullens mouth almost without his consent.

“Hey Cullen.” Iron Bull greeted, his face screwed up in pain. “You wanna help me out?”

“I…” Cullen glanced at Blackwall, who looked tired but amused. Armand gave a jaunty wave. “If
you’ll explain what’s going on here, maybe.”

“Qunari training exercise to master your fear.” Bull said, breathing hard. “Been a while since I needed it. But that Nightmare demon was… big.”

“But, how exactly does this help?”

“I could explain, probably. It’d involve a lot of Qunari words though.” Iron Bull shrugged and picked up the club, offering it to Armand when he pushed off his barrel and wandered closer to Bull. “Just, hit me with the stick all right? I need to get over this demon crap.”

Armand shrugged and hefted the club. “As you wish.”

He swung, and the club hit Bull in the chest with a resounding smack. He grunted in pain, and breathed deeply through his nose, but Armand had drawn no blood as far as Cullen could see. So he wound up and swung again, drawing another groan of pain from Iron Bull.

“Oh yeah.” Iron Bull was saying, sounding just a bit too profane for this early in the morning in Cullens opinion. “There we go.” after Armand’s fourth hit, Bull snarled out, “Damn demon. Who’s stuck in the fade, huh?”

Cullen was still completely mystified but Armand must’ve tapped into something he couldn't understand. After another hit, the warden shouted. “That demon wanted to tear you in half! It wanted to crack your skull and eat your insides!”

Cullen exchanged a look with Blackwall, who just shrugged.

Iron Bull liked it though, he groaned again and said, “And who killed you?” After another hit, he drew in a deep breath and declared, “That’s right! Iron fucking Bull! Oh, I needed that. Thanks Mister.”

Armand stepped back again, also breathing hard. He dropped the club to the ground and wiped his glossy dark hair back from his forehead, though Cullen could see that his hands were shaking again. He covered with a laugh and said, “Don’t I get a proper name after our little adventure?”

Bull laughed, still breathless. “Do something interesting and maybe I'll upgrade you from Lavellan’s kept man.”

Far from being offended at that, Armand roared with laughter and said, “Oh she’d like that. Once I explain to her what a kept man is, of course. The Dalish don’t seem to go into that sort of relationship, I’ve noticed.”

"Cullen you get breakfast yet?" Bull asked casually.

"Ah, no." Cullen replied. He’d been quiet enough during the exercise that he’d thought himself forgotten. "Not yet."

"Well come on then. I'm hungry." Bull beckoned to him with one huge hand.

Cullen raised an eyebrow, but he fell in beside Bull, and they moved through the camp together quietly. It was only just dawn and most of the soldiers weren't awake yet. He knew that soon the sergeants would be hollering the boys awake and the camp would come alive with the smell of coffee and sausage and horse leavings and sword oil. Soon they would be off again, Hestia on her white mare leading the scouts ahead, Cullen with the soldiers at a more sedate pace, with Iron Bull and the Chargers bringing up the rear. They had come to the conclusion that if anybody could keep
After a moment, Cullen saw that Bull watching him out of the corner of his eye. Knowing that Bull would say what was on his mind sooner or later, Cullen chose to keep his peace and think about who could be right to take over Rylen's duties in Skyhold. Griffon Wing Keep was still theirs, but only as long as the Inquisition occupied it, and Cullen hadn't been comfortable trusting a keep in such dangerous territory to anyone else.

"Krem was talking about sending Rocky and his crew back to Adamant before we get too far away." Bull finally said, once they'd gotten plates of eggs and oatmeal and cups of steaming coffee, and sat down at one of the long wooden tables. "Bring those walls down for good. The Inquisition did so much damage during the siege, doesn't look like it's salvageable."

Cullen shrugged. "We will have to ask the wardens. We just forged this alliance, I'm not sure I want to test its strength just yet."

Iron Bull grimaced, but nodded. "Yeah okay. Thought I'd ask. Also, I dunno if Red has told you yet, but my people are ready to reach out. They're offering a real alliance with the Inquisition, with all the good and bad that implies."

For a moment, Cullen wondered how it was possible for the Chargers to offer an alliance when they were already employed by the Inquisition. Then he caught Bulls meaning.

"What, really?" He asked, to say he was shocked would have been quite an understatement. "Are you sure? Normally the Qun doesn't consider dealing fairly with outsiders."

