The Unforgiving Night
by veridium_bye

Summary

One of Olivia's nightmares takes hold of her in her sleep again, prompting an uncomfortable discussion between her and her lover, who's reputation as an Andrastian and Seeker of the Chantry more than speak volumes for where she would probably stand when it comes to Mage's strife. Both women come to face-to-face with their assumptions of one another, and learn more about the boundaries created between someone elevated, and someone oppressed by the Chantry's existence.
Olivia’s dreams were vivid, unforgiving, and purposeful. For such a lighthearted and kind woman, her sleeping visions were the most malevolent. It was as if her subconscious was the reservoir of all the turmoil and negativity she was exposed to in her waking life – and it had amounted to so much, that even her encounters in the Fade became tinted by it. Her deepest fears and anxieties influenced her more than she cared to admit.

Still, even by her standards, this dream was particularly vivid and disturbing.

She was rushing through hallways, and it felt as though she had returned to the Circle at Ostwick during the mayhem of the first days of the Rebellion. Some Mages took the first chance to abandon the Circle, others tried to remain and create some semblance of armistice. Both groupings took casualties left and right. The uninhibited and indiscriminant bloodshed was what inspired Olivia and her friends to leave and seek out their nomadic futures. But here, there was no trace of truce or authenticity. The hallways kept going, rounding and curving into an endless corridor of the unknown.

Behind walls and from a distance she could hear voices, so many voices. They were yelling, screaming, calling for help. Some were even arguing. Was this the Circle? She could almost be convinced. But, with the way the landscape seemed so unstable, a Mage like Olivia was privy to what was her waking life and what was her complex dreaming.

Even if the lines between the two worlds were blurred profusely, she knew. But, that didn’t make the experience any less traumatizing.

Stopping in her tracks and turning around to look behind her, she could feel the reverberations of heavy, armored footsteps on stone. Her bare feet were a habit grown out of hiking in the wilderness and not wishing to make a sound with a clumsy shoe-fall, but, it was also good for feeling sensations like Templars marching toward you. Her chest hollowed out with instinctive fear, knowing that when such a force was upon you it rarely meant any good.

Quickly, she scanned her surroundings, looking for any kind of hiding place that would disguise her petite frame. Then, as if by a deity’s mercy, a door appeared in her periphery. She ran for it, feeling the noise of the group encroach closer. Thankfully, it was unlocked, but it opened to a small closet – hardly something which could hide her should they grow curious and open the door for herself. Still, it was better than nothing. Closing the door behind her quickly, she immediately began searching for something to barricade it from the inside: a block of wood, a rod, anything. Using magic would surely draw attention.

Sifting through shelves of what appeared to be laundry – bedsheets, tapestries worn out by overuse, and linens – Olivia felt like she was running out of options quicker than lightning could strike a tree down on in the valley. Then, hearing a crack of sand eroding under something, she quickly whipped around to see that she wasn’t alone. Hiding under the height of the lowest shelf in the corner was one of the children, having been separated and clearly abandoned to fend for herself whilst the rest of them were quarantined elsewhere. Olivia’s heart skipped a beat, but was relieved to not feel threatened. Her concern immediately shifted to the welfare of the child in front of her.

“Oh, no,” she said, seeing the girl’s eyes full of fear. “My dear girl, don’t fear me.” She crouched down, getting down onto her knees.

The girl hugged her knees in tightly, her hands and face slightly dirty. She must have been hiding out
for quite a while, unsure of where to go without an escort or guard to ensure her safety. Olivia pursed her lips as she saw her pull away from her.

“My dear, I am like you. We hide from the same monster, but it is alright. I will not let you fall into unsafe hands,” Olivia cooed, wiping some hair out of her face, feeling the dirt from the floor that created residue on her palms.

The girl watched her for a moment more, almost as if she was waiting for her to turn into a creature and devour her. Then, when Olivia remained her human self, she lowered her knees and crawled towards her. Olivia fell back onto her bottom as she made room for the girl to crawl into her arms. She couldn’t have been older than 6 or 7 years of age – the idea that anyone would let her stray or go off alone was absurd.

Then, the procession of monsters was upon them. As the shadow line of the door began to flicker with light and darkness cast from the shadows of Templar postures, Olivia scooted herself into the back corner, holding the girl with one arm against her as she pulled them away from the door. She was as quiet as she could manage; she hoped that the noise the troops would make with their lumbering stomps would provide her cover. They both were still, paralyzed with nerves as they awaited the storm to pass.

From below her chin, Olivia could hear the girl quivering against her. She took a breath – she, too, wished to quiver and shake in reaction, but she found herself having to be strong. If she showed fear, how was she to ask this little girl to remain brave and trusting?

Then, as if her prayer had been answered, the shadows stopped, and the noise began to fall away farther and farther into the distance. Olivia’s rigid stillness was softened by the girl, who let out an exhale.

Olivia bit her lip, rolling her eyes shut as she felt that they had survived the worst of it.

“Thank you,” the girl whispered against her chest, gripping the thick skirt of her Mage apprentice gown.

Olivia grinned, rubbing the girl’s shoulder softly. “Sweetheart, there’s no need to thank me,” she said softly.

All of a sudden, the door that she had grown to trust swung open violently. Behind it, a Templar, with red eyes as bright and demonic as anything she had encountered in the Fade or in textbook diagrams was alive and well.

“You Mage wench! There you are!” his voice growled and roared like a hungry creature ready for his hunt to be over. “Get over here, man, let’s snuff out the infestation once and for all!” he called to his compatriots behind him. She felt the rush of dreadful wind conjured from the movement of bodies.

“No!” the girl cried, clinging desperately to her. Olivia could feel the frost of instinctive ice powers in the girl’s hands as she held onto her body. The magic in her own flesh reacted in sympathy, wanting to protect and vindicate itself.

Olivia tightened her body and stared the man down. “You won’t touch her, or me! Stay back!” she yelled fiercely. She turned her torso away so as to place more of her body between the Templar and the child. Then, she forced the girl to release her from her grip, as she kept her in the corner. Olivia rose to her feet, then, hell-bent on being a shield to this poor child if need be. Her short and nimble frame felt puny in comparison to the overbearing shadow of the Templar.
“You insufferable witch!” he cursed in return, “you will die for endangering the life of a Templar!”

Olivia spat onto the ground in between them as she began to muster magic in her palms.

“Then strike me down, Templar, and we shall see who the Maker wishes to rot into the ground,” she hissed, her irises beginning to match the effervescence of her hands.

Then, the Templar had had enough. Unsheathing his sword, he raised his weapon over his shoulder. As he did so, Olivia prepared to expel enough magic that she would hope would be lethal. As he lunged for her, she closed her eyes, letting her magic engulf her body in order to protect itself. Just as the high-pitched hum of the blade drew near to her throat...

Awake.

The sharp intake of air jerked her out of her resting position, and she found herself curved over her lap and gasping. Her voice let out a sharpness with her waking motion, and her hands clutched onto the bedsheets, soaking in the sweat of her palms.

Realizing once and for all that it was another one of her terrors, Olivia began attempting to compose herself. She had had to self-soothe herself out of these episodes many times, though, it wore on her a little more with each experience of it. As she began reeling herself back in, she couldn’t help but let an exasperated whimper escape her lips.

From her right side, she heard and felt rustling from under the bedsheets and blankets.

“Olivia?” a hoarse, sleepy voice asked.

She did not answer – pulling her knees up and placing her forehead in her hands, she kept focused on regulating her breathing.

Cassandra realized, then, that this was not something to roll over and ignore. Looking over her shoulder and seeing the way Olivia was holding herself up, the way her chest was heaving air in and out as if she had just returned from running a mile in the cold rain, she knew something had occurred. Rolling onto her back and sitting up, she placed a hand between Olivia’s shoulder blades.

At the feeling of touch, Olivia flinched sharply. “Don’t!” she hissed.

Cassandra’s hand remained mid-air, having been staunchly rebuffed. She withdrew it full, letting it instead hold her upper body up as she turned her shoulders to face her back.

“Olivia, what has happened?”

“Nothing. Just go back to sleep. It’s nothing.”

Cassandra’s brow furrowed. Clearly, whatever it was, it wasn’t nothing. Olivia was never one to be overtly hostile, unless she had been thoroughly provoked. In which case, Cassandra had no qualms with its justification. She only wanted to know what it was.

“My Love, I wish you would tell me.”

Olivia’s breath began to calm a bit now, and feeling the weight of her head in her hands, she began to accept that this was not something she could get away with. These terrors were real, and her experiences were real, and the way they continued to terrify her wasn’t going to just vanish into meaningless grey matter.
“I…” she inhaled stiffly, her body stilling, “I had a nightmare, is all.”

Cassandra didn’t let her understatement deter her from the root of the matter. “Do you…do you wish to discuss it? Or is this something you would rather keep private?”

There was a momentary pause wherein Olivia grappled with being asked such a question for the first time. The considerate tone in Cassandra’s voice softened her in a part of her heart, although she remained frazzled and defensive from the effects of her dream.

“It was just…more fearful images of Templars and the Circle. I would think you would…” she hesitated, her gaze turning slightly so as to look at Cassandra from over her shoulder. “I just…think you would rather be sleeping. Forgive me.”

Cassandra began to understand a little more of what kept Olivia at bay when it came to such things. While she had done a great deal to prove to Olivia that her political leanings did not mean she would never be compassionate to her experiences, Cassandra had to contend with the fact that her outspoken nature had answered some questions on her behalf, in her reputation of being a most unsympathetic Andrastian and Chantry official.

But now, with Olivia being in her life and clearly not going anywhere any time soon, she had to reckon with what the future would look like. Because it was most certainly not going to resemble the way her past had been.

“Olivia…” Cassandra exhaled, leaning forward and resting a hand on her own lap, “anything that troubles you is a trouble to me, regardless of what part of your identity it is derived from.”

“Cassandra, you don’t have to pretend just because you are in love with me that you aren’t who you are. I understand, and I have accepted it. Being a Mage is my burden,” Olivia pursed her lips as she swallowed hard, feeling the urge to cry becoming an ever-increasing proclivity in the moment.

“You think me heartless, then? Have you really resigned yourself to loving someone whom you think without compassion?”

“I think you have your limits as we all do. Besides, I am hardly the political radical or figurehead my friends are. It was only a nightmare, and I will recover and move on.”

Olivia was rather done, clearly. She grabbed a handful of the bed sheets and rubbed her face, wishing to erode any and all irrationality from herself. Then, she laid back down onto the bed, curling herself away from Cassandra and tucking her hands underneath her pillow. Watching her close off both mentally and physically, Cassandra couldn’t help but feel guilty.

“Sleep well, my Love,” Olivia said, a touch a coldness in her voice.

There was an awkward pause, wherein Cassandra remained sitting, staring at her lover’s bare shoulders draped in tousled strands of blonde hair. Part of her wanted to see if Olivia could truly just fall back asleep, untroubled and unbothered. That would make one of them, then. But, another and more dominant part of her wanted to get down to the root of the problem. She had to think on her feet, before too much time had passed for Olivia to have patience with her.

It was then that she slid over cautiously, laying herself down on her side facing Olivia’s back. She adjusted the sheets over them both, before she reached both arms both under and over Olivia’s torso. She tightened her grip, then, and pulled Olivia into her, their bodies fitting together perfectly as though she had been made to hold her like this. Cassandra’s strength overrode the rigidity in Olivia’s body – she seemed unwilling to give an inch, but also unwilling to fight the situation.
“My Love,” Cassandra whispered against her shoulder. She let her hand rest on Olivia’s upper arm, gripping with care. “You needn’t hold onto every pain on your own. Please, if you feel overwhelmed, do not feel it a burden on my part to listen to you.”

Olivia kept her eyes closed, but she was awake as ever, and she let Cassandra’s words sit with her. Perhaps in her rush to defend herself from the vulnerability of the moment, she fended off her lover before she could understand what her intentions were. Maybe she wasn’t just wanting to shut her up or make her calm down. Perhaps, she simply wanted to know for the sake of knowing, and because it had troubled her. Chewing on it, she let out a sigh.

“Perhaps you really are what they say you to be,” Olivia muttered.

“Hm? And what is that, exactly?”

“A masochistic Chantry snob who went against all of her wits and fell for a Mage harlot.”

Cassandra smirked without humor. “Olivia, why do you not tell me of these things?”

“Because Mages know better than to edit the narrative in broad daylight.”

“Surely, you have some form of agency, enough to correct someone when they are degrading you in open air.”

Olivia then sighed. Alright, she thought, time to take some swings. She then rolled over to face Cassandra, remaining in her embrace as she did so. She curled her arms under her cheek and made stern eye contact with her lover, their faces a mere couple inches apart where they rested.

“Cassandra, have you ever simply taken a Mage at their word?”

The Seeker exhaled sharply through her nose. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“I mean, when a Mage has expressed their circumstances in your presence, have you just…let it be, without editing or enforcing a context you think to be more correct?”

There was a pause of silence as Cassandra humored Olivia’s bluff call. She thought back to her many dealings with Mage and Chantry politics, from her time as the Right Hand of the Divine, and of course being a Seeker, up until now as a member of the Inquisition. Her ego gave way to soreness, then, as she knew what the honest answer would be.

“I suppose…no,” she confessed.

Olivia’s brow raised slightly, feeling affirmed in her boldness. “I see. So, even when the voice comes from a naked and beautiful woman in your bed, you cannot help yourself.”

“I believe the fact that you are, as you say, naked and in bed with me, tells you just how much I am at a loss for ‘handling myself.’”

“You think I’m joking with you, now? That this is some scintillating pillow talk?”

“Clearly, it is anything but.”

“Good, because I have an order for you, Seeker Pentaghast.”

Cassandra’s eyes widened a bit, witnessing Olivia’s bravado manifest itself. She squirmed a bit, stretching and collecting various muscles in her body as she adjusted herself where she lay. This lover of hers was notorious for not pulling punches, but up until now she had done a splendid job of
doing so with kindness and softness. Cassandra began to understand Olivia’s fluctuating sides of emotion: when she was kind, when she was jubilant, and when she was downright intimidating.

“And, what exactly is this order?”

Olivia scrunched her lips to one side, before making her command known:

“You are to trust people’s experiences of marginalization and oppression to be valid, even when you do not personally relate or offer sympathy. You will do this particularly with Mages. Instead of leading with that big, brilliant head of yours, you lead with what your gut tells you. Your gut is your humanity, and it is just as much a barometer of truth as your mind is.”

“Olivia, my occupation as a Seeker compels me to discern fact from embellishment. What you ask is…ideal, in many ways, but its practicality is less so.”

“Oh, my darling, that is quite funny,” Olivia said, a grin on one corner of her mouth.

“What, exactly, is funny?”

“That you think I care as to what your job tells you to be. You know what mine has been? To marry a wealthy man. Then, it was to make a Circle hall look pretty and keep out of trouble. Then, it was to keep myself and my friends alive by selling my body and my charms to any man with a hunger for flesh and purse of sovereigns at his disposal. Oh, and then I was a Noble woman’s guardian and discrete apothecary for her abusive husband. Now, I am a senior-level Mage scholar for the Inquisition. All along, I have been cornered into one requirement: that I shut up and let other people have their opinions on my dignity and reputation.”

Cassandra’s eyes couldn’t help but show the humbleness she was feeling in her heart. On the one hand, her stubbornness said fight back, to argue incessantly about what she had always believed to be true. Olivia wasn’t quite done, though:

“It’s all fine, right? As long as the job gets done, and people stay in their spaces. But, I can have the most disgustingly violent nightmares every night, and no one should feel compelled to care except for my own kind. I don’t understand it: warriors have nightmares, do they? Why is it so pitiful that Mages do? You think it my error that I don’t trust you to be open and empathetic to my struggles, when everything on your face, your armor, and your doctrine tells me to keep it to myself.”

“I cannot believe you think me so harsh and unwavering. I am capable of changing and evaluating my actions for misguidance as any capable person should be. You are projecting the blame onto me before I have had a chance to prove to you my ability to be compassionate.”

“I believe you can change and be considerate, absolutely. What I am stuck on is how you think you can disconnect yourself from your reputation and your history so easily, whereas I must always walk hand-in-hand with mine.”

“We all have the ability to define our actions and beliefs for ourselves, Olivia. We cannot let the view of other people control us.”

“Tell that to the child in my dream that I was shielding from a maddened Templar ready to hack us both into pieces. I’m sure she would have loved to live long enough to be able to debate you on such a subject.”

The tension had grown into a thick and unyielding presence in the air. Perhaps Cassandra should have just let them both go back to sleep when Olivia initially called for it. This wasn’t exactly the heart-to-heart she thought she wanted from Olivia when she first beckoned her to open up. It felt like
a hard-won armistice, and not some euphoric vulnerability that had been fought for and triumphed.

“Forgive me for inquiring as to what concerns you. Obviously I am underqualified for such tasks in your eyes. As for your order, I will contemplate it as best as I can, what with my feeble, prejudiced mental aptitude.” Cassandra’s brow lowered, and she rolled onto her back now, pulling away from Olivia’s closeness.

At that reaction, Olivia groaned. “Cassandra.”

“No, I am quite bereft at the depth and nuance of this conversation. My life experiences have been underwhelming and inadequate preparation for such things.”

“You’re being a turnip.”

