Steamy Thedas Nights

by IrreWilderer

Summary

76 prompt-fills ranging from G to E for various ships. Not in canonical order.

Leliana/Amell - Chapter 1 (E)
Sera/Lavellan - Chapter 2 (T) Chap. 17 (E)
Solus/Lavellan - Chapter 3 (E)
Alistair/Cousland - Chapter 4 (E), Chap. 10 (T), Chap. 15 (T)
Blackwall/Lavellan - Chapter 5 (E) Chap. 11 (E) Chapter 16 (T) Chapter 18 (E)
Fenris/Mahariel - Chapter 6 (G), Chap. 13 (G)
Sebastian/Hawke - Chapter 7 (G), Chap. 9 (G), Chap. 14 (G)
Anders/Hawke - Chapter 8 (E), Chap. 12 (T)
"good morning" kiss (and morning sex)

She’d never been a morning person. There was good reason for it: morning brought the day.

Tasteless meals, teeming dormitories, tightly-packed hallways; terrifying lessons complimented by extra-credit work entailing self-directed spite because of how she’d been born and what she was: no, no, Irene really hadn’t learned any love of morning living in the Circle Tower. What she learned was to hate her mana; to despise the coursing river within that ran her right towards demons—and was the reason her friends often died in bed. She learned this at ten.

Her lesson at eighteen was to resent the sun. Sitting in the stuffy Circle chapel, hands clasped, eyes forward, she drown in the Chantry’s blazing yellow symbol of brilliant self-abasement. She suffocated with its heat, and fainted because she forgot to breath. Waking in bed, she wondered if there was any way to stop the day from starting. If the morning never came, then neither would her sins.

Somewhere north of Lothering, a collective of tents sat in pre-dawn grey. The sky was overcast. A bird sang, and Irene still wasn’t used to these things so she jumped. Their cotton blankets rustled, causing the body next to her to stir, but then everything calmed save the singing bird.

Irene lay thought-filled. She couldn’t fathom the number of things learned following her twenty-first birthday. Different animal sounds, seasonal allergies; the absence of emotional numbness. Shock and joy. Bubble baths. White chocolate. But none of those lessons had come from the Circle.

“Good morning,” sniffled Leliana, swishing towards her under the quilt. Her arm and leg slung over Irene in a drowsy cuddle. Small, sleepy sounds escaped her mouth: a quiet hiccup; a silken sigh. It was the ballad of lilies waking in their bed.

Irene stared.

Leliana’s rouge was wiped off. Her hair had tussled so terribly that it haloed high around her head with not one strand falling past her shell-like ears. Save a stroke of lilac on her left lid, the eye-cosmetics had smeared away, too.

Those sophisticated, glamorous things which once achingly attracted Irene were gone. And it was wonderful. Irene liked that Leliana no longer smelled of rosewater and Orlesian vanilla—she smelled of the love-making which had taken them past midnight, leaving them a mess. She smelled like campfire at her hairline, too. Breathing her in was like sucking on smoky sweet-taffy. It was good.

Leliana propped herself up on her side, curious at Irene’s silence. “Or not?” she wondered.

The Warden nibbled her lip. “It’s not,” Irene answered. “Or… it is. It’s—” She sighed. “What if, when we’re done, they make me go back?”

Leliana roused herself immediately. “Oh, sweetheart… no. They can’t! You are a Warden, now. Your place is fighting darkspawn. There’s no need to worry about these things so early in the morning!” She lay back down, cradling her face on Irene’s chest. Confidence was replaced by softer, honeyed concern. “Were you up worrying about this all night?”

“No,” Irene admitted honestly. “Only since I awoke. I started thinking about mornings in the Circle, and… and how I used to run to the lavatories, then back to the dorm to ready for breakfast. I ran
constantly. To classes; to confession. Away. You know, from templars looking to bully. I was always so tired.”

Leliana laughed cheekily. “And now you run after darkspawn. No wonder you are so trim and fit.”

Irene cracked a half-grin. “It’s different,” she noted after thinking about it. Thinking led to reflection. Reflection dropped her tone to a dark, doubtful octave. “Really different.”

Somewhere off in another tent, Alistair delivered his guttural ‘good-morning’ greeting. The yawning sounded like a desperate druffalo searching for a mate. He was snoring again within minutes.

“Are truly you worried they will take you back?” Leliana wondered.