"Ordinary you'd be right," Bull admitted. "But they've identified themselves, they're not running a game on you." He took a bite of his oatmeal, grimaced slightly and put his spoon down again. "They found a massive red lyrium shipping operation out on the coast. They want us to hit it together, talking about bringing in one of the dreadnoughts. They're worried about tipping off the smugglers, so no army. My chargers, the boss, maybe some backup."

Cullen took a drink of his coffee, turning over the plan in his mind. He could see the merits of stealth that the Chargers offered, especially since nobody who had spent time with the Chargers would ever consider them stealthy. "What will this alliance really get us?" He asked.

"They wouldn't use the word ‘alliance’ if they didn’t mean it." Bull said plainly, waving one large hand through the air to emphasis his point. "Naval power, more Ben-Hassrath reports, Qunari soldiers pointed at the Venatori. It could do a lot of good."

Cullen nodded, took another spoonful of eggs and chewed thoughtfully. After he swallowed, he looked at the often cheerful face of Iron Bull and asked quietly, "Then why aren’t you happy about this?"

Bull looked uneasy. "No, I'm good. It's uh… I'm used to them being over there. It's been a while."

"I thought the Qunari wanted to extend the Qun to the whole world."

"Yeah, just didn’t think I'd see it.” Bull sighed, looking slightly queasy and Cullen didn’t think it was due to the eggs. “Look, the Qun answers a lot of questions. It’s a good life for a lot of people. But it’s a big change. And a lot of folks here wouldn’t do so well under that kind of life. I guess it’s not like we’re converting. This is just us joining forces against Corypheus. On that front I think we’re good.”

He sounded like he was trying to convince himself. Cullen thought he knew how he felt. For a long
time, it had felt like treason to even think that Meredith was out of line. Her word was law, and if you disagreed you were dismissed from the Order, or worse. Cullen sometimes wondered if Samson would've turned out the way he did if Meredith hadn’t been so harsh with him. Or if I'd done my blighted job and stopped her when I should've.

Cullen took a deep draught of his coffee to shake those thoughts from his head before they consumed his whole day. He wished this coffee were something stronger. Bull was almost finished with his breakfast, so Cullen said, “Run it by the Inquisitor, but I think it would be a powerful alliance.”

“See that’s the thing.” Bull told him, lowering his voice when some soldiers moved past them, saluting to Cullen sleepily, more interested in their breakfast than protocol. “I brought it up to her yesterday, and I couldn’t get an answer out of her either way. Normally, I'm fine with waiting for her to get around to me but this operation is on a timetable.”

Cullen nodded, letting the thoughts run through to its inevitable conclusion. The Qun wasn’t known for its patience or forgiving nature. If the Inquisition wanted this alliance to work they would have to, for the first time since the Breach, move on somebody else's schedule.

“It’s not like Hestia to be indecisive.” Cullen murmured, more to himself than to Bull. The great man heard him anyway and nodded. Cullen swallowed down the awkwardness and said, “I’ve been meaning to talk to you anyway. You and the Inquisitor- you and Hestia are close, yes?”

“Not as close as I thought.” Bull muttered, almost under his breath. At Cullens look, he waved off the concern and said, “The Boss and I are friends. If you’re worried about me and her, don’t be. The flirting is just for fun, doesn’t mean anything.”

It took much of Cullens considerable self control not to blush in front of The Iron Bull.

“Ah, no. That’s not what I-” Cullen stumbled over his words for a moment before he settled on. “No. I meant you’ve spent the most time with her, out in the field. And you’re Ben-Hassrath. I’d ask Ben or Shay if I thought it would get anywhere, but-”

“But it won’t.” Bull finished, nodding slightly. “You’re right. No point in asking her how she is, she won’t tell you. Hestia’s a good liar, if she were Viddathari the Ben-Hassrath would snatch her up in a second. You know, if they weren’t forced to break her mind first.”

“Viddathari, that’s non Qunari converts to the Qun?” Cullen asked, casting his mind back to those darkest days in Kirkwall, when the Arishok annexed the city.

He supposed there was some comfort in knowing that you didn’t have to search for meaning, or have to struggle to understand what was right or wrong. The Qun took care of that for you, let you know exactly where your place was. All you had to do was believe it was the right place.