Cassandra’s annoyance was cut by Olivia’s flare for words: clearly, her humor was returning into her rhetorical stratagem.

“Olivia, what on Earth—”

“You’re being stuck in the soil and leaving the world to do as it pleases, instead of just engaging with the environment around you and being conducive to change. You’re a turnip.”

“Ugh, this entire conversation has just been one maddening turn of moods. Maker’s mercy.”

“You’re the one that wanted to listen, my Love. I cannot be blamed that you weren’t truly open to such a proposition.”

“Forgive me for believing it to be the right thing to do to tell my lover she can trust me enough to confide in me when things trouble her. I will take note not to make such a mistake in the future.”

“Oh, for goodness sake.”

Olivia rolled onto her stomach, snuggling herself in closer and laying halfway on top of Cassandra’s body flatly. She swiped her hand through her hair, pulling it all back and away out of her face. Letting a leg slip in between Cassandra’s thighs, fitting cozily between then, she stared down her lover who seemed ready to escape both the conversation and her.

“You have a taste for silly, argumentative women,” she commented, resting her chin on Cassandra’s chest.

“I have a taste for exhaustive situations which I seem to have little intuitive skill in avoiding.”

“…And they just happen to involve silly, argumentative women.”

“If that is what they wish to write about me, they may do so.”

Olivia let out a warm giggle. She reached a hand up and lovingly caressed Cassandra’s face, trying to appease her into opening her eyes. Feeling her touch, the Seeker was enticed partially, but she felt to bruised in ego to relent so easily.

“My Love,” Cassandra muttered, “I know you have the ability to carry this on for hours, but some of us have mortal needs for rest.”

“I understand. You are only as powerful as your shortcomings.”

Cassandra let her arm rest across Olivia’s back now, her thumb gently rubbing back and forth against
her skin. Underneath her perturbed façade, she still remembered that Olivia had had a difficult night. Sleep may be welcoming her, but it may be tormenting Olivia, who still managed to find ways to giggle and smile during a most unsavory conversation.

“Tell you what,” she offered, “if you can grant me enough time to sleep, I will revisit your order and contemplate it sincerely.”

Olivia’s brow raised, feeling the shift in Cassandra’s demeanor. Instead of offering an addendum or a victory speech, she smile softly. “I hear you are most difficult to order around. I am at a loss for words at this honor.”

Cassandra smirked. “Yes, that rumor, I am afraid, is based in truth.”

“I must ask if another rumor is true, if you don’t mind.”

“Oh?”

Olivia pushed herself up a bit, just so her lips were above Cassandra’s. She then grinned. “That you have the heart of one of the most beautiful, brilliant, and capable Mages in all of Thedas.”

Hearing her confidence emboldened Cassandra’s heart. In just the few weeks they had been together, she had seen Olivia grow into her confidence and potential with reckless abandon. It felt as though she had no where to go but up and away, and seize every victory without apology. It was vindicating to her, to see Olivia love herself for all the reasons she loved her from the outside-looking-in.

“Such gossip is dangerous, I am afraid we must seek out and neutralize whoever is spreading such slanderous propaganda.”

Olivia held back a laughter as she rested her cheek on her chest. “You can feel free to prosecute, Lover. I confess to my crime.”

The corners of Cassandra mouth turned up slightly, a result of her wanting to hide her amusement and failing. For as much as Olivia could pack a punch, one of the most ironically irresistible parts about her was how she would add a touch of sweet endearment to her tenacity. It was a most potent concoction of personality, one for which Cassandra had become a devout consumer.

“What will it be, then? An eternity in the gibbet or an eternity loving the most temperamental woman in all of Thedas?”

Olivia smirked, knowing then for sure that she had gotten back onto Cassandra’s humorous side. It was tiny, and secluded, but it did exist. She had made quite a home within its confines.

“Oh, the gibbet, to be sure.”

She then felt a sharp press of fingers on her side, igniting a ticklish sensation under her skin. She flinched and curled her side away from the touch, an enunciated giggle of surprise escaping her mouth. From above, Cassandra now grinned unashamed.

“Ah! You have convinced me!” she said in her recovering laughter, “I deserve the solemn and tormented existence of being a Seeker’s woman.”

“I am so glad you could find some sense in that deviant mind of yours,” Cassandra opened her eyes, now, to gaze up at Olivia’s soft, dewy face in the rich moonlight. A streak of illumination went across her left cheek and up her face, creating a glimmer in her eye that made her look like an otherworldly beauty.
“Olivia…” Cassandra breathed then, her face shifting from humor to sincerity. She reached a hand and rest it against Olivia’s check and jawline, cusping it with care. “I may be many things, but I am not made of stone. Even if I did not love you as I do, I would want you to feel open to be your whole self in my presence. Please, do not turn from me so easily.”

Olivia’s smile softened as the tone of the room changed, and she felt the seriousness set in again. She listened to Cassandra’s plea, and tried her best not to let her defensive nerves rise before she could formulate a proper response. Responding, and not reacting, was proving challenging.

Her chest concaved a bit as her shoulders rounded, adding body language to her inner debate.

“Cassandra,” she replied, leaning her upper body on top of her lover’s chest and abdomen, but still keeping upright in her posture somewhat. “My experiences are mine, and I will share them with you when I must. I appreciate it, I really do. But, some things… I do not always feel it best to disclose.”

“Why not? Do you not trust me?”

“Yes, but, you have one of the most iron-clad code of ethics I have ever known. You do not always do well in grey areas. My life is an entire grey area.”

“You make presumptions for my capabilities without letting me be the judge of what my limits are. Surely, you can see why I am frustrated with this.”

“Cassandra, it is not to degrade you, it is to protect myself. I make preclusions out of habit. Besides, my days as a harlot and courtesan have made me a rather precise judge of what people crave from others.”

“So, you are curating your personality for what you believe best appeals to me?”

“No, I am simply utilizing my habits in order to ensure I do not let myself go on and on about my trauma. It is not just exhausting for others, but for myself, to express such pain.”

Cassandra propped one leg up as she laid otherwise still, listening to Olivia still try to put up a fight. Somewhere, she felt, there had to be some kind of compromise: a way to ensure she was given the credit she was due, and Olivia was validated for her truth. Nothing had to end in a stalemate if the parties involved merely deployed some sense.

Or, as Olivia would call it, compassion.

“Very well. I respect your boundaries, even as I do not agree with them. All that I ask is that you do not feel unsafe around me, and if you ever do, you tell me.” Cassandra tilted her chin in her direction, her eyes softening a bit as she felt the armistice take hold.

Olivia, in return, offered a bittersweet grin. She leaned up and over her, placing her forehead against Cassandra’s. Closing her eyes and inhaling softly, she rested there, wishing to smooth over the anxiety the conversation had cultivated.

“I love you, you do know that, right?” she whispered, her hand resting on Cassandra’s chest. She then felt her lover’s arm move up and around her upper back, fitting snugly around her.

“I love you, too. Even when you smell like ash, and fight with the temper of a disgruntled badger.” Olivia choked back a laugh, a smile cracking on her face once more. “I do not! You are one to talk!”

“Olivia, I have energy for one passionate argument. May we continue this one tomorrow evening?”
“Oh, pfft.”

Olivia huffed and twisted herself around, rolling onto her back as she laid back down up against Cassandra’s side. She rested her head cozily in the crux of Cassandra’s shoulder, and took hold of her lover’s arm that wrapped around her shoulders and reached across her chest. A badger, of all creatures? Surely there had to be something, anything, to do her better justice than that.

Cassandra sighed. “I know this will not be the last I hear of this, and I am already regretting saying it.”

“You better. I have ten points already enumerated in my mind. Prepare to duel at sundown.”

Cassandra snickered under her throat. “I am quivering just thinking about it.”

Olivia elbowed her in the side softly, prompting her to flinch and chuckle some more. “Alright, fine, that was unfair.”

“Do you always comfort people after nightmares by being stubborn and insufferable?”

“Yes, absolutely. That is, when I’m not the topic of nightmares myself.”

“Oh, so that rumor is true?”

“Let us just say there is a reason why Commander Cullen rarely allows me to lead morning troop training anymore.”

Olivia couldn’t help but smile and shake her head softly. For all the people in Thedas she could have ended up with, she chose the woman of nightmares, who could offer the softest and loving touch in one moment and then walk outside and make a recruit piss themselves. It was endlessly interesting, and at the same time, comforting to know such dualities in nature were possible.

She nestled herself in deeper against Cassandra’s hold, unafraid of such things. Closing her eyes and taking a breath, she never felt safer.
Some time passes after Cassandra and Olivia's argument about Olivia's conditions as a Mage. A situation unfolds that brings Olivia's concerns to life, and forces Cassandra out of her comfort zone. Suddenly, the experiences of the Mages of the Inquisition become impossible to ignore, and the rough feelings between the two women come to a head.

Days had past since their midnight argument, and in the midst of the workday in Skyhold it was easy to forget that such a conflict had ever occurred. Lover’s quarrels were uncharted territory for them, and now that the initial reverie was beginning to wane, perhaps their differences were becoming too great to avoid.

These thoughts weighed heavily on Cassandra’s mind as she went about her duties, especially when she took time to practice her maneuvers in the courtyard with the straw man playing her adversary. The day had begun to warm, and her light sweat began to show on her skin as she went at it. As she practiced, she couldn’t help but be reminded of what Olivia had mentioned: all the rumors, and all the eyes and mouths that created them, watching. Had her relationship with a Mage truly garnered that much sociopolitical attention? She knew if she were to ask Leliana or Ambassador Montilyet they answer would be an emphatic “yes.”

As she did her routine, she hadn’t noticed that Olivia herself had strayed from her work in the Tower. She was down in the lower courtyard, entertaining a group of children. Some were human, and some were elven, though all of them had become enchanted with Olivia’s kindhearted demeanor. She sat on the ground near the infirmary, her skirts gathered elegantly around her as she sat tall with a lady’s posture. She was singing songs whilst they danced and giggled together. They were around the ages of the girl she had seen in her dream, and the connection was not lost on her. Though, in the reality of the day, she was comforted by their true happiness.

“Oh, my dear!” she exclaimed, hands clasped together and held close to her chest as she watched two girls spin each other around, hand-in-hand. “Do be careful not to fall, now.”

The group of five or six children listened to every word she said as if she were some saintly goddess sent to protect them. Olivia had become used to such treatment, though it filled her with a sense of responsibility to their welfare. Perhaps this was a taste of how Theia felt at all times, being anxious and protective of others, and feeling personally culpable should anything negative happen to them.

“Olivia, Olivia!” a girl called from behind the group, her stoutness making her less visible. “Can you sing the song about the huntress again!?”

Olivia chuckled, rocking back in her place. “Crestia, you have asked for that song twice a day now! Why not love some other songs instead?”

“Because it’s so romantic,” the girl swooned, leaning into her friend. “It is my favorite-favorite! Please?”

A couple other girls began to chime in, saying please with various pitches and adding synonyms onto the word. Olivia smirked to herself, tilting her chin as she relented at last.
“Alright, alright! One last time for today, and then you’ll have to wait until tomorrow. Come, Crestia, join me in harmony!” she reached out her hands towards the girl. Excited like she had just won the lottery, Crestia raced over and collapsed into Olivia’s lap. Feeling her arms wrap over her, she felt safe and emboldened in her joy.

Olivia laughed, feeling the heft of weight against her as she took hold of her dear little friend.

“Now, how does it begin?” she asked knowingly. Her eyes narrowed as she scanned the girls’ faces. They all pondered ravenously, wanting to be the first to suggest the right verse and be praised.

“Oh! I know, I know!” the girl named Taelyn, the daughter of an elven apostate who worked in the tower alongside Olivia but on different subjects relating to magic. She sang out the first few words in a modest song: “Once in the Dales, there was a Maiden named…”

The girls began to sing along, wanting in on the action. Olivia nodded affirmatively.

“Ah, yes! Thank you, darling.”

“Can you sing it now?” Crestia inquired from below, eyeing her.

“Yes, yes, of course,” Olivia shook her head, gazing back at her before returning her eyes to the group before her. “Now, all-together,”

*Once in the Dales, there was a Maiden named Pola*

*She danced in the streams and fed the sweet Halla,*

*One day she saw the Great Bear coming,*

*And she called to her huntsmen,*

*Today, we shall feast on his bones*  
*and sleep in his hide…*

The girls’ enthusiastic lack of harmony made for a most cheerful, if not slightly-unorganized chorus. But, they kept with it, remembering the lyrics and the story. The Huntress named Pola, who led the great voyage to take down the Great Bear that had run amok in the Emerald Graves. She was a strapping heroine, strong and courageous. The girls loved her story because they felt they could be her one day, and between Pola and Olivia as role models, they had great big shoes to fill.

But, with Olivia’s kindness, they had believed it all to be possible.

As they sang, with Olivia swaying to-and-fro with the tempo, they drew looks of both warmth and annoyance from adults surrounding the area. Olivia had taken care not to be too loud, so as to disturb the recovering patients who may have been sleeping in the infirmary. Though, according to the surgeons, such jubilant displays of high morale were just as helpful in recovery as any medicine.

Nearby, a group of three or four soldiers walked past, and one seemed to be discontented with the activity.

“Is that how you got the Seeker, harlot? Singing into her ear until she gave into your loving?”

The witless voice grated on Olivia’s nerves like nails on chalkboard, and she immediately stopped singing and turned her attention to the group of armored people standing several yards from them.
“Soldier,” she replied cordially, “please, take care when speaking around the children.” She believed that if nothing else, the plight of well-meaning kids would compel them to control themselves. She knew deep down, however, that when it came to certain depths of malice, no measure of innocence was enough to de-escalate.

The man spat on the ground, showing his distaste for her meekness.

“If they really cared for the wellbeing of the children, they’d keep them far away from you. You have nothing to teach except lewd sin,” he growled. From behind, his friend reached a hand to his shoulder, seeming to beckon him to back off. But, alas, the man was having none of it: shrugging off his friend’s gesture, he took several steps forward.

Olivia watched, instinctively holding onto Crestia in her lap tighter. The kids turned to face the encroaching soldier, stepping backwards and closer to her.

“Soldier, please, contain your anger. You know not what you do,” Olivia said, care and gentility in her voice hiding her fear.

He stopped with a heavy footfall and grunted. “You would do well not to threaten a soldier and former Templar, whore.”

Olivia’s hands went to Crestia’s ears, wanting to censor his vulgarity. “I do not wish anything upon you, only that you would practice good manners.”

“Harlots don’t know good manners from a bucket of water. What are you going to do, freeze my bones to death like the Inquisitor would a peeping Tom?”

Olivia’s brow lowered, now feeling defensive at the invocation of her friend’s name. “Sir, stand down, please.”

“I don’t take orders from Mages. Stand up and fight me, if you wish me gone.”

Olivia had hoped but not noticed, that around her in various locations of oversight, her friends were watching carefully for what was to follow. Veronica, having peered down from the crow’s nest at the right moment to see a man advance towards Olivia with the posture of a bigot and not a well-meaning stranger, had scaled down and posted herself along a Battlement wall. She leaned up against the stone, hand on her dagger, ready to throw and pin whatever body part was most convenient. Then, there was Naomi, who was less armed in her concern but nevertheless willing to do harm if needed. She had pulled away from her work in the infirmary, watching from the opening of a tent as the man refused to let his trouble go. She folded her arms, trying to look disinterested and covert, but the look on her face gave it all away. Lastly, there was Theia, who had been standing at the mouth of the Great Hall alongside Vivienne as they discussed stratagem for Mage armor schematics. Her attention was sharply ensnared when she noticed the one lone figure advance towards her friend. Now, they were both peripherally surveilling the situation.

An insubordinate soldier, wonderful, Theia thought. Another reason for her and Cullen to be sore at the next War Council meeting.

Back down on the ground, Olivia was daunted by the escalation of the man’s intentions. She pushed Crestia up from her lap, her hand wrapping around the front of the girl’s body as she guided her to stand behind her shoulder. Crestia’s eyes had lost all their joy as she took her position behind her teacher and mentor, the woman whom she swore sunshine took its name from.

“Sir, surely you would not wish to cause such a conflict here,” Olivia tried once more to appeal to his
sanity.

However, as the man stood, arms folded rigidly against his puffed-up chest. She sighed, rising to her feet. The girls went and stood behind her tea-length skirts, some holding onto one another for assurance.

“That’s a pretty Mage. Knows when to come when called,” he said, smirking over his shoulder at his friend, as if he had won some game. Olivia felt the disgust in her chest at his bodacious behavior. It was crass and piggish, but it wasn’t unfamiliar to her.

“I will not fight you, Soldier. The Inquisition does not allow for such things without formal request to the Commander’s office, and a promise of non-fatal intention.” Olivia had read the protocol scrolls, and read them well. Mages and non-magically-imbued personnel were not to spar in open air unless they were of high enough rank, without permission to do so. The rule was made to protect people from temperamental disagreements between unequal power talents.

“Since when do you follow rules? Come on, missy, give me one sweet pucker of ice right on the cheek. See what happens.”

“No.”

“Come on!” he roared now, his hand going for his sword. Her dream, the vivid nature of its violence, came back to life for her. Olivia’s eyes narrowed as she watched him gesture, the phallic nature of his weapon and his dependency on it crystal clear to her.

She took a bold step forward, her attention turning towards his friends.