“I guess not.” The canvas ceiling was becoming transparent with the approaching sun, Irene noticed. “It’s not about being taken back. It’s more… I’m worried to be taken away from this.”

This was the velvet of their touching skin. This was the new world nurtured and grown the night before when they’d lain together for the first time. This was the only thing she ever wanted to know: her lover’s scent, secrets, and taste, and comforts. A life under lock-down had prepared her for certain perilous lessons of Grey Warden duty, but it certainly hadn’t readied Irene for the learning of happiness. She’d die before she was torn from it. And she certainly no longer wanted to die.

Leliana sat up. Blankets fell from her slender shoulders like silk off a queen. “No one will take you away. This is where you belong, now. It is where I belong. Us. Together.” Dipping in, Leliana kissed her cheek. “And if they try, you may simply conscript the entire Circle and be free once more! Such is your power, now.” She laughed musically.

Irene touched Leliana’s hair. She loved her locks, as orange and beautiful as sundown. She wanted to be covered in it—to see it splay across her own skin—and then, perhaps, braid it with pretty ribbon. “I think I’m starting to understand what that means. ‘Good morning’,” Irene clarified when Leliana gave her a confused look. “Mornings were always the start of something awful. A beginning for more of the same, and it was always the same guilt: that I was born wrong.” She saw Leliana’s expression glow. Not with pity, but with pride. Irene took a determined breath. She was filled with something she did not often feel: strength. “But not anymore.”

"I can show you an even better morning, if you like,” the redhead purred. Pushing the covers away, Leliana settled on Irene's stomach. Irene's mouth slackened in a soundless moan as her lover dipped in closer, whispering "my brave one," before shuffling further.

Irene shivered. It was a dizzying loss. One moment all she could feel was the ready, willing heat of Leliana's shaved mound against her—but she hadn't even time to know it and want it. Leliana continued lower, bending Irene's knees crooked. Irene's spine curved with a snap when her lover parted her thighs. Leliana was looking straight between her legs, and Irene felt an object of lust; a thing to have pleasure wrung from. She smelled her own cloying scent; her eyes fixed on the canvas ceiling, and were soon fixing to burn a hole right through it. Swallowing, she balled her hands, stomach swelling with arousal. Leliana giggled.

"You are so receptive! So passionate. You make this easy." Leliana's forefinger lazad forward and back between her folds, up and down her labia, testing the waters (which Irene provided quickly). Forward and back; again and again: Leliana stroked across her opening, slowly preparing her. The sensation of unfurling—of relaxing and readying to be spread and filled—stopped making sense insofar as words became meaningless, and all Irene knew was I need it, I need it, Maker, please! as her lover played with her.
"Can you cum just like this, I wonder?" Leliana asked.

Irene choked on a whimper.

Leliana added to the first, and now the pads of two fingers peeled along the Warden's pussy. Flicking Irene's clit but stimulating the bud no more, Leliana was content to tease; to so, so softly wisp along her womanhood that Irene's thighs quivered uncontrollably with the drive for penetration. She spread her legs further, desperately, hands grappling at the bedding. Irene was worked to a sensitive, sodden, helpless state. She could hear her own dampness; the thick, slick sounds as Leliana began to press harder as she slipped through her lips. More—just a little more—and Leliana would be inside her channel, deep and good. *So good.*

Irene bucked. Leliana laughed again.

"Alright. It is, perhaps, too early to play such games." With a *tsking* sound that turned into a delighted hum, Leliana fingered Irene, pumping hard. Irene spasmed full-bodied, mouth gaping, while starting to sweat. With every quick, slicked insertion to the knuckle, the Warden made half pleas—"fu-" "plea-" "gulh-" "muh-"—as she begged senselessly for release, but when Leliana began rubbing her clit with the other hand, Irene couldn't talk at all. She tensed against the new rush in her legs; the roiling waves in her belly bringing her to the edge. She could feel her orgasm building; collecting all those brutal, inciting sensations as Leliana's fingers fucked her pussy; drew up and along her tight walls, driving her home. Irene held her thighs back, legs spreading further, inspiring her lover to slip one more finger in. Eyes rolling, Irene was stuffed; full; fucking *brimming* with her lover. The swirls on her clit sped to a patternless, sloppy assault, and with a shout Irene burst, clenching around Leliana's fingers as she came blindingly.