“Yup.” Iron Bull nodded again, taking his mug of coffee and swirling it in his hands. It looked like an acorn cap in comparison. “In my professional opinion, the Inquisitor is the furthest from okay. That shit in the fade was bad enough for me, and believe me when I say that I’ve seen some shit. It was bad. But Hestia… I mean, everybody has a breaking point eventually. I’ve seen her fall apart before, but nothing like this. This was…” Bull looked up at Cullen, his face somewhere between concern and frustration. “This was bad.”

“What do you mean, you’ve seen her fall apart before?” Cullen asked quietly, leaning forward with his elbows on the table. “What does that mean Bull?”
“You know.” Bull shrugged his massive shoulders. “Hestia falls apart sometimes. The stress gets to her and she has to let it out somehow, so. They don’t take long, and she’s usually back on her feet in an hour. This is the first time I’ve seen one take days.”

“No I don’t know Bull.” Cullen said sternly. He was hearing a ringing in his ears, a pounding noise in his head. Somewhere in the back of his mind his voice echoed, a shout from so long ago. *What if it kills me?* “How often does this happen?”

Bull tilted his head to the side slightly, as if he were doing complex calculations in his head. “Not often, once every few months maybe? Maybe four times since all this started, I think. I thought you knew about this?”

Cullen shook his head and looked down at his coffee. “I suppose not.” He said. “Perhaps I didn’t want to know.”

They sat quietly for a moment, Cullen staring into his mug of coffee and quietly watching the world fall apart. *How can we have an Inquisition without an Inquisitor? How are we supposed to stop Corypheus, stop Samson, stop the Venatori? The empress was assassinated in that other future, but how can we stop that without her? How can we do any of this if Hestia can’t lead the men?*

And underneath those churning thoughts, there was this one, sitting black and heavy in his heart.

*Why didn’t she tell me?*

Cullen knew he should not be surprised. Bull’s assessment had been correct, Hestia was a good liar. He’d seen her turn on the charm with nobles in Skyhold, becoming cultured and flirtatious at the drop of a hat, willing to listen to whatever petty grievance or endless diatribe or circular story the visiting dignitaries wanted to regale her with. It was like a mask she wore, a face she used only with those she didn’t know and didn’t care about.

He’d flattered himself in thinking that he knew the real her, the Hestia beneath the mask, the woman who cared more about the butcher than the ones who bought his wares. Was that another mask she wore? Was the woman of the people simply another act she was playing, a disguise she wore to get Cullen on her side, and others like him who tired of politics?

*Why didn’t she tell me? I could’ve helped. She’s been understanding with my problems and the limitations the withdrawal has set on me. Why didn’t she tell me?*

Cullen remembered again the night before the attack on Haven, the singing, the way Hestia had unravelling in the darkness, snow on the ground all around them. *What if it kills me?* He’d thought then it was an isolated incident, a moment of fear that overwhelmed her. But if these moments were happening often, that was something else altogether. Leliana and Josephine would have to be told, Cassandra too. Cullen knew they hadn’t wanted to pick a replacement, but if Hestia lost control of herself in battle again-

*Stop it. He told himself. Hestia’s sick but she’s not fragile. These incidents are just that: incidental. She will be fine with rest and care, and everything will be as it was. She didn’t tell me because it’s not my business.*

“Pardon me Commander.” Cullen looked up, into the windblown face of Scout Harding. “I have good news and bad news. Which would you like first?”

“Good news, please, Harding.” Cullen told her, wiping a hand across his jaw, trying to pull his
thoughts back to the here and now.

“The good news is that we’ll be halfway through the Dales by this evening, which means we’re only two or three days away from Skyhold.” Harding set a map of Orlais down on the table between them, and pointed out their current position. “The bad news is, Gaspard De Chalon’s forces are camped right... here.” She moved her finger along a road to stop halfway through them and Montsimmard. “We’re not getting to Skyhold pass without running right into them.”

Surely soon we shall meet. Cullen remembered the words Gaspard had closed each letter to the Inquisitor with. Apparently the man who would be emperor was done with soon.

Cullen looked at The Iron Bull, and a look was all it took for Bull to understand his meaning. He stood up and set off at a loping run, his voice booming through the camp. “Inquisitor! Time to work!”