“You would see your training compatriot make a fool out of himself with this?!” she demanded of them. Two of the men turned to each other, feeling bruised from the way the Mage invoked their character. One stood back, not wanting to intervene. Clearly, this man was the ring-leader, then, and not by being the smartest of the group.

From her perch, Veronica unsheathed her dagger, estimating with her keen eyes just how and when she would have to throw the first. From the infirmary tent, Naomi, reached up her long, velveteen dress sleeve, her hands making contact with the small dagger she, too, traveled with. So much for being less equipped.

Then, there was Theia, the Inquisitor herself, stepping forward and closer to the edge of the stone platform she stood on. She heard Vivienne insist that she intervene and stop the nonsense before it was too much of a mess to clean up. But, Theia didn’t race down. No, she saw someone had already taken her place in that endeavor. She watched, her eyes stoic and vigilant. She trusted she would be powerful enough to intervene, should she be compelled to.

“Come at me!” the man said, fully unsheathing his sword and stepping into a ready position. From behind, she felt the girls all flinch at the sound the sword’s metal made, and they quaked as the stepped back farther behind her. Olivia stood tall, though, as much as she could do so. She was unwavering, resolute-looking. She had known the danger of a man’s sharp blade and dull mind before, and it had left her long-since jaded. This was nothing new, nothing terrifying in its rarity. It was almost as if a mask of her own creation, inspired by the airs of Orlesian playfulness, took hold now.

“Sire,” she said, stepping forward again. “I have nothing in me to offer you. You antagonize a helpless Mage woman, who knows nothing but how to make potions and spurn the imaginations of lesser men.”
The man groaned. “Stop with your wordy enchanting and fight me like a real warrior would, dammit!”

“You make violence seem so attractive, Soldier. Tell me, if you wish to penetrate me so deeply and quickly, why you feel the need for this approach.” Her eyes glazed over with a shallow, honeyed allure.

The man swung his sword in his hand, rolling his shoulders. “I want to get a taste of what the Seeker gets a mouthful of every night, and I want to show you Mages that you don’t run this place like you flaunt yourselves to. Now, fight me, harlot, before I do the hard work for you!”

People had begun to crowd around the perimeter of the courtyard grass, watching with concern and worry. Some, however, looked as though they were being vindicated in their opinions they were too cowardly to voice out loud. This man, for them, was their pitiful champion, then. Olivia couldn’t help but feel at a loss for the flurry of emotions and consequences that stifled the air she breathed. Was she supposed to fight him, then? Perhaps kill him? Could she depend on the understanding of Theia as the Inquisitor, even if it meant reinforcing the gossip that she was a radical Mage who believed in the impugnity of her kind against all crimes?

Olivia held her breath.

“Then do it!” she exclaimed.

Then, as if emboldened in her lack of value, she stepped forward until she was no more than 6ft from him. She reached a hand and grabbed the sword blade, pulling it to her abdomen and placing the tip of it against the middle of her stomach. The sharpness pressed into her just enough to where her lungs reacted instinctively, and she stood with bated breath as she positioned herself for a gruesome fate.

Veronica watched with widened eyes, and she stood ready, her hands now both holding daggers which could fly through the air and relieve the man of his ability to live. Naomi, looking more concerned like a Mother would, stepped away from the tent and towards them, but stopped herself. She did not want to give the man another reason to act brashly. Theia, up above, raised her brows as she felt the pang of protectiveness in her body take hold. Her eyes began to flicker with purple static. Just how far could her lightning strike go, she wondered. Down two stories and across the ground? That would work.

The man’s bravado waned a bit, as he watched her give herself into her own demise. He stuttered, his eyes full of reckless rage.

“Y-You cheap whore, you think you can just—” he struggled.

Olivia stood still, determined. She maintained rigid, unforgiving eye contact with him. If he was truly here to seek his own form of adulterated justice, then he should have it, then. Make her a martyr and give him hell to pay for the rest of his life. Kill her in front of children, and send them home with scorned hearts, vengeful and ready to grow into lethal adults. Make the Inquisiton itself have to compensate for the slaying of an innocent Mage in its own walls.

“Do it, Soldier. ‘Tis an order, from an insubordinate Mage slut,” she hissed.

The man’s eyes then narrowed, his brow lowering and teeth baring like a furious animal. He looked as though he were mustering up the courage and had just about done it. Olivia glared at him with knowing disappointment, before she closed her eyes, awaiting his move. Her submissiveness enraged him even more; nothing sharpened the temper of an ill-advised warrior like unabashed
pacifism.

Then, just as he was leaning forward, and she felt the pressure increase against her stomach, he stopped.

For, behind the most unwise soldier, another woman had a penchant for sword blades. Cassandra Pentaghast, the Seeker he so desperately wanted to empathize with in his vulgar words, held her greatsword to the back of his neck, the tip of his bearing into his skin almost to the point of drawing blood.

“Soldier, stand down and sheath your weapon.” Her voice, infamous in its growling tone, cut through the courtyard air with a vengeance.

Olivia’s eyes opened as she heard her lover’s voice speak, and she saw the man’s face, how it changed. Where there was foolishly unafraid anger, now there was tried-and-true terror. She gazed at him, and he made eye contact with her in return. When he did so, she offered him a most sickly-sweet grin.

Then, as he stood frozen in limbo between the two women, he felt a shock of freezing cold crackle over his sword grip. In an instant, Olivia had sent a branch of ice from the tip of his blade that was embedded in her torso, cracking across it and onto his hand, encasing it in.

“No fear, Seeker. I have sheathed it for him,” she said in an exacting monotone.

The man let out a cry, looking down at his frozen hand and sword. He couldn’t run and hide like he wanted to, with the Seeker at his back. Cassandra proved most forgiving, though, when Olivia stepped back, removing herself from the direct line of harm. She lowered and sheathed her sword, too, and went to work with her hands instead.

She grabbed the man from the back of his shirt collar, yanking him back against her so as to grow her order in his ear as his sneveled. “You will be sent to the Commander’s Office at once, and then sequestered until the Inquisitor can decide how to reprimand you for this disgusting show.”

She turned then, pulling him with her as if he were a stray animal. Looking at his helpless friends who all looked like they had seen a ghost, she stared them down.

“Take your comrade to Commander Cullen at once, or all of you will be strung by your heels from the Battlements overnight.”

She then flung his sorry ass in their direction. A pitiful grunt escaped his lips.

“S-S-Seeker, I—”

“Now.”

The group crowded around him now, standing at his side. They nodded with sorry expressions on their faces like the cowards they were, and began walking up towards the stairs that would eventually lead to the quickest route to Cullen’s quarters.

Cassandra watched them go, and as they were midway up the stairwell, she turned to see Olivia standing still as well.

“Olivia,” she said, though she felt at a loss for words. She had so many questions, and so many concerns to voice all at once. Though, her mind was still fixated on the sight she had come upon, of a man holding a sword directly into her stomach, and looking ready to follow through on it.
Olivia’s eyes went after the group of Soldiers, too, but when Cassandra turned she made eye contact with her. Hearing her name, her blank face was undaunted.

There was so much she could say in response: that she was alright, not to worry. That she felt an impulse to be daring and wasteful with her life, and she was at fault. She could say she knew that her friends would have had her back and defended her should he decide to go forward with his irrational dare. But, seeing Cassandra’s face, the look of confusion and concern, all she could hear in her head was one solemn truth:

“For that,” she replied, “I would have been made tranquil.”

They stared at each other for a spare moment. Olivia’s eyes remained unchanged in their emotionless stoicism. Cassandra didn’t know what to do or to say to that. Her old nerve would have been to disagree, or to fight that assertion with counter-evidence. But, seeing the sincerity in Olivia’s face, the seriousness in her tone, she felt as though such a continuance of debate would have only dug her heels in. Then, there was the fact that, in that moment, Cassandra did something she rarely ever did when a Mage described their harsh conditions in this world: she believed her.

Their silence was broken by the rushing of children’s feet around Olivia, as the girls finally felt that things were all clear.

“Olivia! Olivia!” they cried, surrounding her. Some gripped onto her skirts, even. They all gazed up at her.

“Are you alright?” Crestia yelled over their voices. Olivia’s trance was broken then, and she let her arms spread outward around her, hands reaching and holding the back of two of their heads as they foiled her in love and concern.

“Oh, my darlings,” Olivia cooed, trying to inject some emotion into her bones and tongue for them. “I am alright, no harm done.”

“Was he going to kill you?” Taelyn asked, standing on her tippy-toes.

Olivia inhaled sharply. “No, my dear, he was only trying to scare me. I was in no immediate danger, I promise,” she told a half-truth that made her chest ache. While she knew friends loomed in the wings, ready to defend her, Olivia never put it past an ill-tempered man to do more harm than logic would estimate. What she had done was dangerous and ill-advised, but it was also useful in downplaying what could have happened. After all, if she truly felt she were in danger, she wouldn’t have called his bluff, right?

Cassandra watched, speechless, as the children engulfed the environment with anxious concern. Suddenly, they were all saying different things at once, creating an disorganized symphony of voices.

“Would you have killed him?” one asked.

“I would have told Mom, she would have done him in!” one exclaimed.

“Olivia, please don’t ever get hurt!” another implored.

Cassandra was overwhelmed in that moment. It was a doubled-down sentiment when she realized all of the adult people who had been gathered around to watch. The Seeker, defending the life of a Mage outright and with her own blade. Such things did not carry a precedent.

Her eyes snapped back into the present moment as she watched Olivia pick up the girl called Taelyn,
and hold her on one hip. She was smiling, now. Melancholic, but it was there.

“Come, now, let us all go back to the tower and I can sing you the song whilst I check on my projects. Come, come!” she managed a façade of cheeriness well, given the circumstances. The girls then all reacted with renewed thrill, smiles and grins as they walked after her.

As Olivia made her way past Cassandra, the women exchanged one last glance, and she slowed her steps momentarily.

“Thank you, Seeker,” she replied formally, knowing they had an audience of more than just small children. Then, she was off, not wanting to wait for a stumbling response from the woman whom she knew would rather have a formal and confident opinion to give. Walking up the steps with the girls in toe, Olivia felt out of the way enough to let her face of tired nerves show. With her withdrawal, all eyes turned to the remaining Seeker, who stood tall and alone now.

At a loss for how she may have better handled the situation, Cassandra’s wandering eyes made contact with Naomi’s, who had stood yards away, watching the situation like a hawk. Her compassionate gaze was a welcome reprieve, though it left the unanswered questions looming in the air.

Naomi took the gaze as an invitation to come closer, and she did so, her arms still folded.

“Seeker,” she greeted, “I am grateful for your intervention, as we all are.” She referenced the two other Foxes who’s eyes and weaponry were ready to be deployed should Olivia continued to be in harm’s way. Cassandra didn’t bother turning to look – she assumed such things would be natural to expect.

“What happened? Why did she do this?” she asked in return, feeling like any strand of logic or sense would be helpful, even as she may have asked the wrong questions.

Naomi exhaled, shifting her weight unto one hip. “She did what she’s good at: playing soft, and then calling a man’s bluff when he feels most undaunted. Though, I am unsure of whether it would have gone like she gambled.”

“So, she instigated this?”

“No, not in the least bit. Your Commander’s Soldiers are a mixed bag, Seeker. Former Templars, though deserters, are still cut from the same cloth as the ones that are red-lyrium-crazed. Has she not told you of their verbal animosity?”

Cassandra placed her hands on her hips. “Yes, she has mentioned it.”

“And? Do you not see an issue?”

“She almost always discusses it after it is too late to be reprimanded. She has made it clear to me that she sees her conditions as a Mage as her to handle, and not mine to intervene within.”

“I see.” Naomi bit her lip, looking off to the side. She pushed her long black hair off onto one shoulder as she thought. “Well, in any case, Olivia is not to blame. She tried her best to appease him. He came at her with a hunger for gratification nothing but violence would solve for him.”

“I find it hard to believe such men are in our army without so much as a second glance,” Cassandra admitted. Her biases and narrowed perspective took time to deconstruct, and old habits of perspective took time to be put to rest.
Naomi scoffed, then. Even she, the person who perhaps had the most patience in the entire group of Foxes, knew that was bogus to believe.

“Seeker, such men infest the world. You will never escape malice if you are a Mage, especially for an Elven apostate. These truths are unavoidable. The longer you love her, the more you will encounter these situations, and perhaps eventually you will believe her when she speaks of it.”

“Naomi, I—”

“Seeker. Instead of formulating an astute response, perhaps you should let the one with personal experience be the last voice in the conversation. Good day, and thank you, again.”

At that, Naomi nodded politely, and sought her way back to her post working in the infirmary. As she left, Cassandra became increasingly convinced that she was never to catch a break in this situation, even if she felt she had done the right thing. It wasn’t enough to simply do, and think later. It had to be a combination, a reciprocal interaction between her thoughts and her decisions. That meant she had to finally, at last, open up to the idea that maybe she had been ill-advised in her workings with Mages. She had taken for granted that her friendship with the Inquisitor had made all necessary changes and improvements; now, she feared that it had done anything but.

Eventually, she steadied herself enough to return back to her area of the fortress. As she walked, she got lost in her thoughts. What to do, how to do it, maybe what not to do.

From above, Theia watched her walking, and anticipated that things had gotten much more complicated for Cassandra and her politics the longer she loved Olivia.

“Such a wonder,” Vivienne commented at her side, “perhaps Cassandra may yet prove to be a Mage sympathizer after all. Such sights are almost as apocalyptic in nature as that of Corypheus’s dragon pet.”

Theia sighed, eyeing Vivienne from her periphery. “I knew this was inevitable if they remained together.”

“You know what they say behind their backs, darling, don’t you?”

“Of course – Josephine keeps me informed of all such discourses. It is for the safety of everyone.”

“Oh, so you know they say the Seeker is trying to prove Mage inferiority by curbing one into her romantic and sexual subservience?”

“Ye—well, that, actually, I was not aware of. Where on Earth did you hear that?”

“The Capitol is a most unforgiving beast, darling.”

Theia groaned, her hand resting stiffly on her hips. “Let us all hope, then, that they sort this out before I must convene a tribunal to negotiate the terms of their relationship as it pertains to the geopolitical sphere of all of Thedas.” Her voice was drenched with dread.

Vivienne smirked without humor as the two women retreated back into the Great Hall. “My dear Inquisitor, if I am to be honest, perhaps you should have led with that in the first place.”
Smoke Settles

Chapter Summary

The day wears on after Olivia's conflict with the former Templar soldier. Cassandra tries one more time to embark on conversation, and this time, Olivia proves more open to expressing her frustrations with being who she is and the ambivalence felt by the higher-ranking members of the Inquisition towards the conditions of those who still work for the cause without titles or aplomb to their names. Olivia continues not to pull any punches, but, maybe that is exactly the kind of language Cassandra knows how to work with.

The morning’s tumult had given way to an otherwise uneventful day for Olivia. After a couple hours of entertaining the children whilst she tried her best to get work done, they eventually had to return to their parents. This gave her a couple hours of quiet, wherein she could give her full attention to her tasks.

Cleaning bottles, washing pots, organizing her catalogue of samples, and other busy work to keep her mind off her ordeal earlier in the day. Between the gossip it would inspire, and the “words” she would have to have with several people about her conduct and safety as a Mage, she was already dreading the consequences of her actions. She thought it was fundamentally unfair for her to be feeling this much guilt for something she in no way provoked.

Dusk painted the sky as she continued her work, and the other Mages one-by-one withdrew from the workday to their respective quarters, or perhaps to the Hall for supper. Olivia being the remaining Mage in the tower was not an uncommon occurrence, although usually it was for happier reasons.

Realizing daylight was nearly gone, Olivia went around and began lighting the various candles and few torches throughout the first couple floors of the tower where she primarily occupied space. Once she had reached the last candle on the second story, she let out a fatigued sigh. Now, more than most, she wished things were different for herself. While she had never outwardly regretted being born a Mage, internally she would wonder how different life would have gone for her had she not been imbued with such a complex condition.

Could she have found someone amiable enough in both temperament and fortune to satiate the needs of her younger self and her family? Could she be somewhere in the countryside, living the life of a refined Orlesian Lady, bringing up children and counting the number of beautiful horses in her stables to pass the time? Or, perhaps she would have been a prolific Dancer, pined for by everyone across Thedas. She could have traveled, had adventure, and never know the violence a Mage’s life promised.

But, then, she wouldn’t have her people.

Making her way down the wooden stairwell, she once again got caught on the one caveat of her daydreams: who would she be without her friends, who had irrevocably changed her life and who she was for the better? Who would she be without the passions of being an Apothecary Mage, who experimented with substances and equations some only dreamed about. From practicing with spare samples from the Circle inventories in her bedroom late at night, to now, being trusted with ledgers and scouting missions for ingredients and patents for new creations.
It would all be a lot easier to enjoy had she not carried the weight of being a sleazy sorceress around for a reputation.

Once again, she found herself in front of her work table, freshly cleaned and sorted in preparation for the following morning. Her thoughtful conclusions brought little solace to her. Perhaps this is always how it would be: never quite content, but never quite finished with her lot in life. She would always be distracting herself with new projects, new ideas. Maybe that would be her saving grace when all was said and done.