"Yes!" Leliana approved happily, hands slowing her magic on Irene's womanhood as she rode out her bliss. "You are so beautiful like this. All day I could watch you!"

Slowly, and bleary-eyed, Irene at last emerged from the hazing high of afterglow, legs tingling. She smiled wide; awkwardly, almost. She was not used to so much grinning.

"Do you want—?" She blushed. *You know.*

"What I want," Leliana informed, "is to watch you eat a big breakfast. Tonight we shall see about compensation." She giggled.

Ten minutes passed like nothing. Quiet squawking supplied by crows, an Antivan crow, and Morrigan and Alistair crowing at each other had the women realizing it was time to rise.

"Time for another day," Leliana chimed under Irene, who now lay upon her breast. "Another morning."

"Mm," Irene agreed, glancing up at her. "A *good* morning, though."

"Oh yes," Leliana nodded. "They will all be good, now. And forever."
“Oooh. That for me?” Sera wondered. “Bit early to be playing Mistress Spank-an’-Tickle, but I’m game if you are.”

Ori turned from lacing the leather boot that ran half-way up her leg. While wryly eye-ball-ing her bawdy Buttercup, who in turn was watching from the bed, she took in the windows full of sky. Morning still wasn’t putting on airs: a thick and heavy dawn refused to break, which probably suggested lingering rain accompanied by low, rolling thunder-thrums.

And it absolutely meant that Josephine was going to insist Ori keep longer at her work. Thanks to sloppy, ‘inclement weather’, the refugees would be staying in, and the Inquisitor might as well, too.

“I wish,” complained Ori. “Putting the bedposts to work sounds way more fun than dancing lessons.” Sighing, she stumbled one-shoe-on and one-shoe-off towards her great, luxurious bed full of numerous cookie crumbs and one buck-naked girlfriend.

The Inquisitor flopped on her back, sinking into the goose-down.

The bedding was in need of a wash.

“Starting that pish already? Empress Elfy-fucker’s big hoo-haw isn’t for… ever, almost.” Sera lay alongside Ori, her starkers stomach flush on the bed and knees crooked. “What? Lady Josie scared you’ll make the rest of us look like tits?”

“Looking tits-like is the least of my problems,” Ori answered, turning her head. She huffed. “All this… crap: it’s because Josephine says our messengers can’t be trusted. She says if Celene is warned ahead of time, we lose the element of surprise, and assassins will move on her later when we’re not expecting it. So we’re off to Orlais.” Ori squinted suspiciously. “Pretty sure that’s a load of shit. I’m pretty sure Josephine just wants to go to the party.”

Sera had sleep-silt and agreement in her eyes. “Definitely. Whole things’ goin’ hips-up, but seeing Ambassador Uptight’s party-breeches? Worth it.”

Ori was so glad Sera had chosen to stick around. Much of what Sera despised fit the Inquisition to a T: nobility funded, hierarchical by nature; associated with the Chantry’s ickier parts. It had seemed a given that Sera might leave, a flurry of farewell middle-fingers in the night, and, to be frank, Ori didn’t want to do this without her.

Deigning to nobles; the kissing of asses—Ori wasn’t cut-out for grovelling. Needing to be nice to the nob-headed nobles rankled her. Standing for inspection while onlookers tutted their judgement made her start sussing-out the exits, but Sera kept it tolerable. Sera and her dislike of Dalish silliness; Sera and her refusal to take stupid traditions seriously: Ori never thought she’d find another elf like her. Not that she was looking.

“Don’t see the huff, anyways,” Sera snorted, rolling onto her back. “’s not so hard. Step, step; here, there. It’s cake if you’re not thick. I mean, the monied manage alright, and most of them are kissing-cousins.”

“I just keep getting in my head about it,” Ori admitted. “I’m thinking about what I’m supposed to be doing with my hands thirty seconds later instead of what my feet are supposed to be doing now.”
“And that’s the problem. *Stop thinking.*” Sera leaned closer, resting her forehead on Ori’s. “Just do the rudding thing.”

Ori rolled her eyes.

“No one is as naturally gifted as you, butter-butt. Some people can’t just pick up a bow and start taking out targets at eight-hundred feet. Some people need to *practise.*” Ori frowned. “Besides, dancing is different. You have no idea—”

“Like piss I don’t!” Sera bolted up and crossed her arms. “Lady Emmald made me get all frilled-up and stupid for lessons on Fridays, and I wanted down the street to play with my friends. But I had to dance, and I was miserable. So I learned fast as I could, and you know what? Still not worth it. She didn’t say shite. Not like the others mums.”