The army that followed Gaspard De Chalon was, by and large, just like every other army. Men and women in armor that was once polished and golden but now had a respectable amount of dents and grime, lines and lines of tents set in rows as straight as a compass line, the general aimlessness of soldiers with nobody to fight. Cullen saw card games being hastily broken up as they rode slowly through the war camp, Hestia on her white mare with he and Madame De Fer flanking her.

They’d ridden the five miles across the empty plains in a tense silence, one only broken by the snuffles of the horses and the soft clopping of hooves on the ground, the birdsong in the trees only serving to emphasis the quiet. Cullen could see from the set of her shoulders, the way her hands clenched the reins, the straight way she held her back, that Hestia was not looking forward to this meeting.

Just before they entered Gaspards war camp, Hestia had pulled her mare to a stop and turned the horse so that she could speak to them both. “I suppose we deserve this, for brushing off the War of the Lions as somebody else's problem,” she said, gritting her teeth around the words.

Cullen knew what it cost her to say that, even though he privately disagreed with her. The civil war had begun long before the Inquisition had formed, but it had become increasingly clear that they would have to have a hand in deciding how it would end. Fairbanks had given them valuable information on the Dales, the most important fact being that the common folk of the Dales would not be able to survive another year of this war. The peace talks at the Masquerade would either unite Orlais or tear it to pieces, and only one of those outcomes was an acceptable one.

“The official stance of the Inquisition is one of neutrality.” Cullen said anyway. “We haven’t chosen a side.”

“And how likely is Gaspard to believe that?” Hestia asked Vivienne.

“Not at all Inquisitor.” Vivienne replied briskly. “Your actions speak loudly, even if all the tales are lies.”

“So we’re on our best behavior in this meeting.” Hestia said, worrying her bottom lip. “We admit as little as possible, we deny what we must and we promise nothing.”

“A standard conversation in Orlais, then.” Cullen said, hoping to coax a smile out of Hestia.
She didn’t smile, only continued to worry her lip. “We just need to be careful, all right? The rest of Orlais may think we’ve come down on his side, but I’m not getting us into bed with Gaspard until I’ve smelled the sheets.”

Cullen almost swallowed his tongue. “Excuse me?” He sputtered, “What?”

Hestia rolled her eyes. “Oh you know what I mean.”

“I- don’t think I do actually.”

Hestia ignored him. “Vivienne, what are our advantages going in?” She asked the enchanter. “All I really know about Gaspard is that he’s a Chevalier and he claims to hate the Game-”

“A typical tactic for a knight of any status in Orlais.” Vivienne agreed, nodding her head, the curled horns of her helm gleaming silver in the faded sunlight of a cloudy sky. “In fact, our advantages are not so few as you imagine. He many be a decorated general, but he falls into the same trap other men have stumbled over throughout history.”

“He thinks every woman he meets is weak and feeble?” Hestia said, arching an eyebrow.

“He’s reached the point where he believes no one can best him?” Cullen suggested.

“And he’s utterly convinced that nobody that isn’t from the Empire could ever competently play the Game.” Vivienne finished, looking smug. “He’ll expect subtlety from me or other chevaliers, but not from the two of you.”

Now Hestia did crack a smile. “No different from his species in any respect.”

Cullen raised an eyebrow at her. “I feel like I should be insulted by that.”

Now both women ignored him. Hestia leaned back in her saddle, tipping her head back towards the grey sky. “I hate feigning vulnerability.” She groaned.

“And that is precisely why it will work.” Vivienne told her briskly. “The best way to trick someone is to play into what they expect of you.”

With that, the enchanter leaned precariously over to reach into her saddle bag, drawing out a mask wrought in delicate silver filigree, with small amethysts set about the eyes, in a pattern similar to feathers. She fixed it to her helm with a confident flick of her wrist. Cullen could smell the ozone as the spellwork set into the mask did its work. A point of pain began to build behind his eyes.

“Cullen, are you all right?” Hestia asked him softly, as they cantered their horses through the Orleasian camp.

“A headache, nothing more.” He told her, schooling his features back to neutrality. The last thing she should be doing right now is worrying about him.

“I can help if you wish.” Hestia told him, looking at him with all the concern of her compassionate heart in her gaze. “All you need to do is ask.”