She reached and grabbed several books from the corner of the table, her hand feeling the front cover of one. These were no longer needed, and must be returned to the shelf. She quietly made her way over, holding the first book out and promptly replacing it where it once was. As she searched for where the second book had been, she heard the door open. She turned her head, and saw it was a tall figure with a dark head of hair, with a body dressed in limber Seeker’s armor.

Ah, so she would be her first interrogator, then. Perhaps it was better to get it out of the way.

Olivia exhaled and returned her attention to sorting out her books.

“Evening, Seeker,” she greeted, hand shifting a stack to the side to make room for the book she held.

Cassandra had garnered the courage to come to her on her own proverbial turf but seeing her standing there took an ounce more than she had in store. Closing the door behind her, she took a breath and stiffened her posture.

“I…I can tell you are cross with me. You always refer to me with my occupation,” she offered piecemeal humor.

Olivia filed in the final book, freeing up her hands and attention for her lover who clearly prepared for a war of words.

“Surely not, darling. Why would I?” she said, turning to her and remaining where she stood.

Cassandra took a breath. “About this morning.”

“Yes?”

“I believe you think me misguided in my intentions for intervening. Or, maybe you think me ambivalent. Or, that I blame you for it—”

“Cassandra.”

A pause, then, while both women stared at each other. Olivia raised a brow, wondering just how much Cassandra had been overthinking this. Clearly, she had spent her remaining hours in the day with a very particular activity.

“I…yes?” the Seeker relented.

“I am not angry with you. I am angry with the whole grand scheme of things, but, not you individually.”

“Oh, well, that is a relie—wait, you are angry?”

“Mhm, why should I be anything but?”

Cassandra hands moved up her sides anxiously as she contemplated what to say next. Olivia’s
fearlessness kept her off balance, which was not a common sensation to feel for her.

“I figured, well…” she struggled. Then, she remembered Naomi’s warning about her speaking, and how much time she spent talking. “Actually, I…wanted to know if you would be willing to vent to me about it.”

Olivia’s chin tilted a bit in surprise. “Oh?”

“Y…Yes. That is something I hope you would be open to doing.” Her off-the-cuff detour from her original line of discussion was proving rockier than she wanted it to be. Cassandra didn’t do impulsivity well, but she did it with intention. Clearly, if she was winging it now, it meant something to her.

Seeing the conflicted emotions play themselves out on Cassandra’s face, Olivia put her fingers to her mouth and bit back a giggle.

“You are quite poor at this, aren’t you?” she remarked, eyeing her.

Realizing that the veil of confidence was no longer in effect, Cassandra slouched a bit, feeling for once panicked under pressure. “I am trying to make sense of this and…at the same time, I want to be the person you need me to be. Just be gentle with me,” she asked.

Olivia inhaled slowly, taking in the scene for all it was worth. “Fine, I will humor you. But, if it goes anything like the other night, I reserve the right to shove your head in a bucket and run.”

Cassandra grinned with relief. “Alright, fair enough.”

The Seeker then moved to the nearest chair she could find, which happened to be positioned next to Olivia’s work desk. She grabbed it and placed it closer to the fire which was beginning to dull out, and sat backwards on it, resting her arms atop the backrest. Meanwhile, Olivia straightened out her dress skirts and made her way to the rug in front of the hearth and stood tall as her audience took her seat.

“It…Hm, how should I start this? I’ve never given a lecture before,” she humored the situation, a sly smile on her lips. “Ah, well, I suppose I could begin with this: it is ludicrous to me that the forces of the Inquisition allow people to work and live amongst those belonging to different classes and races without so much as a consideration as to what prejudices and biases people bring here. You think that we are all united under one supreme cause, and that it absolves us of our bigotries, as if by magic! It is unbelievable. Even with Theia working as hard as she does to ensure everyone has a safe and cooperative working environment, some of you “allies” just sit in your cocoons and wait for everyone to work around you!”

Cassandra felt butterflies in her chest, and not the warm and fuzzy kind. More like the kind you get when someone goes for the jugular of a problem and mercilessly sinks their teeth into it.

“—For example, did you know that several of my fellow Mage women have had to deter unwanted advances from drunken men at the tavern, only to risk being violently punished because we are Mages and we should be submissive and idle? I can’t even imagine what it is like for the Elven women, who are eroticized and objectified as servants even when they are promoted to ranks which give them authority! And then you have the servants who don’t have the luxury of titles or ranks, who nonetheless do vital work here. Do you all in the upper echelons simply assume this is some utopian fortress wherein all inequalities and oppressions just cease to matter?”

Cassandra didn’t know whether the question was rhetorical or direct, and her lips parted as she
anticipated having to answer. But, as Olivia continued talking, she knew it was the first one:

“I have whistles and sexual comments hurled at me almost daily when I go walking around the fortress for work. I keep my colleagues from lashing out or countering them, because we risk punishment. I don’t know what else to say besides it is ridiculous! It is! I cannot shake all the magic from my body off like a coat and hang it up at the end of my day. You, you warriors can strip down armor and put away weapons. You could tell people anything about you! You could say you’re a bloody pastry baker! But I, I can’t so much as sneeze or get jealous over something without feeling my magic begin to simmer in reaction. And you know this, and you still think the best thing to do is treat me like an animal needing to be quarantined at a moment’s notice. The reason the rebellion happened, the reason that so much destruction happened, is because Mages grew sick and tired of having their subjugation be the epitome of good ethics. There is nothing ethical about what I experienced, and there is nothing ethical about expecting me to forgive a society, and an Empire, and a religion for perpetuating it! Yet here I am, and here we all are – Theia, Veronica, Naomi, and every Mage here – working to save the world that would see us perish should we prove too inconvenient or powerful.”

Olivia had been pacing and stomping her feet as she spoke, her arms flailing and animating her frustration. Her petite frame grew formidable in its fierceness. Cassandra took in every word, feeling the habitual twinge of stubbornness in her bones as she listened. Her years of work and fighting had calloused some of her beliefs into her mind, but that did not mean that it could never change. People always took for granted that she was unwavering and undaunted in her beliefs, and they were correct in many respects. But, so much had happened to shake the foundations of her virtue. Then, on top of it all, Olivia happened.

“I do not understand why I am radical for believing I deserve not to die, or be subjected to violence, or be sequestered from loved ones for being born in the body I was born into. I do not believe what the Chantry says about its liberal nature – they have enabled senseless violence and bloodshed, and for what? To exploit us when one of us becomes their heroine, their chosen, their Herald? Mages have always been either vilified or exalted, never anything in between. I am not here to simply be a lustful figure, some siren of a movement who could make potions and elixirs and tame the heart of a woman who happens to adhere to the very institutions that objectify her. I am here to prove that Mages like me don’t have to be supernaturally ordained or doomed in order to exist. We do not just show up when we need to save the world or be the villain in histories. I am here, we are here, and we deserve justice and fairness and compassion.”

Olivia was turned away from Cassandra when she finished her last sentence, and she remained there, still, holding her arms against her chest as she felt the momentum of her frustration oscillate in her body. So, the cat was out of the bag – the rebel, opinionated Mage she had always been. Her kindness and softness foiled the heretics of any rogue Mage, and underneath it all, she hungered for justice just as ravenously as any.

Cassandra stared at the back of her head, the tangles of waves tied up in a loose bun with a ribbon weaved in. While it seemed as though this was a great exodus of emotions, Olivia made sense. It took courage and tact to conduct herself in such a way, and her abilities to convey her beliefs with dignity were hard-won. No matter if she agreed, Cassandra respected her, and admired her for her bravery.

So, when Olivia at last turned around to face her, her eyes full of expectation, Cassandra offered an encouraging grin.

“Olivia, your grievances are valid. While I cannot say I understand intimately why you feel as you do, I can understand that it is important to you. I respect it, and I hope you know that.”
Olivia watched her, and she could tell Cassandra was trying her best to override her instinctive response. It meant a lot to her, seeing how much she was doing to reframe her mindset all for her, though it was bittersweet: how many Mages were undeserving of her sympathy before she came along?

“…” Olivia exhaled, “I want you to believe what you say, Cassandra. Not just say it because it is the right thing to say.”

Cassandra leaned back off of the chair. “That takes time, Olivia, but I am trying my hardest. I know you are upset, but I am only one imperfect individual.”

“That is…agh, you are right, I suppose,” Olivia turned away and folded her arms.

“You have to give me some credit. I have spent the majority of my adult life in service of the Chantry, and I am still a firm believer in my faith. It is hard, as you have said, to shake the ingredients that have been contributed to the formulation of your character.”

“Yes, but you have reasons compelling you to do so, that I do not.”

“And what are those?”

“It is the right thing to do on behalf of those who must survive whilst you deliberate where your morals lie.”

A pause in the conversation took hold, then. Cassandra looked away, eyeing the fire as one or two steadfast flames managed to survive whilst the wood broke down. She could feel Olivia’s attentive eyes on her face, scanning for any sense of concession or compassion. Suddenly, she felt like a hypocrite: the woman of action, the woman of right and wrong choices, sitting on her hands for something that required intentional activity. Was her reputation all a farce, then? Or political selective? The idea of her politics clouding her ethics and humanity disturbed her. Faith was supposed to propel everyone in all things, not just in convenient situations. Her faith, she believed, had done well in that regard. Perhaps not, as a Mage stood in front of her, reckoning with her shortcomings.

“Before this continues, may I ask one question?” Cassandra inquired, still not finding the strength to look her lover directly in the eye.

“Yes, that would be fine,” Olivia responded, rolling her shoulders as she felt fatigue in her muscles. Cassandra took in a breath, slightly surprised at her consent.

“You are a capable fighter, even without Mage abilities. I have seen you when you have accompanied us on Missions, the way you fight predominantly with weapons and not your staff or your spells. Why did you put his sword to your body, then, as if you were defenseless and buying time?”

The question was laced with unsatiated concern of a lover who hated seeing the one they loved in harm’s way, as well as a Seeker’s need to logic. Nothing about her behavior made strategic sense to her: surely, there were other ways to remedy and de-escalate.

She heard Olivia scoff, and that provoked her to turn and face her. When she did, she saw that Olivia was grinning without joy as she shook her head.

“Cassandra,” she replied, “I was going to kill him.”
“By subjecting yourself to the end of his sword?”

“You saw what I was able to do with his sword just to neutralize his weapon. I was planning more, should he have kept going. It was a trap meant to make him stutter and perhaps decline to proceed. Sure, it was a bit impulsive and dramatic, I admit, but… I was only doing what I believed would protect myself.”

“You were ready to murder a Soldier of the Inquisition?”

“Yes, because I was not about to let the children watch another Mage be slaughtered without provocation. He was an adult, and he made his choices. They did not.”

At once, Cassandra remembered the context Olivia had found herself in. She wasn’t simply out in the field, engaging in skirmishes with bandits or rogue Templars. She was in a stronghold, with children watching her, having felt safe enough to play in the open air of the courtyard. The man’s anger had ruined it for them, and endangered one of their favorite people in the process: a person they believed invincible and good, a hero worthy of protection and defense. Olivia was not just protecting herself, she was making a statement: Mages can defend themselves, and should, even when the ramifications are stacked against them.

She was going to make an example of herself.

“I suppose it was a good thing, then, that I intervened when I did.”

“Hm, yes, for him. Not for either you or me. Now, people think you are ready to slay witless men to protect your pet, and they think me defenseless and habitually sleazy without you.”

“You really think that? After you turned his weapon into an iceberg?”

“I could have turned half of Skyhold into an abysmal winter fortress, and they would still sneer at my ensnaring of you, Cassandra. I’m not silly.”

Cassandra sighed. Clearly, there were factors to this situation that went beyond her control, and she was struggling to contend with that.

“Forgive me for making you relive it. Regardless, he was insubordinate and malicious, and he will be punished. You have nothing to worry about in terms of punishment or interrogation. I will ensure it.”

“I suppose I owe you thanks for that, then.”

“You owe me nothing, least of all gratitude, for my stumbling.”

Olivia tilted her head, a sorry look on her face as she made eye contact with Cassandra. She saw the conflict in her hazel irises, the way years and years of calloused scruples were being torn asunder within her. It couldn’t have been a comfortable or positive experience, but then again, neither was being a Mage in this world. Though, in that, she could have compassion for her.

Nothing felt worse than to struggle whilst others sneered at your audacity to do so.

“I…I am to go to the Capitol tomorrow with Madame de Fer, to investigate some unideal trade agreements among the market merchants on Ambassador Montilyet’s behalf. I received the orders this afternoon, I’m sure in response to this morning’s dramatics. Vivienne also wishes for some recreational shopping and collection of gossip, so, we will probably be gone for a few days.”

Cassandra was alarmed to hear of such an order that had gone unchecked or untold to her. But, then
again, what authority or expertise would she have on such a mission?

“So, were you planning on leaving without a word?”

“No, silly. I have just told you, haven’t I?”

“Well, yes, but…”

“You think me unwilling to be anything but upset before I leave you,” Olivia called her out, now, with a bittersweet strength in her.

Cassandra restlessly shifted her weight in her seat, before she decided to quit sitting all-together. Rising to her feet, she stepped away from the chair and towards her woman, who remained still watching her.

“Am I to be punished for admitting that I will miss you?” she cut to the quick of her nerves, her face softening as she admitted her weakness.

Olivia’s chest rose, and her sparring attitude began to melt. They had been fighting and debating for days now, and it had worn on her even when she gave the impression that she was emboldened in her fury. Cassandra was difficult to resist when she was sweetly sincere. Thoughtfully, she looked past her, eyeing the fire as she mustered the ability to swallow her pride. Then, after a moment, she returned her eyes to her.

“Not in the slightest, my dear. May I recommend we halt our deliberations until after I return from my excursion, then?”

At that recommendation, Cassandra smiled. It was a relief as much as it was a blessing, knowing she could spend their last night together before her mission being in love with one another, and not at odds.

“I would like nothing better,” she replied, before reaching and pulling Olivia into her for a long-awaited embrace. Olivia went along with it, for she, too, craved an all-engrossing hug after the events of the day.

Her cheek against Cassandra’s shoulder, she closed her eyes and breathed in. When they were like this: Cassandra’s protective arms around her waist, her own arms around her neck, and her face tucked in towards her neck, Olivia could let anything go. But, this would not be so easy to put to bed, and she knew that.

But, for one night of sleep, they could lay down their weapons.
Black Dove

Chapter Summary

Olivia has been gone several days along with Madame Vivienne on important Inquisition trade business to Val Royeaux. During their sojourn, attacks on Olivia's reputation and history become public knowledge, prompting a smooth counter from Leliana, Josephine, and Vivienne in order to recover the narrative from the clutches of Orlesian nobility. Their return to Skyhold broadcasts their efforts for all to see for themselves: Olivia has changed, but has she truly let go of what made her who she was?

For once, Cassandra did not rise out of bed early in the morning, armor herself, and get started with her day whilst Olivia slept undisturbed. This morning, Olivia was the first to wake and rise; nothing woke you up like a tepid morning bath in preparation for a day of travel.

They were visited in Cassandra’s quarters by a servant woman, sent by the Ambassador’s office to help Olivia into her traveling gown. The mission to the Capitol meant having to dawn the attire of an Orlesian lady once again. Though, Ambassador Montilyet had ensured that such a task would be much more pleasurable for her, opting for a different variation of undergarments than the more antiquated Orlesian style, one which was looser-fitting and comfortable. The gown itself was not cumbersome or nauseating in color, but a sophisticated one and heather grey in color. And, once they found their way to the Capitol, Olivia could elect to wear her light armor if she chose to, which she probably would in order to draw little attention to her presence there. Her name and face were both known well enough for her to feel nervous in reintroducing them both after joining the Inquisition’s forces and burning the ego of an established noblewoman. Watching as the ritual took place, Cassandra couldn’t help but feel sorry and humbled. Traveling for her meant armor, feeling comfortable in her skin. For Olivia in this moment, it meant playing the role of her life in order to capitalize on her remaining social clout.

Cassandra wondered how many mornings Olivia did this with the thoughts of her own mortality and fragility in her head. How many mornings she would dress ceremoniously for whatever tumult or objectification awaited her on the other side of the door. How much people sneered at her, commented behind her back, or even to her face, all the while she looked like the precise embodiment of grace.

Watching the woman’s hands string her back and ribs tighter and tighter, cinching every spare inch of her body into its garment cage, all the while Olivia’s blank and unassuming face stared down at the floor with expectation, the Seeker wanted to promise anything and everything she could to make it up to her for the years she spent like this.

Yank, pull, tie.

Yank, pull, knot.

But it would never be enough.

Once the undergarments had been secured, all that was left was for Olivia to step into her gown and have it pulled up and onto her body and tied up in the back. Once that was done, with less implicit violence than the corset, she was ready. Her hair had already been done in a prim and proper up-do.
Now, all that remained was a traveling cloak, and for her to make her way down to the courtyard where her carriage she would share with Madame Vivienne awaited.

As they made their way down the stairs and through the hall, Olivia walked beside Cassandra quietly. Her luggage had been sent ahead of her, as it was not much to speak of – Lady Adalia had sent only a small portion of her accrued wardrobe after their falling out, one last spiteful act against the woman who had dedicated her existence to ensuring her safety. Nonetheless, Olivia found herself content with alternating between the two or three house dresses she had kept throughout her travels. They were modest, and worn, but they were hers – she owed no patron thanks for their existence.