Ori sat up, too, completely surprised by this sorry, unasked-for anecdote. It was a shock. Just as shocking as the image of Sera decked-out in a fancy frock. “So... you took dancing lessons? When you were younger?”

Sera’s gorgeous face was plagued by pouting. “Said it, didn’t I?”

Ori was mad. She felt her blood boil. Not at Sera’s quick-to-bitterness, but because Sera couldn’t turn a corner down memory lane without coming to some crossroads where ‘Lady Emmald’ wasn’t being a total bitch. Sera had no good stories and no good reason to look back at her past. It made Ori furious. It was a kind of theft—the kind afforded a bit too easily by rich bitches like Emmald who were flush with making others miserable. Sera had had her childhood *stolen.*

“I’m not surprised, honestly.” The Inquisitor swallowed the anger so Sera wouldn’t think it directed at her. “Dumb as it is, dancing actually takes some amount of coordination, and *you* are very coordinated.” Ori meant it in steamy, sexy slynes, hoping to distract the other woman, but Sera was too far-gone in dour nostalgia. When Ori attempted to touch her hand, Sera swiped it away.

She realized immediately what she’d done.

“Sorry, Tadwinks.” Sera sighed. “It’s just...”

“You’re *thinking.*” Ori leaned in, pressing their foreheads flush just like Sera had done. Sera smelled like she needed a bath. She smelled like she needed to brush her teeth, too. More than that, she smelled like that crap could wait. “So *stop thinking.*”

They sunk into the mattress, clinging and humming. It was intimacy, not lust. It was comforting, not cuming. It was a strangeness for Ori, who had once assumed sex was the natural progression of naked limbs and asses hanging out, but Sera had shown her a different world. One of skin and security; of security *in* one’s skin. Ori didn’t owe anyone anything with her body. Even if she wanted to give Sera all of it.

“You know,” she suggested, head on Sera’s chest, hands brushing swirls over birthmarks, “if you teach me some steps, Josephine might let me skip a few lessons and we could...”

“Not a chance!” sang Sera. She combed Ori’s hair with her fingers. “You go play Important People. I’ll go do... you know, anything else.”

Relenting, understanding, not excited (but accepting), Ori forced herself up. “Fine. Then I guess I better go do... that.” She noted the other leather boot laying on the ground. “*Ugh.*”

Securing her outrageous shoes, throwing on cottons and leathers and putting her outfit to rights, she
glanced back at Sera who had rediscovered their cheese plate from the previous night.

“See you later, alright?” Ori finished lacing up her pants while standing near the steps leading down. “Gonna stop by your room after a meeting with Leliana. That’s about noon. Varric said he’s coming by with that Rivaini stuff, then if you want you can come with me to—”

“Wait!” Sera’s eyes snapped up from the smelly, sumptuous cheddars. She shot towards Ori like an arrow. One of her arrows, specifically, so it went straight, true, and hit her mark with a splat.

“What?!” Ori gaped.

Leaning in, solid and rather specific, Sera smooshed her forehead, the sounds slapping echoes on the walls, the wet of her lips leaving a little cold spot on Ori’s brow. Sera stood back, satisfied. Ori blinked, flabbergasted.

“What?"

“That’s… It’s what some of the mums would do! Kiss their kids before they… Before they…” Sera frowned. She looked down. “Sounds stupid out loud.”

* A little, blonde elf-girl with eyes bigger than the world. Watching her classmates; their mothers fare-thee-well with kisses and compliments. The little blonde elf-girl only watches. Until she wonders ‘what about me’, her mind understanding the steps faster than any other dancing daughter, but her heart not in it. Waiting; asking. ‘What about me?’

“It’s not stupid,” Ori promised, licking her lips for the sake of her suddenly parched throat. “It’s weird, yeah, but not stupid.”

Sera hesitated. ‘ Weird’ was a highly subjective ideal in these days of Coryphyshits and glowing hands. It was difficult to discern whether ‘weird’ in this instance was terrifyingly bad. “Yeah?” Sera asked, brow slanted.

“Yeah.”