All you need to do is ask.

If only that were so. Cullen thought, watching her back as she pulled ahead of him on her white mare, reining the horse back to a walk as she approached the officers tent and the tall barrel chested man in armor that stood waiting for them. For her. I wouldn’t even know what to ask for. The truth?
Her confidence? Her trust?

Her heart. Something deep inside Cullen whispered, the same thing that ached when he looked at her. She already has mine.

Grand Duke Gaspard De Chalons stood almost tall and proud enough to deserve the title. His armor had been polished until it gleamed, the greatsword that rode on his back looked heavy enough to throw even Cassandra off balance. Leliana had taken pains to teach each of them about Orlesian heraldry and the subtleties of the masks the nobility wore; thanks to her hard work Cullen could tell at a glance that Gaspards mask was meant not only to symbolize the lion head heraldry of the Valmont house, but his status as a chevalier was on display as well in the form of a single yellow feather.

“Inquisitor!” Gaspard boomed, dropping into a low bow as soon as Hestia pulled her white mare to a stop just before the officers tent. “It is an honor to meet you at last.”

“And you my lord.” Hestia answered, a beatific smile on her face. “This meeting seems long overdue.”

“The leaders of the land coming together at last, to shake the foundations of the world.” Gaspard declared, in a rock salt rasp that belied many years spent smoking fine tobacco and drinking terrible ale. “Not since the days of Andraste herself have such powers been brought to bear.”

“Which does that make you my lord?” Hestia asked, giving Cullen and Vivienne time to reach her and dismount their own horses. “Are you the Aegis of Andraste, or Maferath? Or would you prefer Shartan, the Prophets Champion?”

Cullen saw no flicker of expression on Gaspards face, but out of the corner of his eye Cullen saw that Vivienne had nodded ever so slightly. Was that pride in the enchanters eyes? He blinked and it was gone.

Gaspard avoided answering the question by ignoring it entirely. “You there!” He shouted to a passing farrier, “bring a box for the Inquisitor!”

At this point, it was habit for Cullen to help Hestia down from her horse when she needed to dismount. Left to her own devices, nine times out of ten Hestia would trip out of the saddle and land on her arse in the mud. It didn’t bother her, usually she laughed off the mud or grass staining her armor, but it didn’t seem like the thing she’d like to do in front of one of the leaders of Orlais.

But this time Vivienne put a restraining hand on his arm and murmured, “No Commander.”

“There’s no need for a box my lord,” Hestia said, smiling down at Gaspard. “If you would be so good as to lend me your hand?”

This won’t end well. Cullen thought, ignoring the jealous twist in his gut.

Gaspard stepped up to the mare and took Hestia’s extended hand, his black gloves a stark contrast to her white ones. They made a striking pair in the gloom of the grey morning, Hestia astride her white mare in her white leathers and her white teeth flashing in her smile, Gaspard a gleaming warrior in silverite and deepest black, a gallant knight at the feet of the lady fair.

Of course, the lady fair rarely twists their ankle in the stirrup and loses their balance as she dismounts her horse, and this is exactly what Hestia did. Cullen leap forward but Gaspard was closer, and she tumbled into his waiting arms, the weight of her body forcing the Grand Duke down to one knee.
“Well then.” Gaspard said, his voice having dropped an octave or so. “That’s one way to get to know each other.”

Hestia smiled up into his face, breathless and radiant. “You’re quicker than you look; must come in handy in all sorts of situations.”

“And how many situations do you get yourself into Inquisitor?” Gaspard chuckled, still holding the Inquisitor in his arms, a facsimile of a dip at the end of an Antivan dance.

“Depends on the day.” Hestia replied, eyes twinkling.

Cullen looked away.

The bells rang out on every tower in Skyhold, loud enough to scare the ravens out of their roost and send them screeching into the air, a dark billowing cloud of feathers and noise to signal the arrival of the last of the Inquisition army. The last rays of sunset were shining in the west, the great orange sun casting fire and warm light over the mountains.

Cullen glanced over at Hestia, surprised to see one of her lazy lopsided smiles on her face, a true smile of pleasure as opposed to the fixed and dazzling smiles she’d spent most of the day favoring Gaspard and his generals with.