Nearing the open doors of the Hall, she snuck a gaze at Cassandra only once. She saw the look of stoic grace on her face, how she was contained and elegant even in her hardness. It was most attractive, if not bittersweet.

“My dear, there you are!” Vivienne called jubilantly throughout the fog of the early dawn. “We must be on our way, if we are to make it to our checkpoint on time.”

Eventually they had traversed down both flights of steps. Olivia smiled politely to Vivienne who had been sitting in the carriage cab, ready to go. They were to be accompanied by several Inquisition guards, but, it was a lighter traveling group – their excursion would be much faster than it would be had more allies and officials been in accompaniment. Turning to face Cassandra one last time, her chest and ribs propped into upright posture from her corseted ensemble, she sighed shallowly.

“I would ask you to write, if the trip was to be longer,” she said, trying to inject some lightheartedness into the desolate early morning air.

“The Scouts will ensure transmission of important information, including that of your safety. Do not worry,” Cassandra replied, holding her hands together behind her back like a keen warrior would.

Olivia gave a fleeting grin, before her nervous eyes gazed down at her own hands, how they were softly gloved in velveteen fabric.

“I will miss you,” she admitted as she looked away.

Cassandra watched her stumble with emotions, and it tugged at her. She reached a hand and tucked her curled index finger under Olivia’s chin, and gently guided her gaze upwards to her. They could have spent all week fighting non-stop, and it wouldn’t make saying goodbye any easier. Looking upward, Olivia’s honey-hued eyes were awaiting her, as if they had invited her gesture. Their eye contact was silent, for a moment, before the Seeker responded.

“I will miss you, my Love. Be careful,” she offered, leaning into her.

Olivia resolved the remaining distance between them, leaning onto her toes and placing her forehead against Cassandra’s. She closed her eyes and held her breath, as if doing so would freeze time for them.

“I will, I promise. I love you,” she said at last.

“Darling, are we to spend all day lingering on the whimsical romance of your life?” Vivienne called from their ride, and Olivia blinked quickly as she shot back into the full context of their moment. She leaned back down and away from her lover, feeling self-conscious for taking so much time to be sentimental. Cassandra, not yet done, snuck a devout kiss on her forehead, one hand reaching and lightly grasping at her waist.

“I love you, too,” she breathed onto her skin, “now go, before Vivienne straps you down to the roof
of the carriage.”

The humor in Cassandra’s demeanor made Olivia smirk, even as she was melancholic to leave her behind. She nodded once, obediently, and pulled away from her for good. Her eyes lingering on her one last time, before her hands went up and drew her hood over her head. At once, she had turned and made her way promptly for the carriage. A guard offered his hand to the refined looking woman, and she gladly took it, and entered the carriage. The door shut behind her once and for all, and soon enough, they were riding out of the Fortress and making their way to the road.

Cassandra felt her chest grow hollow the smaller the carriage became in her eyesight. She remained there, standing, until it was no longer visible to her mortal eyes. Then, it became unavoidable: the crisp, cold, unsympathetic atmosphere of the empty courtyard, whilst the majority of Skyhold still slept.

--

With no personal correspondences to anticipate from Olivia, the days at Skyhold that followed passed slowly for the Seeker. Intelligence from Leliana’s people confirmed their safe arrival in Val Royeaux, as well as their secured lodgings. While she knew she was more than likely safe, it still graded on her nerves more than she cared to admit. Olivia was a capable woman, and being accompanied by Vivienne was a comfort. Still, the image of her at the end of a man’s sword, standing indifferently in the face of her own demise, left Cassandra anxious about her possible impulsivity.

The morning of their expected return, Cassandra made her way up until the Raven’s nest for Leliana to give her report of their progress. The morning light illuminated the tower beautifully – the early hours of the day made the nest the most inviting, despite its shadowy ambiance.

Finding herself at the top of the stairs, she spotted Leliana reading one of two scrolls in her hands. She approached undaunted and quiet, ready for the information she desired.

Leliana’s gaze looked upward as her compatriot made her presence known, and a compassionate grin appeared on her face.

“Indeed, Seeker, they are to return today. By early evening, from the looks of it,” she said knowingly, not bothering with a hello or good morning. Such trivial manners were lost on the two women, after all they had endured together in their careers.

“Good, then the mission was a success,” Cassandra replied, folding her arms.

“Yes – Josie is quite pleased, actually. Olivia has proven salient despite the slander.”

“Slander?”

“You have been made aware, no? It does partially concern you, after all.”

Cassandra furrowed her brow. If anything had involved her and disgusting gossip, she had not been informed. Sometimes she wondered just how much her aversion for political nuance serviced her, since so much seemed to happen without her knowledge. Though, taking a lover complicated things past the threshold she had become accustomed to: Olivia added a whole new dimension to the possibilities for rumors and libel.

Leliana shook her head, her grin widening. “For a Seeker, your talents for pursuit of the knowledge have waned considerably during your tenure, Cassandra.”
“Noted, Leliana, thank you for adding insult to injury. Now, will you tell me what this is all about?”

“Vivienne added a footnote to one of the reports I received from my men. Apparently, Lady Adalia did not let Olivia go without taking her vengeance. She has spread wondrous slander across the vines of the Orlesian nobility, bringing Olivia’s past to light for all to judge.”

“What? So her past during the Rebellion, her behavior as an assassin…?”

Leliana nodded once. “Yes. All of it. Right down to her manipulations of her husband, which she has lied about. The nobility has a nickname for her, now. They are calling her the Black Dove of Orlais: a beautiful, unnatural thing.”

“This is all ludicrous. Lady Adalia owes Olivia her life, and this is how she repays her?” Cassandra turned away, beginning to pace as the tension in her shoulders built. Her mind went to imagining how Olivia would react to such news, knowing her name and her traumatic past had been dragged through the mud. She could only guess just how sordid of a Viper’s next the Capitol was for her, than, at her arrival.

“Cassandra, you know as well as I that Mages have no reason to objectively trust anyone. I am surprised you would insist on the integrity of Nobles whom you sneer and mock for their flippancy.”

Leliana’s comment was as precise as it was correct. Perhaps Cassandra was grasping at straws, but her ability to rely on her virtues and opinions about the world was vanishing faster by the day. Now, it felt as though any observation about the world had a shot at being right, what did she know?

“Ugh,” she groaned, rubbing the back of her head and turning around to face Leliana once more. “You are right, I suppose. But, what does this mean for Olivia, now?”

“We have taken great care to deploy our own influences. Josephine is pulling a few strings, and Vivienne is on the ground, working to change the tide of perspectives.”

“And, Olivia, then? How has she fared, did they say…?”

“Olivia is a capable person. She has remained focused on her duties, under careful watch from Vivienne and my men. All notes on her say she has been mindful, careful, and loyal.”

Cassandra sighed. Of course, Olivia would remain true to her cause; surely, this had not been the worst working conditions she had ever faced. Still, Cassandra was resentful of every little thing that had become piled up on her: when it rained, it poured. She instinctively wanted to protect her, to make her rise above the problems she faces. But she knew that to be a fruitless desire.

The Seeker’s eyes got lost in space as she looked away, beginning to get caught up in her thoughts.

“Cassandra,” Leliana called her back to the present moment, “she returns today, she is out of any danger this may have provoked. If anything, it will be an ego-bruising. By the time Josephine and Vivienne’s counteractions take hold, it will be a sorry memory.”

“I cannot help but feel personally responsible. If I had been more…compassionate, to her conditions, I could have helped more than I have. As it stands, I feel as though I have done more harm than anything.”

Hearing her, Leliana couldn’t help but chuckle under her breath. This was a new and unexpected dimension to Cassandra’s personality: hesitation, thoughtfulness to the point of sentimentality, out in the open air for all to see. She knew this side of her probably lurked deep down, underneath all the callousness. But, to see her wear it on her sleeve was as refreshing as it was bittersweet.
“There remains the issue of the Soldier who remains sequestered and suspended from his duties. I have spoken with the Inquisitor, but she wishes to know what Olivia wants more than anything before she proceeds in her judgement. Do you have any idea of what resolution she would desire for what happened?”

With all of this, Cassandra had almost forgotten that the belligerent soldier even existed. It made for a sour taste in her mouth when she was reminded of him. Gathering her hands behind her back in her typical work posture, she shook her head.

“We did not discuss his punishment, I am afraid. She was…rather ready to forget it happened at all,” she replied.

Leliana exhaled softly. “‘Tis a pity. We must wait, then, for her return. It will be a sore welcoming.”

“Yes. Though, I am sure she is not exactly in a jubilant mood anyhow.”

The two gazed at each other with expressions that spoke where words could not. After so many years working alongside each other, and sometimes stepping on each other’s toes, they had come to an unspoken level of communication. Having a lover did add levels of extra concern for Cassandra on top of all she had on her plate, but, such things were not impossible. Leliana recognized that Olivia was not just some fling, or casual distraction. Protecting her was just as much about protecting Cassandra, now, for better or worse.

--

The estimation of an early evening return proved accurate, and as the horn blew signaling the oncoming carriage, Cassandra’s heart softened with relief. She had been keeping herself busy in her loft, sifting through reports and inventory lists, trying to preoccupy her worried mind to no avail. She may have been productive, but the exertion of both professional and emotional energy proved exponentially more exhausting to endure. Now, she would be gratified at last.

The approach of the carriage brought more than a few bodies to the courtyard in order to be entertained. Even the Inquisitor herself, with Josephine at her side, came to stand on the stone round platform at the bottom of the first flight of stairs to the hall. They were smiling with warmth as the Carriage pulled in through the gate.

Elsewhere, the other two Foxes found their way. Veronica watched from a window in the crow’s nest, whilst Naomi arose from one of the tents, wiping off her busy hands with a linen rag. She grinned, knowing her sweet friend was safely returned to them. Such blessings were not lost on her.

Cassandra made her way, too, running into Dorian who had come down to see what the commotion was all about.

“Ah, Seeker, coming along to welcome your love back into your most magnanimous arms of thorns?” he teased, walking alongside her as they made their way to the stairwell.

“Hello, Dorian. Polite and charming as always, I see,” she looked back at him, not stopping her pace so much as a half-step. Nothing was going to keep her from seeing Olivia as immediately as possible.

“Indeed I am, thank you for being such a grateful audience. Now, as for what lays ahead: are you prepared for such a scintillating romantic moment? The whole Fortress is waiting on bated breath to see if the Seeker herself can contain her vast emotions, you see.”

“I hardly believe that to be true.”
“Stranger things have happened, Cassandra. Like, for instance, you falling in love with a Mage who
looks as though the golden sun itself shines because she fuels it with her whimsical positivity.”

Cassandra sighed. They came down the stairs now, just as the carriage was being pulled around to be
stationed only several yards from where they stood. Arriving at the most ideal spot to receive them,
they came to a halt, and awaited the traveling allies to dismount from their carriage.

“My relationship with Olivia is of a private nature, Dorian, despite the gossip.”

“You think so? Your affairs are many things, Seeker, but they are in no way coy.”

“They are mine, above all else.”

“Fine, add to the suspense, then,” Dorian smirked, folding his arms as his attention turned to the
opening carriage door.

First to unload was Vivienne, who was opulently dressed in a freshly sewn and tailored Enchanter’s
robes in her quintessential jumpsuit style. The fabric was a most stunning silver-blue, with deep
metallic trim lacing the underside of her layers and stitching along the hem and sleeve rims. Her
shining and dramatic collar framed her face like she were foiled in a butterfly’s wing, and her bell
cap sleeves were freshly pressed and bright. Madame de Fer had enjoyed this respite, even if it were
supposed to be a mission on behalf of the Inquisition.

Cassandra was a bit anxious, having been disappointed in seeing Vivienne first when the woman she
wanted to see lingered behind her. It was rather anticlimactic, though it added to the delicious
suspense – something Vivienne counted on when she had insisted to exit first. Seeing the crowding
groupings of people around them, Vivienne smiled with self-satisfaction. This is exactly what she
had counted on.

“Hello, Seeker. Dorian,” she greeted with a warm sophistication as she stood tall, hands on hips.

She had stepped away to give enough proper room for her traveling companion to make her
appearance, and boy did she. Everyone’s attention turned once a hand reached out to the footman’s,
the arm wrapped in a stark black sleeve that went all the way up to loop around the middle finger
with a string. On the index finger was a gold, spherical ring that shined in the exposure to the dim
sunlight of the evening.

Cassandra and Dorian’s eyes were without distraction as the watched. For, as she stepped out, Olivia
was far and away the antithesis of how she had looked when she left Skyhold days ago: Her head
and hair showing first, her golden hair was curled and pinned out of her face, allowing the flowing
locks to flow down her back. For decoration, she had a birdcage veil of black beaded netting pinned
vertically across her eyes and forehead, reaching far back across the top of her head and secured by
black and golden painted paper flowers. When she had stepped down the carriage footstool and onto
the ground, the full embodiment of her transformation was out to play. Her traveling gown was as
black and opaque as her sleeve, a swooping oval neckline reaching from shoulder-end to shoulder
end, exposing her bare collar bones and cleavage. The corset nature of her bodice was all black
velvet. Her full skirt, stiff and soft looking, branched out from the tight fit of her waistline. Along the
hem, gold embroidery lined the fabric, adding a touch of grandeur to an otherwise foreboding
aesthetic.

And as for her eyes themselves, the honeyed pools of grace and kindness, they, too, were lined in
black eyeliner and shadow. The contrast of light and dark made their colors seem to glow as if she
were conjuring magic, but, there was no artifice here. Olivia had stared her reputation in the face,
bore her teeth, and conquered it.
She stood there, standing with broad, tall shoulders, alongside Vivienne. For once, she looked as exquisitely lethal as Madame de Fer did. Her expressionless, though unassuming facial expression soaking in the reactions of everyone around her: the wide eyes, the hands being put to mouths, the mixed looks of wonder, attraction, and fear. Even the Inquisitor, who stood above them all and largely out of immediate sight, had let the surprise show on her face. Josephine however, was not caught off guard: a spare one or two notes looped into correspondences with the mission’s personnel ensured her hand in this. This was a careful curation, a counter to the onslaught on Olivia’s good name. She grinned with triumph, seeing the material consequence of her and Vivienne’s machinations.

But then, there was Cassandra. Cassandra, who had rested her life on her stern beliefs, who prided herself on being capable in times of shock or unpredictability. She was devastated in the most deliciously complex of ways. Olivia looked like royalty, like something that would be sculpted and exalted in the gothic halls of some Nevarran opera house or garden courtyard. She looked powerful and intimidating. She looked impatient and harsh.

Had she let this unfortunate succession of circumstances change her, callous her to the world at last? Her heart sank, wondering if this was the last straw.

But then, Olivia’s scanning eyes locked on hers. Then, it was as if the entire courtyard, the entire fortress even, could have dissolved into thin air for all she knew. The feeling of happiness was mutual, as Olivia’s deadpan face broke into a relieved smile.

“My Love!” Olivia said confidently out loud, her hands grabbing and lifting her gown skirt so that she could rush to her lover who she had not seen or heard from in days. The smile, the brightened eyes, the warmth – there she was, there was her Olivia. Cassandra’s chest exhaled, the suspense leaving her body once and for all.

As she approached rapidly, Cassandra couldn’t help but smile in return. She loosened her posture and opened her arms out, taking a few steps forward to hurry up the enclosing of distance between them. At once, Olivia had leapt into her arms, wrapping her grip around Cassandra’s neck as she gave herself completely over to her. Cassandra’s hold around her upper back tightened immediately in receiving her, ensuring her safety and security within her embrace. She could feel Dorian take a few steps back, as both he and Vivienne witnessed the endearing sight. It never got old for them, nor anyone in the Inquisition’s allied forces, to see Cassandra moved to the point of open-air affection. Such things were the stuff of fairytales and lewd smutty literature alike, after all.

Cassandra tucked her chin into Olivia’s shoulder, closing her eyes briefly while she felt her in her hold. She was safe, real, and alive: three things that carried their weight in gold in the Inquisition. Feeling her soft and slightly oiled hair underneath her hands, she realized once again just how much she missed the sensory experience of her. When she breathed in, she noticed that whilst her aesthetics had changed, her habits did not: her hair still smelled of her oils, spiced and rich in their aroma. Olivia was just who she had always been, and she was foolish to even question for a second that she had betrayed who she was because of the spite of Orlesian nobility.

“Olivia, I am so relieved you are here,” she said low, loosening her grip just slightly as she talked into her shoulder.

“As am I,” Olivia replied, taking the cue to pull away a bit, her hands falling to rest around Cassandra’s arms and shoulders as she gazed up at her. “I’m afraid I have much to tell you.”

“I have been informed briefly by Leliana, though, I would appreciate hearing the details from you.”
“Of course. Agh,” Olivia put her hand on Cassandra’s cheek. “I hope I did not scare you just now?”

Remembering in her mind’s eye the way Olivia looked just minutes ago as she first stepped out of the carriage, Cassandra grinned. Yes, it was a bit of a shock, but who wouldn’t feel besotted seeing the woman they loved decked out in black gothic attire, looking like she could kill a man and not ruin her new shoes, all the while giggling to herself about a joke she heard earlier in the day?

“Olivia, if you did anything to me just now, it would be confirming once and for all that you are the only woman for me.” Cassandra’s eyes beamed with pride, then, the kind that was sweet and not crass.