Ori gently pulled her by the hips. She put her nose-tip to Sera’s and smiled at her skin’s warmth in the miserable, cold room. She thought about later, and later-later, when the day was done, responsibilities out of the way, and maybe they’d share a bath, but there was no flipping way Sera was going to have to wait around and wonder about her worth again.

Because she and her big, damn heart were worth more than rich-britches Lady Emmald could ever have afforded.

“Way friggin’ weird,” said Ori, nuzzling her. “You loony.”

Sera glowed like the sun. She smooched Ori’s forehead three more times for luck, and the Inquisitor went off for her lesson.
"thigh-high stockings and garter belts"

The Inquisitor had returned from assembly. She’d come back with a box.

“Open it,” she urged, cheeks pinched by smiling.

Their ostentatious Winter Palace quarters boasted more abundance than Skyhold’s Great Hall. Despite the Inquisition’s coffers, it hadn’t Halamshiral’s lineage of grandeur—never mind that the organization’s existence was fledgling while Orlais was antique. This singular room’s window-dressings could newly outfit every Inquisition soldier, while the molded-gold accents on fireplace and furniture may have done-away with the institution’s debt were it melted down.

All of it suggested prosperous stability where there was none. It was a lie: loveliness slathered distractingly over worm-eaten wrongs.

At least it was pretty.

Opulence surrounded them with overstuffed divans. The Inquisitor, however, sat upon the bed, knees folded under herself, eschewing their cushions for the mattress. Her uniform was impeccably pressed. She bore pricey cosmetics from the Empress. The woman looked lovely, lustrous, and returned entirely too early. Solas had been expecting privacy for some hours.

More than expecting it, he’d been exploiting it.

“Come on. Dig in. Unless you’re trying to guess what it is,” Ma’ven teased at length.

He was. While speculating at the contents within the palm-sized box, he assumed she had needling theories regarding her own mystery. Solas was, after all, naked save the pants of his Inquisition costume. For afternoon attire, it was noticeably risqué.

“What I’m guessing is that delegations did not go as hoped,” Solas said off-topic. “Half an hour does not bode well when considering the hurdles of smoothing hardships between wronged kin. Or divided lovers.”

Ma’ven bit her lip. “Well, when I said I had a meeting between Celene, Briala, and Gaspard, I was… mistaken about when it was. As in I was lying. The meeting is tomorrow.” Her expression turned apologetic at his frown. “I didn’t want you wondering where I was going! Or what I was up to. Because I was getting you that. Your present.”

Her sarcasm and gift-promises weren’t much of a ‘sorry’.

“And lying was your first chosen alternative to frankness.” But Solas calmed himself, smiling sympathetically. He understood her reasoning better than he could explain. “You might’ve told me you needed a moment for yourself, Ma’ven.”

The woman grinned. “I was counting on you liking the present so much that you forgave me. That was my very-great hope.”

In truth, Solas was mad only so far, and to say he was mad made mountains from molehills. He was a bit defeated, obviously, having learned his plans hadn’t been sound-proof, but, thanks to his hastily put-on pants, he wasn’t yet discovered. His secret was safe. And soft. Holding him; binding him in ways he was better off not thinking of. Although it was difficult. His secret was a little tight.
“What could it be?” Solas asked curiously, sitting at her side. Wrapped with sparkling gauze, its bow had a little bell, giving airs that were quite gauche. He put it to his ear and shook once, hearing nothing but an insignificant rustle. “Is it occasion-oriented? Or could it be something you’re convinced caught my eye in the crafts quarter? One of those scaled portraits, perhaps?”

“Now I’m wondering if that’s what it **should** be,” Ma’ven nervously admitted. She smoothed her hands over her legs. “No, it’s not that. I’m hoping I’m not way off the mark with this. And the occasion is.... Well, there is one, but I don’t know what it is yet. I’ll think of something, though, so don’t worry.”

The box lost the bow with a pull, its gauze with a tug, and opening the lid Solas stared. A man who prided himself on subtlety, he had apparently disappointed his standards this time.

“Oh, Creators, I **was** off!” Ma’ven shoved her face in her hands miserably. “You kept staring, but I thought it was one of your wanting looks instead of a curious one. Fenedhis. I’m sorry.”