After a moment she caught him looking and a pretty blush spread across her face. “They fixed the wall,” she said, pointing to the southwest side of the keep, where the large crumbling gap in the walls had been patched with sand colored stone. “Finally. I thought it would be a broken pile of bricks forever.”

“According to Josephine and Leliana, the renovations of Skyhold have reached their end.” Cullen told her, just to see her smile again, this time at him. “The keep awaits your approval, Inquisitor.”

“No need to wait for that,” Hestia laughed, looking up at the keep with something approaching adoration in her voice. “Skyhold had my approval from the first moment I clapped eyes on her.”

Cullen swallowed and looked away from her to hide the flush that was creeping up his neck, and to stop himself from saying something he may regret later.

The soldiers and officers stopped in the frozen valley, but he and Hestia would have to negotiate the narrow path that led to the bridge. They would dismount their horses in Skyhold with the wardens and the inner circle, or what was left of them. Most of Hestia’s traveling companions had departed the Western Approach in twos and threes, or, in the case of Cole, simply wandered into the desert and disappeared only to reappear in camp the next morning, usually with the spines of a cactus stuck to his arms or knees.

“At least I can tell Josephine and Leliana that I’ve figured out who we should favor in this stupid civil war.” Hestia said, once the portcullis had begun its long and arduous journey upward.

“You can?” Cullen asked.

Inside of his chest Cullen felt something sinking. Much as he’d tried to convince himself that the events of yesterday afternoon meant nothing, that all her flirting and laughing with Grand Duke
Gaspard and his generals had been just an act, a part of The Grand Game, Cullen hadn’t been very successful. Even now he could feel the simmering heat of jealousy in his stomach, a jealousy that was only fueled by his certainty that if Gaspard really wanted Hestia, there would be nothing Cullen could do to stop him.

He had no right to be jealous, this he knew. He had no claim to the Inquisitor, however loudly the beast in his chest protested. That Cullen had feelings for Hestia didn’t matter in the grand scheme of things, not really. He had no way of knowing if Hestia felt anything for him beyond friendship, and he had no way of figuring it out, not without risking his position in the Inquisition, not to mention her easy smiles and whatever trust she had extended him.

“Yes indeed.” Hestia replied. “I don’t care if Celene eats puppies and kicks babies, anything would be better that Gaspard as Emperor of Orlais.”

That startled a laugh out of him, and Hestia tossed a triumphant smile over her shoulder to him before urging her white mare into the gateyard, where Master Dennet and the other advisors waited.

He watched her go.

Cullen remembered her face in the half light of her tent, the depth of emotion in her eyes, the way she had trembled when he kissed her fingertips, the way she’d allowed him to… yet he could not be sure, even now. She had been afraid, stricken with grief and exhaustion, and he had lent to her what comfort he could. Whether it had meant to her anything near what it had meant to him, that he could not say.

Hestia was a good liar. If she felt anything for him at all, Cullen wasn’t sure he would be able to tell.

In the gateyard, Hestia was chatting quietly with Master Dennet while her brother and Madame De Fer dismounted and started to help unsaddle the horses. Cullen had just dismounted his own horse and reached for his saddlebag, but his attention was drawn by a voice that called out across the gateyard.

“It’s about time you got here Tia!”

Hestia’s head whipped around, and Cullen followed her gaze to the foot of the grand staircase, to see a young woman in blue and white circle robes, a scruffy Levy clinging to her hand. Her glossy black hair falling in waves down her back, her deep blue eyes bright and shining and very very familiar, her bright white smile flashing in the sun.

Next to him, Armand Trevelyan dismounted his own horse and smiled.

“Elayna?” Hestia whispered.

Elayna Trevelyan brushed long black hair out of her face and said, “Apparently your Inquisition requires the skills of the best spirit healer in Thedas.”

“It is you.” Hestia laughed breathlessly and dashed across the gateyard, meeting her cousin in the grass. “Layna,” she murmured, embracing the other girl tightly. The relief in her voice hit Cullen right in the chest. “I missed you so much.”

Chapter End Notes
I'm just gonna keep adding Trevelyans until we are at Trevelyan capacity, and nobody can stop me

As always a big thanks is owed to Illyria_Lives, without whom this big fucked up family would not exist. I'm sootspritesprinkles om tumblr and sootsprites94 on twitter! comments feed the fanfic machine!

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