Hearing her compliment, Olivia’s heart fluttered. She had spent the entire return trip twiddling her thumbs, wondering how Cassandra would react to her shift in presentation. Would she call it overly-theatrical, or scoff at its pomp? Or would she objectify her? Olivia’s trust issues always became inflamed when she changed things about her life. She always worried that the people whose opinions she valued would turn away, or reject her. Time and time again, though, Cassandra had proven herself as steadfast. Slowly but surely, Olivia was starting to believe that was what she earnestly deserved.

She smiled broadly, satisfied beyond knowing. She leaned up and kissed Cassandra with the utmost devotion, chin tilted as her dimples shown whilst she did so. Cassandra’s arms lowered to around the indent of her waistline, and she kissed her back. Crowds, and Dorian’s mouth be damned.

“And so the Black Dove of Orlais continues to stake her claim,” Vivienne narrated aloud, knowing her words would have teeth sunk into them and spread like wildfire throughout the fortress and beyond. She sauntered over to stand near Dorian as they both observed with self-satisfied grins on their faces.

“This is all too delicious for words,” Dorian remarked, “and how did you manage such dramatics with only a day or two to spare, Madame de Fer?”

Vivienne let out a ‘tsk’ sound from her lips. “Lord Dorian, lives change by the hour in Val Royeaux. When we had heard of the unconscionable libel Lady Adalia had unleashed, we promptly turned the tides in our favor. Nothing does wonders for a contentious reputation like a reformed wardrobe and a smile,” Vivienne’s confidence laced the air with victory. Folding her arms, her gaze went up and away to the two women standing on the stone platform. Locking eyes with Josephine, both of them nodded. The job had been done and done well.

The lovers could busy themselves with kissing as long as they wished.
Olivia has returned to Skyhold and reclaimed her agency in the face of slander. However, there remains the issue of the Templar who accosted her for all of the Fortress to see. Her unorthodox solution -- hand-to-hand combat, no magic, no weapons -- causes a stir amongst her allies. Though it is a mystery what compels her, the Inquisitor agrees, and Mage/Templar politics become the moniker to an in-house match at Skyhold. Olivia takes the chance to reckon with the reputation she has for being a meek, petite, lustful woman once and for all.

“So, I must decide what is to be done with him, then?”

Olivia’s question quieted the stern atmosphere of Ambassador Montilyet’s office. She was in the presence of Cassandra, Josephine, Theia, and Leliana – all women sympathetic to her cause, but who nonetheless added pressure onto her position. They stared back at her, mixed expressions of determination and compassion.

“Surely, but within reason, of course,” Josephine responded, leaning forward in her seat at her desk. Theia stood at the Ambassador’s left side, arms folded softly. Then, on the other side of her at the end of the desk, Leliana stood beside Cassandra, both women holding their hands behind their backs. That left Olivia standing before them all, solemn in her stance, facing the ensemble of eyes and ears.

“What is to be considered ‘within reason’ then, Theia?” her attention turned toward her friend.

Theia bit her lip and let out a ragged sigh from her lips. “Olivia, he has proven to be a temperament unideal for an Inquisition soldier. Though, he is one of many when it comes to his background; if we condemn him, we may send a reverberation of paranoia throughout the forces. Reprimanding a former Templar for his treatment of a Mage is not exactly a black-and-white situation, I’m afraid.”

“But he endangered the life of a fellow Inquisition official, did he not? Olivia is right in her innocence,” Cassandra quipped. Her and the Inquisitor exchanged glances, Theia noticing the shift in sympathies that had shown itself in the Seeker’s behavior.

“Seeker Pentaghast has a point. Mage or no Mage, the Soldier made the advance knowing he would be insubordinate in doing so.” Josephine, now.

“What does the Commander say of this, and why is he not present for this discussion?” Olivia’s question cut through the otherwise careful conversation with a sharp tongue. Everyone turned toward her once more, Josephine’s lips parting as she elected to answer.

“Commander Cullen has signed away the matter to Leliana and Cassandra’s oversight. He has met with the Soldier, but he does not see a point in retaining him since he has caused more trouble than he is worth in his eyes. He sees it as a cut-and-dry procedure, that we should dishonorably discharge him and allow him to return home.”

“He is a Templar, I doubt he has any home to speak of,” Theia chimed in, “if anything he’ll find the nearest remote tavern and drink himself into an enraged stupor over the Mage who ruined his one
chance at a redemptive career.”

“So? He cannot think it possible to retaliate, with our security. He must live with the consequences of his prejudice, and hopefully he will find a merciful new direction by the Maker’s oversight,” Leliana spoke, invoking her faith as well as her sympathy for Mage abuse in the same sentence: a careful dance that she did well.

“The Maker is capable of all things, Leliana, but we must bear the consequences of his creation of violence and discord,” Cassandra’s chin lowered as she peered at Sister Nightingale.

Amongst all this talk, Olivia remained quiet, watching the women debate each other in circles. She quietly put her hands onto her hips. This was all quite a homecoming, to be sure. Maybe a naïve part of herself believed she would return to Skyhold and the issue would have been long-resolved, with no more mess to clean up on her part. Clearly, the mess was able to preserve itself masterfully for her return.

“I wish to fight him,” she said at last, not bothering to wait for a silence to make her voice known.

At once, all women stopped their debating and turned their attention to her, the four sets of eyes all filling to the brim with confusion. Fight him? Out of all the possible answers to this problem, she would elect for the option with the most fanfare, and the most risk of harm?

“Olivia, are you insane?” Theia asked, speaking what everyone was wondering out into the open.

“Olivia, surely you know the parameters for a Mage fighting a non-Mage, and how that would look should he be defeated,” Leliana added, shifting her weight in her feet.

Josephine sighed lightly. “My friend, there are a vast array of sensible ways to resolve this issue without risking harm to you or to anyone else we may not wish to have involved,” Ambassador Montilyet completed the trifecta of “Olivia” responses.

Meanwhile, there was Cassandra, remaining quiet. Her face was a knowing expression of understanding; she easily empathized with desires to be treated fairly and recognized as having strength in the face of adversaries. Although, it was still mildly surprising to her that Olivia would be so blunt about it.

In the face of criticism, Olivia remained undaunted.

“I will fight him in hand-to-hand sparring, no magic, no staff. Cassandra made a good point to me the afternoon after the incident: I am not just a capable enchanter, I have spent years now managing myself in combat. I have come across men as big and clumsy as him in the field and in my bed before, and I can handle myself.”

Theia groaned, a hand rubbing the back of her neck. “Your days as an assassin and harlot are in the past, Olivia. Do you trust your abilities against a Soldier who trains every morning, noon, and night to fight for the Inquisition?”

“Thevia and Olivia exchanged a look of contention between careful friends, and after a moment, Theia turned to gaze out the window by Josephine’s desk. With her withdrawal, that left three remaining voices to contend with.

“Some reflexes are never lost, Theia. I would think you’d understand that.”

“Some reflexes are never lost, Theia. I would think you’d understand that.”

It would be the most honorable way to settle the disagreement. If she disarms him with no magic and sends him back to his barracks with his tail between his legs, people will perceive her as the
rightful victor.” Leliana could see the perks to such an arrangement, if the risk bore fruit. Still, she could feel the stress in the air as Olivia’s proposition of endangerment graded on everyone else’s nerves.

“Would everyone believe that she would not deploy magic at any point in the battle, though? Aren’t Mage’s abilities prone to instinctive expression?” Josephine leaned upright in her posture. Clearly, her life with Theia had educated her with insights into Mage intricacies, and she was careful to deploy her knowledge with care.

“I will promise in writing that if I utilize my magic at any point in the fight, you may dismiss me from my service to the Inquisition. Certainly, such a promise would satiate peoples’ need for fairness.”

Theia scoffed, turning back to face her. “Olivia, are you gambling with someone else’s purse strings at your disposal? How can you be so sure this will all work out the way you desire it?”

“Because I trust myself, and I know how his kind operate. He is all anger and no technique. My very existence spurns him. I will best him, or I am not meant for this life that I lead.”

The room went silent once more as all five women reckoned with the matter at hand. Josephine turned her eyes towards the Inquisitor, showing that while she always believed in nonviolence, Olivia had a right to call for such an arrangement and was undaunted in doing so. Leliana, convinced and already spinning with ideas as to what would happen after the fact, was ready for it to be settled. Cassandra, though, could only look at her woman with a sorry mix of admiration and protectiveness. She couldn’t tell Olivia what to do with her own life, but she wanted to.

“Fine, I sanction it,” Theia conceded at last. “It will take place tomorrow, giving you enough time to practice up a little on your…methods.”

“No need. I feel quite refreshed in spirit. However, since you all did not wait until I could get out of my traveling gown to bring this to my attention, I would like to ask that I be dismissed to settle back into my bearings.”

“Of course, Olivia. Let me know if there is anything you need,” Josephine managed to grin. It was returned with Olivia’s warm eyes, as she nodded to her.

“Thank you. Inquisitor, Ambassador, Sister Nightingale…Seeker,” she went down the line with a farewell recognition of all their titles. “I will take my leave.”

Her eyes lingered on Cassandra for a fleeting moment as she turned away, before at last she broke her attention away and withdrew from the room. Cassandra hoped she would be heading for her quarters, but, at this point anything with Olivia was possible. Now that she was gone, the more brutal and blunt conversation could be had.

“Inquisitor, are you absolutely sure this is to be the way to resolve this?” Josephine rose from her chair, now, joining the remaining three women. They all made their way to stand in front of the crackling fireplace, Josephine and Theia making a coupling whilst Leliana and Cassandra made another.

“It would be the protocol for dishonorable behavior between Soldiers,” Cassandra added, “but Olivia is no warrior.”

“You don’t know Olivia, then,” Theia commented curtly.

Cassandra felt a pang of protective anger in her, a rarity when it came to conversations between her and the Inquisitor. It was the defensiveness of a lover when an old friend pulled rank.
“What I was referring to, Inquisitor, is her training and not her morale. Nothing will stop him from utilizing blunt force strength given her petite frame.”

“Size and build do not matter so much as how you utilize the body you’re given, Cassandra. A petite woman with the right knowledge of a dagger blade can take down an entire contingent of Templars if she has her wits and education about her,” Leliana grinned with partial vanity.

“I know that, Leliana.”

Josephine folded her arms. “I am sure there would be some way to settle this without subjecting a Mage to the violent temper of a Templar in our own stronghold. Perhaps we may convince him yet to apologize and resign?”

“He has refused to do so every time we have propositioned him. He believes he has a right to be here more than she does,” Leliana shot the idea down once again, though Josephine’s resilience was admirable.

“And what are we to make of the situation if she wins, and the atmosphere in Skyhold is polarized? People will want to take sides,” Josephine was quick to counter. She brought up an important point about organizing such a conflict of interest: should the fight gain saliency, people will want to root for a protagonist. That protagonist’s identity would depend upon who you asked.

As the Ambassador and Spymaster eyed each other, a voice intervened. It belonged to Cassandra, who had taken to leaning against one of the chairs.

“Olivia has a hard-won reputation here for being kind and friendly to all around her. While her reputation precedes her, so does her true self. She has made many doting friends and allies here. We will have to trust that if the tide turns in her favor, that will be enough to buffer the situation.”

Leliana turned and faced Cassandra, still worried, but willing to gamble. Olivia’s confidence was palpable when she was in the room, and no one could deny that it would make for an interesting day to follow.

“Agh, very well, but no one can chide me for being frustrated when I have to smooth over tensions,” Josephine conceded, waving her hand in the air with dismissive impatience.

“My darling,” Theia said as she rested an arm on the fireplace mantle, “if anyone is to be frustrated by tomorrow’s proceedings, it will by that Templar after he gets his ass handed to him by a petite Mage apothecary.” With that, the women stared at each other, and soon grins and smirks were on each of their faces. Even though it was controversial, no one could doubt who they would all be rooting for behind their decorous facades. "Him, and Cullen, when I inform him of the event. Maker knows he already daydreams of telling me off and forging my signature on his pay raise for what I put his nerves through.”

When daybreak took hold of the Fortress, Olivia had once again been the one to rise out of bed first. Though, she was promptly followed by Cassandra, who watched her keenly as she prepared herself. The Templar had gingerly agreed to fight her when he was visited by guards and the Inquisitor herself the evening before. Checking in with Olivia before retiring to bed, Theia remarked that he seemed to have hid a malice for Mages well enough to be recruited to the service of one as the Herald of Andraste. Now, it was as though he had enough of pretending, and Olivia was the fixation of his unrest.
Good to know, when you’re preparing to fight him one-on-one with nothing but your body.

She made a soft ritual of putting on her clothes: a neatly fit sleeveless top, lined with pliable hide and thick linen. Then her breeches, which were thicker, but comfortable. She looked as though she were a malleable newcomer to the soldiers’ forces, a conscript ready to prove herself. Cassandra leaned back onto the wall as Olivia finished up by tying her hair back in a slick bun, leaving no spare strands to be pulled, yanked, or caught.

“Are you sure you are prepared for this? Did you practice at all?” Cassandra asked.

Olivia, finishing up her hair, took a breath. Turning to face her, she placed her hands on her hips.

“I am fine, I have this. Don’t worry,” she replied, dusting off the thighs of her pants and making her way to the door.

“Olivia, wait,” Cassandra stepped after her. Olivia stopped and whirled around quickly, as if she had been caught in the act of racing out the door like a thief. She stood there, awaiting the last words from her love, before she was to either end her days with the Inquisition or a Templar’s career.

Cassandra came forward, standing directly in front of her. Her face was a torn expression of confidence and concern.

“No matter what happens,” she treded carefully on her words, “just know I will always, without a doubt, be on your side.”

The suspense stilled, and Olivia’s shoulders became less tense. Hearing Cassandra’s devotion, she gave a comforting, slight grin. She then reached a hand up to Cassandra’s cheek, gently rubbing with her thumb. So, there it was: Seeker Pentaghast’s loyalty dedicated once again to the actions of a Mage, against her track record, and perhaps against her better judgement. Though, this time, the person didn’t have to be the Herald of Andraste in order to compel it.

“I know, my Love. Thank you.”

--

Down in the courtyard, a significant crowd of people had amassed around the large, drawn-out circle ring. It wasn’t often that Skyhold got lively entertainment to preoccupy its personnel, and a fight between a Mage and a Templar carried a hefty weight of symbolism. The significance made itself known in the way sideline audiences had formed: on one side, the majority were Mages, elves, and servants. On the other, there were soldiers, scouts, former Templars.

The one Templar that mattered most, though, was being held in the middle of the ring as Olivia made her way down the stairs. Cassandra flanked her, in an unapologetic show of allegiance. The look of them as they arrived quieted the crowd down substantially, though there were still persistent murmurs and whispers. Allies, friends, lovers – the state of their dynamic had changed the nature of Skyhold in ways they hadn’t predicted.

Olivia looked ready and nimble. The Templar looked furious and ready for what he thought he was owed. His dirty bondle hair was oily, tied back into a bun as well to cover up its shagginess. He hadn’t shaved in several days, and the stubble on his chin and jawline was unevenly brisk. His dark eyes, and the overbearing brow, reminded her of many Chevalier’s faces she would search out in pubs and taverns: the look of a man with something to prove and little to show for it.

Making her way now across the grass, she turned and noticed the Inquisitor herself standing on the outer rim of the ring. Ambassador Montilyet, Leliana, and Commander Cullen – her advisors –
standing with her. They had taken the time out of their busy days to witness and curate this experience.

She took one fleeting glance at Cassandra, nodding quickly, before stepping into the center of the ring alongside the man. He sneered at her with a malevolent pair of eyes, eyes which had haunted her dreams and chased her down in wooded pathways for a year’s worth of dread. This time, she stared back at them, remaining focused on her goal.

Cassandra saw her off before approaching Theia, who was standing with her hands collected behind her. Olivia’s arrival meant they could get the even started and over with, finally.

“She is ready,” Cassandra said, as she turned to face the two enemies alongside the Inquisitor and Advisors. They watched as an assistant handed Olivia some tape for her hands, tape which the Templar had already applied to his calloused and war-town knuckles.

“I cannot believe you sanctioned this, Inquisitor. You know what the ramifications are,” Cullen said low, just enough for the group of them to hear.

Theia sighed under her breath and turned to peer at him from her periphery. “What, Mages and Templars fighting? Since when is that pandemonium-inciting news?”

Cullen stiffly exhaled, adjusting his frustrated posture. He wasn’t going to argue about this one more time. Theia was an unwavering rock when it came to backing her friends’ plays, even as Inquisitor.

“Alright!” Theia called out with a commanding voice. At once the crowd silenced, all-too-easily humbled by her divine authority. “I wish to make the rules abundantly clear before this fight starts. Number one, no murderous or fatal intent. If you step over the bounds of fighting into such, you will be immediately dismissed both from this fight and the Inquisition itself. Number two, there is to be no retaliation to the winner or loser of this fight from anyone in the Inquisition forces. Should I hear of it, the punishment will be directly called for by me. Number three,” Theia turned and eyed her friend specifically, “it is agreed that absolutely no magic will be used during the duration of this, neither to attack or restore oneself from injury. If there is any magic disbursed, it is grounds for dismissal.”