Taking the carefully-folded silk bands and strands and material out, Solas scrutinized. Whereas the gauche box suggested sumptuous debauchery, what he held went beyond. The stockings were not simply the elegant day-wear of Orlesian men and women alike, made with such delicacy that the gossamer string-count was impossible. These only in-privacy appropriate thigh-highs were softer than down, daintier than gold leaf, and bore minute pearls sewed into the lacy trim, as well as about the luxurious garter-belt to which it attached. There were sweetly small satin bows everywhere, suggesting innocence where there was none. Its straps and lines, once worn, promised to draw attention to what it did not cover: the soft curve of naked hips; the beckoning hills of one’s bottom or sex. The colours were cream and grey-blue: dreamy, and inviting.

The matching bra was more of the same: a meandering, flower-motif laced mesh to immerse the body in muted mystery. There was no padding—the piece was not for molding or shaping the body: it was for celebrating it; exalting it in a thin draping of splendor.

As a crafted object, the items would please with its careful, fragile make, and as an outfit it was fit for only a night of beautiful, specific endeavor.

Solas frowned. Despite his appreciation, given the context of where it was boughten, the bra, stockings, and garter belt were no doubt touted as something for mistresses to don for their monied lovers. He turned it over in his hands.

“You exchanged coin for this?”

“Like I said—you seemed to be interested.” Ma’ven’s shoulders drooped. “You… don’t want me to wear it, do you? Is it because it’s Orlesian? I know all this decadence gets a little hard to swallow. Or is it because I’m the Inquisitor? You think it’ll be an insult to what I am? Or is the thought of an elf wearing these basically **meaningless** human fashions too—”

Standing, Solas worked his belt, inspiring silence. Pushing his slacks to his heels, the gesture revealed his great secret: he was sporting nearly exactly what had been in the box (sans bra, and with a few fashion-minded discrepancies).

He wore no underwear alongside the ensemble. The air was warm on his skin; against his exposed cock, and bottom.

Ma’ven’s jaw dropped.

“The garment is hardly native to Orlais,” Solas stated. “Nor would it negate the dignity of your
name. It is negligee, Inquisitor, not some symbol of intimacy by which to be shamed.”

She hesitated. “I…”

“Those were excuses. A means to mitigate the unease you imagined I felt.” Solas sighed. “I understand.”

The shock washed from Ma’ven, though marks of surprise still lingered. Her gaze was sharp; she half-smiled. Moving from her spot, the Inquisitor shifted to sitting on the bed’s edge. “Then… am I also imagining you got a little defensive? And why hide this? You clearly threw those pants on as soon as you heard me coming in the door.”

Solas sighed again. “Your reasonings, while not your own, reflect the world’s perspective. That you guessed I wished you to wear the garb says as much. It goes against assumptions of sexuality that state such means of expression are for women. And, as specified, the ‘uselessness’ of this regalia has no place amid Dalish practicality. I did not think you would understand.”

His misdirected frustration found a mark in Ma’ven, whose lips were parted by painful recognition of his rationale. Solas regretted his tone. Still, he stuck to his arguments. It had been ghastly being measured by the whispering women. The shop had employed particularly thorough bigots, and leaving without curt comments at his back had been impossible. Wearing what he did now for his own sake was tainted by irritation. Although he’d purchased it because he thought it beautiful, he did not feel as beautiful wearing it as he’d hoped.

“I’m sorry. That comment about shem fashion was stupid. It’s not as though the Dalish don’t have some, uh… frivolous clothing, too.” Ma’ven’s hands knitted together, fingers going white with anxious pressure. “But… you know you don’t have to hide yourself from me. Don’t you?”

There was something about her eyes—the way her gaze spoke of entralling tolerance, and the wisdom in what they didn’t say—that caused Solas to step away, putting his back to her. He had been foolish to indulge. Sometimes, however, he missed the feel of finery while wearing his apostate’s attire. And there was no denying Orlais’ air of plenty-bloated excess had him more nostalgic than usual.

If only he could show Ma’ven the exuberance of his age; the revel and grace of gone Elvhenan. Not all had been tainted by Evanuris gluttony. There had been beauty. Very revealing and relishing beauty.

“It isn’t your blame to bare. I…” Solas squared his jaw while staring out the window. “The wardrobe was bought from boorish women better armed with wagging tongues than business sense. Their behavior was a reminder of when I wasn’t to be believed; when wisdom bestowed was met by ridicule. With your Inquisition I’ve been respected, but it has not always been so.” He glanced at her. “It was not simply the biases of an oblivious world. The burn was more personal. Their insults…”

“Solas.” Ma’ven moved from the bed. She did not, however, fling herself at him, and instead left a few short feet of respectful space between. The woman knew too well his moods; his fickle trust. “What did they say? Is it because you’re an elf, or…”

“There were insinuations about my sex and station, yes.” Solas’s eyes were back on the windowpane, soaking in the outstanding view of the garden. “Were my ears their inspiration? I cannot say.”

“Tell me the shop’s name, and I will make them absolutely miserable.”
Solas smiled. He was glad only the garden could see it. “You are above petty revenge.”

Ma’ven was closer, now. Just over his shoulder—from where he could smell her subtle, flowery perfume.

“Not really,” she said.

This time he looked at his feet while smiling.

“I suppose the support of others remains a surprise when given,” Solas admitted, finally turning to face her. “I’m sorry, vhenan.”

Her golden eyes found that light kept only for when she knew he was content. Gaze sparkling, the Inquisitor said, “don’t be. You have absolutely no reason to be sorry.” She bit her lip mischievously. “Although… What were you doing in here all alone? Looking so gorgeous, I might add.”

Solas barely kept from blushing. “Inspecting the fit. Why? What are you insinuating, Inquisitor?”

“Nothing.” Ma’ven’s brow tilted as she started pacing. “I thought maybe you were checking yourself out in the mirror. Maybe enjoying a little alone time.”

“My ego is so great I gain sexual gratification from my own image? Is that it?”

“Well, I gain sexual gratification from it,” Ma’ven replied to his playfully needling tone. “So why not?” She grinned toothily. Then, without warning, she melted. Her fixated gaze lost focus behind half-fallen lids; her smirk succumbed to the distracted parting of lips in a trance. Breathing harder, her throat rolled when she swallowed. “You look amazing. Completely. You know that. Right?”

Thankfully, Solas approached and cupped her face with both hands. “Thank you.”

Ma’ven’s eyelids fluttered. Their strength had as much as her threadbare voice. “Can I… Can I touch you?”

Solas squared his feet further, the garters’ tug pressing on his skin. The belt held his stomach like a vise; a fire roared somewhere while his body enjoyed its own. Having relaxed in his lover’s calming presence, the remembered, like-new exposure of his cock—though his legs and abdomen remained covered—called attention to his sex, and that was a thing of sensuality in itself. The room seemed to watch him; to touch him where he was bared. And under the gaze of the Inquisitor, he felt at once devoured and powerful.

“Yes,” Solas rasped.

Kisses rained upon his chest as he watched, enraptured by the things she did. Lips and fingers; soft and trailing: she understood his motives more and easier than maybe he did as she puffed hot breath over his nipple, licking it with the grating flat of her tongue. Flicking and rubbing the hardened nub with her thumb, moaning as she then mouthed lower towards his stomach, Solas twitched, his member thickening. It was worse there, and better—she groaned pulsing sounds of enthusiasm over his abdomen as she kissed, her fingers slipping beneath the band of his garterbelt. In no way intent on taking it away, she soothed the pinched flesh; massaged it while whispering, the peaks of her lips tickling as she did, “what these stockings do for your legs, Solas… You’re gorgeous.”

She worshipped not a man but the thing of beauty he was become. Such devotion should have proved distracting, but it was not for anything the Wolf might’ve done that she prostrated before him with enslaved lips, kissing the material of his belt as much as his skin. It was just him—just him looking as he did. Vanity wasn’t his sin, but before Ma’ven it’s something Solas remembered. He’d
wanted to be beautiful, and he was to her. He was so incredibly wanted.

Still dressed fully in her uniform, the velvet scratched silkily over him as Ma’ven’s clothed arms held his waist and she kissed, now over hip bone, thigh, back up to his hardening cock, and passed that to his belly. She stayed there, pecking lightly, grinning against him and he felt it: all her joy and bliss because of him.