Olivia stretched her hands under the firmness of her boxing tape whilst she listened to her friend dictate the conduct of this fight. It almost made it sound respectable to hear her narrate it with such authority and refinement. Deep down, Olivia knew the truth of this: it was an aggravation of a man’s gross ego, and a woman’s inability to let it go without it being properly responded to.

With that, both adversaries were guided by assistants to their respective halves of the circle. Olivia’s shortness looked easily enveloped by the man’s shadow, but her eyes gave off a look of all-knowing savvy that defied her physical appraisal. Meanwhile, her enemy seemed to want to growl like an animal as he rolled his shoulders in preparation of the fight. He turned to face her from the side, taking the stance of a combat fighter. He had sparred like this before many times throughout his tenure. He knew what this was. Her training hadn’t the formality nor the steadiness he knew.

Olivia didn’t take the preparatory stance the Templar did: she held her body loose, hands to her sides, palms shaking to loosen up the tenseness in her limbs. Her weight was posed on the balls of her feet, shifting from foot to foot as she got in touch with her body. Her jaw was relaxed, and she breathed through her nose. She appeared to be the methodological antithesis to him – or, ready to be overwhelmed and defeated.

Cassandra watched her like a hawk – and she understood this approach. Even if it looked unassuming, it was a defensive strategy. You couldn’t hit and take down what you couldn’t catch: Olivia wasn’t intimidating in stature in comparison to the Templar, but that made her maneuverable.
She wondered how she had come to learn and understand her tactical strength like this, avoiding the overbearing violence of men.

Olivia and the Templar’s eye contact was unbreakable as Theia held her hand suspended in the air.

“On my word – begin!”
The Daydream

Chapter Summary

The morning of Olivia's hand-to-hand match with the former Templar is upon her, bringing everyone to attention for what will surely be a sociopolitically charged ordeal. Olivia has her own mind for how it will happen, however, and her handling of the experience provokes everyone in Skyhold to reckon with the unspoken and ignored tensions in the Fortress as a community of differences. It is a growing moment for herself, as well as her relationship with Cassandra, who must also come to terms with how her virtues have shifted in allegiance in their own way.

CW: Description of fight, violence, including blood and wounds.

Chapter Notes

CW: Description of fight, violence, including blood and wounds.

An uptick in suspense happened the moment the Inquisitor signified the beginning of the fight. All eyes were on the two figures in the ring, awaiting the first advance, the first hit, the first blood. Olivia remained calm as all bets were off, now. She continued to keep eye contact with them as they began to side-step. Around them, the crowd was cautious – rooting for anyone in this surely keyed into what your politics were, not just who you personally liked. The hushed ambiance added greater tension to the situation.

He hunched a bit, fists up, one in front of the other, ready for swings. She walked with her hands at her sides, eyeing him from the side, footfalls nimble and light.

“You think you can dance your way out of this?” he egged her on, his anger proving to be his first line of attack.

Olivia took a breath, steadying herself in the face of such carnal animosity. “Fighting is all about choreography, Templar.”

“Fighting is about honor, of which you have none.”

“Honor is an action and not an insult, sir. Kindly stop wasting my time.”

Their encircling of one another was enclosing the distance between them little by little, and Olivia could feel the overbearing stature of the man encroaching on her space. She knew it wouldn’t be long now.

“You’ve wasted my time keeping me locked away like a criminal for calling you what you are. Now, I get to show everyone here just how conniving and disgusting you are.”

“Good, I was hoping I wouldn’t have to spread my legs to all of Skyhold to show the truth.”
That was it. Inhaling sharply, he grunted as he threw the first swing. It was a brusque punch, and she dodged it well, veering off to her left side and twisting her torso. Retrieving his arm, he growled low. They continued to step around each other, though Olivia now had an extra, ample hop to her step.

From the sidelines, Cassandra had tensed her body at the sight of his first offensive move. She was not excited to possibly watch her lover get herself beaten to a pulp; such facets of life were taken for granted for warriors, but now she was in uncomfortable foreign territory watching someone she cared about romantically put themselves in such a direct, aggressive path of brutality. They had fought alongside each other in skirmishes before, but, for some reason this was the more upsetting environment.

The Inquisitor was at her side, rigid in her posture, also fighting off the urge to protect Olivia from her own choices. She knew that somewhere, Veronica was lurking and watching with keen eyes as well, and Naomi had been spotted in the crowd watching with a sorry look. Besides her advisors, the fight was also attended by Vivienne, Dorian, Bull and some of his Chargers, and Varric. Word of the fight had caught quick fire throughout the hold overnight, and hardly anyone could get away with walking about without being asked if they knew. Now, it was upon them, and there was no going back.

The Templar threw a few more untidy swings in her direction, but Olivia weaved her way out of all of them. Side-to-side she swayed, dodging her attacker, her face a deadpan expression of boredom. She knew it would enrage him to see her unaffected in her escapes.

When he growled into the air, she knew it was working.

“Fretful, Templar?” she asked simply.

“You coward! Fight me!” he said in return, standing stiff in the center of the circle.

She, too, came to a standstill. “Fine, then, since you have invited me.”

He stood waiting as she began to hop-step from side to side, shifting her weight in a rhythm like she were about to start jogging.

“Throw another one, maybe you’ll actually hit the broad side of a barn this time,” she said, holding her hands close to her chest now, palms still relaxed.

He spat at the ground, then, cursing her with everything he could say in his mind. She was a petulant temptress, and she needed to be put in her place. Someone had to do it, and he would have done it well had the Seeker not intervened to protect her little pet. Now, he had his chance, and he wasn’t about to lose out now. Digging his footfalls into the dirt, he lunged at her again, this time with an undercut swing.

Anticipating such, Olivia exhaled low and went for it. As he swung forward, presumably for her gut, she jumped upward. Her left foot made contact with his outstretched thigh, using it as a stepping-off-point to get to where she needed to go. In the blink of an eye, she had hoisted herself up by the momentum of one foot and hand on his shoulder and swung her leg around his shoulder. Securing her seat up on his neck, she tossed her arms up over her head. She heard him grunt in surprise, ready with fast hands to grab her and toss her off of him like an insect, so she had to be quick. She threw all of her momentum into her arms and shoulders and fell backwards, pulling him with her as they both fell back. Her thighs tightened on his neck in a chokehold keyed into a weak point in his strong body.

When they went down, Olivia braced with her hands and forearms as they collapsed. He gave out a
loud and insulted huff, feeling the lack of air in his throat and his inability to breathe. He could only
choke in reaction to the impact and it was a most uncomfortable sensation. The woman’s legs may
have been those of a nimble dancer, but they were all muscle, primed from days of nomadic life
followed by carrying her bodyweight imbued with heavy gowns.

Finding herself where she wanted to be, Olivia sat up as fast as she could, just enough to twist him
around with her thigh grip onto his side, and then back. He wasn’t going down easy, though, and as
he reached to pull his own body up and off the ground, she had to dig in. Once he was on his back,
she pushed herself up and on top of his back. She then loosened a thigh and slid her leg down a bit,
finding the soft point of the spine between the two shoulder blades, and slamming down hard with
her knee.

Surprised, the Templar was pressed face down onto the ground again. His cheek was grading on the
dirt and gravel underneath it, and his mouth hung open as he tried to regain his air.

Olivia had bore her teeth as she managed to neutralize him. Her heavy breathing was apparent, but
not exhaustive, as though she had merely done a slew of jumping jacks. The next step in her
maneuver was to gather his arms, and pin them at his back, removing his ability to grab or crawl
upwards. Once she had both his arms in her hold, she pinned then under her seat, her knee still
digging into his back with a bitterness.

“Y-you—” he coughed, his diaphragm out of air and not able to regain it like he wanted to.

The whole crowd has been a concert of “oh” and “ah” sounds, along with shocked gasps. The
Inquisitor and her group had remained quiet, though, in contrast to the people around them.
Watching Olivia best the Templar, Cassandra resisted the urge to smile. She felt an indominate
sense of pride in that moment, as if she wished to gloat about how that woman, that woman right
there was her woman, and no one else’s. Meanwhile, the Inquisitor wasn’t allowing herself to exhale
until the fight was truly over. Until then, she would be worried and fretful for Olivia’s safety, as was
her principle responsibility during their days on the road.

Josephine and Leliana exchanged knowing glances, of which they tried to include Cullen, but his
attitude seemed to be more embarrassed. After all, this Soldier had been under his training this entire
time, and seeing him being bested by a Mage who was out of practice in her combat skills, made him
feel indirectly culpable.

Back in the ring, the ordeal was far from over.

“You think you can slap me like one of your horses, Templar?” Olivia said out loud, her voice
elevated enough so all could hear her provoked dialogue. “Try again.”

She then rose from her hard-won resting place on top of his shoulders, digging in her knee one final
time into his spine before she did so. She left him gasping for air on the ground, arms scrambling
once they were free from her hold. He scurried like a stressed animal back onto his knees, and then
his feet, as he swayed to-and-fro trying to find his balance.

“You insufferable w-whore!” he cursed again, remaining slouched in his sorry posture, “don’t have
the guts to try to hit me…?”

Olivia had found herself a sensible distance away from him, on the other half of the circle with her
back to him. Hearing his continual jest as she eyed the ground, she put a hand to her mouth. She then
began to laugh, a most melodic and cheerful tone in her voice. The laughter unsettled the crowds –
well, those who did not outright root for her, anyway. Those who knew her knew what it meant, and
what it was like to have Olivia laugh at you when she was preparing you to be at the mercy of her
intellect.

It was enough to send a shiver up and down your spine in both arousal and fear.

“Oh my dear Templar,” she said through her laugh, “you think it an insult to call me a whore?”

On his side, he continued his heavy breathing, wiping his mouth off to rid it of the collected dirt and sweat from his time on the ground. “You miserable cunt,” he muttered, unamused by her witty wordplay.

Olivia methodically rubbed her hands, still standing with her back to him, as she calmed herself down. When she was good and ready, she turned and viewed him from over her shoulder, a sly smile on her lips.

“Tell me, Templar, do you think of women like me when you pleasure yourself at night? Did you do so, when you served in whatever forsaken Circle you were stationed to, where you developed your hostility for people like me, which you would later mishandle when it came to an innocent Apothecary Mage in the Inquisition of all places?”

Peoples’ heads began to turn from side to side, as the unexpected monologue Olivia began performing took hold of the atmosphere. Where everyone had expected a brutal, bloody brawl, now it was turning into a theatrical performance. Such was Olivia’s style.

“What bloody shit are you talking about, bi—”

“I’m talking about your tenure as a Templar, you moronic toad.”

Cassandra fought back a chuckle, and she shifted her eyes to Theia, who showed the same need for restraint as she lowered her chin in self-preservation. Leliana and Josephine were not so coy, and shared entertained grins with each other.

“I did not come here to talk, I came here to beat the shit out of you and show you who’s boss,” the Templar began to side-step again, as they had done so in the beginning before the first punch was thrown. Olivia humored him, and began stepping as well, her smile remaining undaunted.

“Like it or not, we are in a conversation. Everyone around us is, talking about the politics of our violence. I figured we should reclaim some of the narrative, no?”

“If you want to keep talking, it’ll make my job far easier.”

“Fine, then, try one more time, to best me. If you fail, I get to have my say.”

He growled, now, ready to be done with her performance. Now, he wouldn’t bother with just a fist. Lowering his upper body, as if he were armored with his shield, he rushed her now, stampeding towards her like a thunderous natural disaster. Olivia’s brow furrowed as she quickly adapted to her response. The oncoming offensive made the magic in her body tingle and sting a bit, even, at its lack of expression; she had to maintain a certain level of calm to inhibit it from breaking out.

She decided to absorb the attack instead of dodge. When he collided with her chest and ribs, she used an arm to push herself up on his shoulder, swinging a leg over as well once she had enough lift. Of course, he wouldn’t let her just glide over him: as she was moving, he managed to wrap his arms around her thigh to secure her within his fleeting grasp. The tightness of his hold sent a sharp pang of pain up her body, and she grit her jaw to keep focus. She felt his weight shift upwards so as to stand more upright, and when he did so, she used the leg that did manage to make it over onto his back, kicking him squarely in space above his hip that was all sensitive flesh and muscle.
“Ahh!” he roared, feeling semi-victorious for having gotten ahold of her. But, he was outmaneuvered before he had even made physical contact. Feeling the kick to his side, he buckled over a bit, his side contracting in reaction to the pain. When he was focused on the pain, she bent her elbow vertically and sent it hammering down onto the space between his shoulder and neck. She let out an angry grunt as she did so.

Another painful roar, and he was falling forward, but not quite down for the count. As he stumbled, she secured her hands on his head, one on the back of his skull, the other under his chin. As Cassandra and Theia watched, they knew what she was capable of in that moment: if she so chose, one swift yank, and she could break his neck and send him plummeting to the ground doomed to die. Both women’s chests tensed as they felt dread at the thought of it.

But, Olivia wasn’t a rule-breaker when it was unnecessary and unhelpful to do so. While she did rotate his head, she did it just enough so her mouth could make it to his ear. Managing just fine, she bit down on the cartilage of it, making him scream with fury and sensitive agony.

The crowd began to rumble with words and fidgeting as they watched; no one wished to change places with the Templar in that moment. He continued to yell, his arms loosening around her thigh just enough for her to free herself from his strength. In that moment, she swung the leg around and dismounted from his shoulder, releasing her bite so that she may be freed. Swiftly, she found her feet squarely on the ground, giving her just enough grounded momentum to turn and kick him from behind. Her foot landed flat on his ass, and pushed him down to the ground once more. This time, he was on his side, limbs curling and contracting as he landed with a rigid thud.

Taking a breath, she took a few steps backwards, hands out to her side as she found her equilibrium again.

“A deal is a deal, Templar, now you have to listen to me. In fact, you all have to listen to me!” she shifted her weight as she turned to face the crowd around them. She watched as everyone’s faces turned, becoming surprised at her bold implication.

Theia looked at Cassandra, brow furrowed as if to ask if she knew this was her intention.

Cassandra’s eyes shot back, a glance of innocence. This was not a part of the agreement, yet, they did not have the heart to cut her off.

Olivia took a second to quiet her exertive breathing. Then, provocatively, she started ripping the boxing tape off of her hands.

“You all have come here to see a Mage and a Templar brutalize each other, yes? But most of you here,” she said as she faced the side of the crowd that was mostly Templar-sympathizing warriors and staff, “must have thought this would have been a surefire victory for the Templar, seeing as though I would be prohibited from using my magic. You think me weak and useless without it, I imagine.”

The faces Olivia saw were ones of bruised egos and vanities, and she had her answer. Some eyes shifted and looked down to the ground in insecurity, not wishing to be called out so harshly in front of the Herald of Andraste and her high-ranking allies. She lingered on their expressions for a moment, before turning around and facing the other end of the audience, where her supposed supporters were standing.

“And you, you who must be hoping I would take my vengeance where I can. You, who I have met, and worked with, and shown kindness to. You would see me kill this Templar, wouldn’t you?”

Now, she saw faces of guilt, mixed in with a few of unapologetic resentment towards her enemy.
They had few reasons to feel ashamed, and she knew that. This wasn’t to be a judgment, or a false equivalency of guilt on both sides. Olivia knew where her allegiances lay, but she also knew that this kind of hungering for violence must end.

She faced the Templar once more, and saw that the viciousness in his eyes had not waned. In that, her own fury was emboldened, and she felt the weakness in her desire to do as she had narrated: beat him, punch him, kick him until he was a gross distortion of the person he had been beforehand. Scar his body permanently with the rage of her fist. She knew, then, the ravenous nature of injustice when imbued with violent methods. She felt the need in her heart to seek the one final exactment of pain, for all the months and years she endured it at the hands of men like him.

“I cannot lie and say I do not believe you deserve to die, Templar,” she said aloud, sending the crowd into transactions of whispers and fearful expressions. “I think, for what you did, and how you treated me, that death would be a most merciful and euphoric experience for me.”

She took a step forward, and with her advance, her friends began to wonder if that was exactly what she was going to do. Across from her, the Templar had managed to hold himself upright, though sore from being sent to the ground twice. He was still in shape like a Soldier would be expected to, and recovery was manageable.

“Then have at it, wench, and make this worth it for me,” he clenched his fists.

Olivia’s eyes narrowed, and the emotions in her magic began to hum between her ears. She knew that would need to do something to exert herself some more, to make her mana wane. In return, she, too, clenched her fists, and took the offensive.

“I’m waiting.” She growled at him now.

She then took a quick jog step toward him, before planting her feet as anchors for her punch. She missed, as she expected, watching him sway to the opposite side of her stroke. She relaxed her jaw instinctively as she kept at it, swinging a follow-up undercut and missing that one, too. Then, he sent his fist flying towards her face, ready to hit where it would hurt. She managed to duck just enough to where he missed her nose and cheek, but his fist caught the top of her head, striking just above her temple.

The crowd gasped as he made contact – it was not the killer shot he wanted, but it was something.

Olivia let out a sharp exhale, feeling slightly discombobulated at the impact, but she knew she couldn’t let up. Her eyes fixed on his, and she prepared another undercut punch. As she lunged forward, though, he grabbed down on her forearm. She growled, feeling his hand clamp down on a limb he could just as easily snap in half if he wished. She utilized her other arm, and took an overhead swing at his chin.

Missed.

Feeling it his turn, he punched her square in the face. The sound it made when his knuckles made contact with her cheekbones made many in the crowd flinch. She did not gasp or scream in response, though, and when his hand pulled away, her expression remained smug.

Cassandra’s heart sank the second he hit her. In that moment, all she had believed to embody about a woman’s equality to a man, and their innate ability to defend themselves on their own, felt like a betrayal. She wanted to be her Champion, do the work for her, and it gnawed at her that she wasn’t trusting Olivia like she, herself had always demanded others trust her in combat.
Her anxiety was only competed with by that which was found in the Inquisitor, herself, her face now sunk and somber in expression. It was no longer unclear as to where Theia’s loyalties lied, to everyone and not just her allies.

Olivia had to get out of this, she thought. She just had to, somehow.

With the sharp ringing in her ears, Olivia knew she was off-kilter. She had to find some way to even the playing field again, and fast, before he sent another punch into her face. She didn’t have her arms, but she had her feet and legs. She lurched her right leg up to her abdomen, coiling it for a sharp and quick kick to his gut. With that shot, she had better luck: the man grunted grossly as she kicked him square in the stomach, making his lower body fall back.

She went with him, as his grip was unforgiving in its determination. But, she used the momentary loss of balance to her advantage: with the close proximity between their heads, she collected spit in her mouth and shot it out into his eyes like a snake with venom in its mouth. He blinked frantically, trying to resist the urge to free up his hands to wipe it off of his face, but he gave in. Then, Olivia got her chance.

As he loosened his hold on her arm she slid it out, clenching both fists. She then went at him: a strong, collected 1-2 punch collection that made an even more body-quivering sound on contact. The first one sent him to the right, and then the other to the left, both hitting on either side of his nose. The crowd around them was louder now, more unsettled with both joy and distaste. Olivia could almost swear she heard cheering, but she was too deep in her own actions to really pay attention.

The man groaned in pain as his nose began to bleed. If she was to continue, she had to do it now, while his vision was blurred and head aching with initial pain. She decided on one last sucker punch, strong and unapologetic. Hooking her right arm back, she charged her knuckles into his cheekbone just under his right eye, her bare knuckles cracking and scraping with contact.

The man grunted with the impact of her punch, and was pushed around, turning his back to her. The side of her head was throbbing, and she knew already that she would probably have a shiner on her eye by the end of this. Watching him struggle to keep himself upright, she had the instinct to finish the job, as she had done in her past when men proved to dangerous to leave alive. She approached him fast, and sent another square kick into his back, wanting him down on the ground again. He went down without a fight this time, landing on his knees and leaning back, almost as if he were about to pass out. His face was blooded and turning purple around his nose, as he faced in the direction of the Inquisitor, Advisors, and Seeker.

And of course, behind him, there was Olivia. Her knuckles were red and slightly bloodied from having been used without her tape. He eye was becoming slightly discolored, and her cheek was swollen, but she was standing tall and tenacious. She made eye contact with Theia.

“I will not kill this man, nor will I bend to his, or any person’s will,” she turned and faced the crowd of the Templar’s compatriots, “because I am a Mage, or a woman, or a former harlot. Let this die today, and let us Mages of the Inquisition do our work, and live our lives, in peace! So help me, Maker, if I see any of you, or anyone else, mistreating a Mage without proper cause, I will do to them what I have done to this man today. I do not care if there is a line of you, ready to take me down, to teach me who has power over me. I decide who has power over me!”

She then outstretched her hand, pointing her finger towards Theia. “The Inquisitor is my leader, and the Inquisition is my cause. That is all I bow my head to. Now, does anyone else wish to challenge me for my own autonomy, or am I to be done here?!”

The crowd was aching with reckoning silence. Eyes shifted nervously between each other. Olivia
was no longer the unassuming, bland personality they may have taken her for.

“No?” she said after a moment, “Good, then I will take my leave.”

She turned and gave a polite, though tired nod to the Inquisitor and her Advisors, including Cassandra, before she turned and started off from the Circle. The man fell to the ground, writhing in all-consuming head pain that blinded him and his senses. He curled himself into a slight fetal position, creating a rather remarkable scene to leave in her wake.

“Oh! I almost forgot!” she grumbled, turning around and returning to the center of the circle. “I am no one’s pet, I am no one’s harlot, and I sure as hell am no one’s captive. Do not presume to think Mages seduce “normal” people into loving them. Your Inquisitor, your leader, loves a non-Mage. I love a non-Mage, and she is an adult who can make her own choices in life. Speak ill of her, or of me, and I will show you what it truly looks like to be a wrathful, poisonous siren!”

Cassandra could feel heat in her cheeks, listening to Olivia incite their relationship and her reputation because of it. She felt eyes go to her, as if she were expected to make an addendum, or follow after her. She remained still, stoic, and respectful, though it was difficult to do so.

Olivia turned and faced her one last time, as if she were looking for some kind of demure affirmation. The crowd’s eyes went with her, breath being held, and nerves in suspense.

Making eye contact with her, Cassandra’s expressionless face broke cover. She grinned, reverent more than anything, and gave a devout, solemn nod of agreement.

“My Lady,” she spoke as she did so, a recognition of her power.

The motion was a big deal coming from her, someone who hardly ever admitted to personal biases or intrigues out in the open air. The little things made big waves, and she couldn’t have done anything more to send tongues wagging and minds spinning.

Satisfied, Olivia exhaled out her mouth. “Very good. Now, I am leaving,” she sighed, and sought herself out of the Courtyard, marching up the stairs as if she were going to return to bed, having been awoken far too early for nonsense.

As the crowd began to move and disband, voices of both criticism and admiration swirling in the air, the Inquisitor, Seeker, and Advisors turned to each other to regroup. Theia saw that the Templar did indeed have a couple sorry friends come to his aid, picking him up and hoisting his arms over their shoulder, heading directly for the infirmary. Through the crowd, Theia could see Naomi, shaking her head with aggravation as she prepared her patience for treating such a fool.

“Well, that went splendidly, I think,” Leliana teased the nerves of everyone around her, an entertained grinned on her lips.

“Splendidly? That was a mess,” Cullen groaned, “The troops will be scorned for a week, having her talk down to them like that, with no rank to speak of.”

“Take care, Commander, she was only correcting the way they have gossiped about her personal life. It was hardly out of line,” Josephine corrected, putting her hands on her hips.

Theia rubbed her face, feeling the anxiety in her bones intensify with everyone’s disagreeing opinions and words. She wished, sometimes, that a consensus was pre-emptive and not hard-won after an hour of bickering every time.

“We got the best outcome: the man is alive, Olivia is unharmed, and everyone is continuing with
their day. What more is there to ask for?" the Inquisitor said, ready for a cup of tea and a few hours in seclusion to recollect her patience with everyone. Between watching her friend get punched, to sorting out tempers, the idea of becoming a hermit was all-the-more attractive. \\n
“We will be feeling the consequences, believe me,” Cullen added.

“The Inquisitor, how are you feeling?” Leliana diverted the subject directly to the Seeker, who was eyeing the ground with her arms folded while the squabbling unfolded. Hearing her name, her gaze shot upwards, and she adjusted herself now that all eyes were on her.

“I do not see how my feelings in this situation matter, given it was Olivia’s ordeal, and now her victory,” Cassandra put up a bit of a wall, to compensate for the rather candid display that had just unfolded for all to see. Leliana eyed her with piqued curiosity, but she did not pursue it any further.

“I think it best if someone check up on her, to make sure she does not need a healer,” Theia advised, giving Cassandra a way out of the discussion.

“Yes, certainly. I will be in contact soon, Inquisitor. Everyone,” Cassandra nodded a cordial farewell, gathering her arms behind her as she stepped away, following after where Olivia had exited. The group watched her go with various moods of interest.

“Take care, Cassandra – she may be in the mood to continue throwing some punches,” Leliana teased as she walked away. She tried hard to mask the smirk in her tone, but it was inevitably audible. Josephine put her hand to her mouth, trying to be discrete as well. That left Theia and Cullen, who were the more unamused of the two, shaking their heads and trying not to lose their patience.

Such an eventful day, one might say.

--

Cassandra was willing to bet coin that Olivia had retreated to her quarters, and when she found her on the other side of her door her metaphorical gamble was vindicated. There she stood, having undressed from her sparring clothes, only her smallclothes remaining. She had laid out one of her work dresses on the bed, clearly intending it to be the next ensemble of the day. Now, though, she was tending to her knuckles which had been scraped, scratched, and bloodied from her impulsive behavior. Standing in front of a wash basin of water, she had been gently soaking them, wincing and gritting her teeth at the stinging sensation.

The water was steaming from warmth, although there was no fireplace in the room. Cassandra assumed Olivia had finally gotten the chance to utilize her magic in order to solve her problems.

Closing the door behind her, she let the air remain quiet for a moment, not wanting to rush in and consume the remainder of Olivia’s emotional energy in one second. Another reason was that, really, Cassandra didn’t know what to say to her. She had called the man’s bluff, bested him like she promised she would, and now for what, so people could continue to gossip about her and her temper, now? It seemed as though there was no end to it, and Olivia had tried her best.

The silence was cut by Olivia’s sharp wince as she finally fully submerged her hands into the water. She was growing impatient with herself, and wanted to be done and moved on with her day. Hearing her pain, Cassandra immediately flipped a switch, and turned into the careful and gentle lover she always was whenever Olivia needed her.

Moving towards her, she grabbed the rag laying rumpled beside the basin, and made eye contact
with her, offering an unspoken care for her. Olivia eyed her with caution, but let her do her thing. Carefully, she reached into the water and pulled one of her hands out, being careful to touch where it wouldn’t hurt. Olivia’s face crinkled a bit in reaction to the soreness, but it wasn’t overtly painful.

Cassandra soaked the washcloth in the water first with one hand, and then she wrung it out lightly. Making eye contact with her lover again, she carefully pressed the cloth onto her deeply bruised knuckle. Olivia bit her lip in a show of stoicism, but she knew that with only Cassandra around she could scream in pain and not be shamed for it. Still, one’s own need for self-preservation was hard to override.

“You should press these with ice water, once they are clean, for the swelling,” Cassandra’s soft tone was easy on the ears.

Olivia swallowed stiffly. She knew what the best course of action was, but in her mixed emotions, it was hard to find direction in her actions.

“I won’t be able to get any work done if I sit down with my hands in an ice bath all day,” she replied, watching her love carefully clean off her right hand of its wounds. “Besides, don’t you walk around the Maker forsaken countryside with worse, when you’re out on your missions?”

Cassandra smirked, a grin forming on one corner of her mouth as she paid close attention to her actions. “Yes, but that does not mean it is wise to do so.”

Finishing up with her right hand, Cassandra placed it back into the water and reached for the left one now. The left one proved less painful to be messed with, but maybe that was because Olivia knew more of what to expect from being touched. She let out an exasperated sigh as Cassandra continued her doting.

“What other advice do you have then, sage warrior, for my healing process?” Olivia asked, attempting to progress the conversation with some bittersweet humor.

“Bathing in salts, eating well, and finding good company to keep your spirit lifted,” Cassandra let a soft smile show, feeling the endearing nature of Olivia’s presence. She always wondered just how Olivia managed to seep some kind of sweetness or humor into the bleakest of situations. Perhaps it was her own way of soothing her nerves. Or, maybe, she was just that remarkable.

“I see. I will take note, to be sure.” Olivia watched as her left hand was now being re-deposited into the basin. Now, soaking them felt better and less shocking to the nerves. That left the matter of her face, and the bruising that was steadily showing on her left upper temple and eye. It made her face look meaner than her personality.

Cassandra turned her attention to her face, wringing out the cloth she had used and feeling the moisture in it turn cool from the air. Crinkling it up into a ball shape, she placed one hand under Olivia’s chin to hold her face still whilst she gently compressed the cloth onto the bruising. Olivia closed her one eye but kept the other open and looking straight at her woman.

“How badly did I scare the life out of you?” she asked.

“Enough to make me forget I have an entire life of violence and fighting under my belt to suggest I could stomach such sights,” Cassandra replied, her lips remaining parted as she kept her eyes on her treatment of her bruise.

“Damn…that bad?” Olivia grimaced.

“Yes, though, it also filled me with a sense of admiration for you. Not everyone would do what you
did to defend your honor. I was...I am, proud of you.”

Olivia felt her cheeks begin to blush, and they distracted her from the aching pains in various parts of her body. She bit her lip, taming the smile she wanted to give. Her shyness was touching to Cassandra, who broadened her smile in response to her bashfulness. She saw the way Olivia’s eyes shined hearing her praise, and she knew then that it wasn’t lost on her. Removing her hands from her face, she set the washcloth on the side of the basin rim to dry. She then folded her arms softly, turning her gaze to Olivia’s face – the beautiful, exquisite face of her woman, now with a bit of character via bruising.

“Are you sure you wish to go through your workday? You have all the reason to be alone and recover,” Cassandra continued, chin tilting to the side.

Olivia inhaled sharply, her mind going back to the day’s docket of responsibilities. “No, I am sure. I must continue my work on the elixir Dorian has requested I work on, it is time sensitive. Necromancers, for dealing in the powers of the dead, they sure are strict on their conceptions of timeliness.” she dunked her hands in deeper for one more moment of soaking, before pulling them out and into the cold air. Grabbing another spare rag which had remained dry, she slowly dabbed and rubbed her hands dry.

“Can you help me with my dress? I cannot reach or do the ties.”

Grabbing and handing her linen dress to her partner, Olivia turned around and reached her hands up above her head. Without a word, Cassandra obeyed her request, gathering the dress in her hands and slipping it over her head and shoulders, suspending it just enough to where Olivia could slip her sensitive hands and arms through the short sleeves. Once the dress was all settled on her body, Cassandra made short work of the ties in the back, pulling and fitting it on her body with plenty of room to breath and move. At last, with a tight knot at the top, Olivia was dressed for her actual occupation.

“Thank you, my Love,” she turned back around, offering Cassandra a warm grin. “Do not worry about me. I will have plenty of pain aids at my disposal in the Tower. I doubt anyone will let me remain unattended throughout the day.”

“Good, because otherwise they may be perturbed to have a Seeker doing the job in their sanctum of work.”

“Your presence compared to the looming eyes and swords of Templars is like being visited by an old friend, my darling.”

Cassandra smirked, shaking her head as she reached her arms to hold Olivia’s waist. It was the one part of her body that did not feel like an overt mistake to grab or put pressure. Gazing at her, for all that she was, she couldn’t help but feel proud and in love with every inch of her body. Still, it scared her to know she was fragile as all mortals were – to be in love is to secretly hope that the person who has your heart is infallible. In times such as these, such luxuries were rare.

“You’re going to worry regardless, aren’t you?” Olivia called her out, seeing the busy look of thoughtfulness on her face and in her eyes.

Cassandra sighed lightly. “I am afraid so. Can you blame me?”

“No, not really. Though, I do wish I could alleviate your worries.”

“Perhaps, then, you should rethink a life of gilded pacifism, and not a career in boxing.”
“Ha! I would be a sight to see, don’t you think?”

Cassandra smiled, a heartfelt chuckle escaping her. It melted Olivia’s heart every time, and made her want to climb into bed with her and fall asleep for the day, listening to her breathe, smile, and chuckle. It was the perfect symphony of sounds and feelings.

“Just be careful, as I have always asked you. You are precious to many people, I am just the most selfish of them all,” Cassandra rested her hand on Olivia’s cheek, lightly touching on the half with the bruising.

“I will, Cassandra. Don’t go growing grey hairs just yet,” Olivia rested her hands on the Seeker’s chest.

They exchanged a moment of quiet, wherein Olivia pulled herself into Cassandra’s embrace, her head and cheek resting against her shoulder as she felt her arms wrap around her. She had done something bold, something radical, in demanding the chance to defend herself against the attack of a man who’s past all-but promised hell to pay. She had stood up to the men who took domain over her dreams and nightmares alike, and she said no more. No more of this, without her getting to have her say.

“Does this mean you are a radical Mage sympathizer, now? Considering you acknowledged me out for all to see,” Olivia’s jovial tone was slowly returning, as she held herself against Cassandra’s body.

Resting her chin against Olivia’s hair, Cassandra heard her question and found a melancholic humor to it. After all she had been through, and all she had yet to face, it seemed as though saying “yes” was a small token of compassion in comparison. But, she couldn’t say for sure and for certain that she had let go of everything she had known and believed to be right – to pretend would be dishonest, and Olivia deserved more than that. But, she could promise some things, and she could be a woman of her word as she always had been.

“I am afraid so, though I will try my best to work on what that means for me. As for now, I can say that with everything in my heart, I love you, and I love you for all of who you are. That means that I love your convictions as well.”

Olivia closed her eyes, hearing for the first time the right words coming out of Cassandra’s mouth, for the right reasons. It was a most sweet solace for her burdensome day.

“Thank you, Cassandra. This has always been a dream of mine, to find someone like you.”

Dreams, it is said, do not always follow the dictation of our hearts. Instead, they follow the authority of the universe, and the responsibility it has to each of our existences as reincarnations of energy and soul from its space. It follows, then, that dreams can appear to us as people, ready to teach us and show us who we can be.

In that moment, Olivia believed she had found her dream, one that had found refuge from her trauma, and at the same time, honored it for its validity. Such a gift would never be lost on her for as long as she lived.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!