“I want to suck you while you wear this.” Sitting on her knees, she nuzzled his member, pulling her fingers up and down his thighs, his head dizzying whenever she neared his groin. “You look so good. Those idiots would take it all back if they could see you now.” Licking along the base of his shaft under to his balls, Ma’ven teased them as she spoke directly against the skin. Every word she spoke brushed them; touched them so carefully and torturously. “If they could see what you looked like—legs long and perfect—in these, they wouldn’t know what to do with themselves. Watching as I suck you off and swallow, they’d gasp and stare…”

She finally took him in and Solas moaned, his cock sliding passed her lips, slicking over her tongue, her heat absolutely intoxicating and singing through his spine. He buried his hands in her short hair, grunting as Ma’ven found a cruel rhythm: forward and back, but not sucking—just prepping him with lazy lapping across his entire length, his cockhead sometimes driven against the back of her throat, but often neglected and it had him panting. Sweat began beading across his skin while Ma’ven continued mouthing up and down, teasing and devastating, the warmth almost as insufferable as the subtle friction. Then Solas shivered as she extracted him from her, his member hard, glossy, and pulsing painfully.

“Vhenan, wh—?”

He saw, in a moment, why she’d stopped. Shimmying, Ma’ven had slipped her hand between her legs inside her trousers, and by her gasp he knew she was as wet and desperate as his spit-glistened cock.

“Keep holding me.” Ma’ven leaned back into his grip, her free hand taking him again. “Hold my head and fuck my mouth. Creators, I’m soaked. Please, Solas. I want to get off like this. I need to…”

Solas was shoved back in her mouth. The woman sucked and bobbed as she bounced, working herself and him with frantic motions. As her tongue swirled, he complied: Solas held her head and bucked, legs spreading as he steadied himself, Ma’ven’s plump lips dragging as his member moved in and out. Silver heat started in his legs; swam across his skin and towards his stomach. He ached and needed; it built and burst. Swallowed nearly with senselessness as she swallowed hard around him, Solas stopped humping, grunted, and then spilled his seed down her throat, the strength of her sucking abating as she suddenly otherwise occupied herself. Solas saw Ma’ven’s eyes go big then roll as she joined him in orgasm, both of their hips snapping pathetically as they followed their separate bliss.

After-glowing, Solas sighed, blinked sluggishly, and smiled as he ran his fingers affectionately through her hair. Ma’ven looked up and fell from her knees to her butt in the same instant.

“I would have skipped myself, but I’ve got a meeting I have to go to as soon as possible.” The woman lay out on the marble flooring, grinning like a drunk. “And I didn’t want to be that hopelessly distracted.” She held up her hand—the one that had been wedged in her smalls. Inspecting it, and no doubt catching the clinging scent of herself, she frowned. “Gah. I gotta wash this.”

Solas took the outstretched hand and helped her up, following her towards the wash-stand. He stood behind her, holding her waist, as she rubbed the soap to suds and cleaned away all evidence. Most
evidence, in any case.

“Would you prefer I find you fresh underclothes?”

“It’s alright.” Ma’ven smiled into the mirror at him. “I mean, I should change, and I would change, but if you’re not going to…”

Turning, she hugged him close, and Solas in turn wrapped his arms around her shoulders as they became enveloped by one another.

“Who says I’m not?” he queried.

“Me,” she answered, grinning terribly. “When I get back,” Ma’ven promised, voice tender and sweet as she spoke against his breast, breath warm and wonderful, “we’ll take our time.” Her hands lowered, and Ma’ven’s eyes widened like she’d made some great, ancient discovery. “Oh! Now I know why I like the outfit so much.” She squeezed his ass twice. “Mmm. Very nice.”

Solas chuckled. “If you linger any longer, you’ll be late for… whom are you meeting?”

“Briala. We’re going to have a conversation about a certain someone’s spies in the Inquisition.” Ma’ven folded thoroughly once more before stepping away. “I’ll see you in a few hours.” She looked him over. “A whole lot of you.”

Solas poured himself a glass of wine, and sipped it slowly while sitting in front of the mirror. He wondered if he wouldn’t fit into the ensemble Ma’ven had bought for herself to wear. We wondered what he’d look like in pearls; in the soft, cream-coloured lace, and blue-grey silk.

He glanced at the forgotten box on the bed, taking another sip. No need to wonder, he thought.
"an awkward kiss" (and not-so-awkward sexings)

For a moment, in her mind, she was home. Rich, risen brocade at the bed and window dressings; old flowers on the floor for fragrance. There ruled a conspicuous silence. The servants were careful in their scurrying.

Overwhelmed by forgotten familiarity, Lady Cousland (as the staff addressed her) shoved her fatigued-lined face in her hands.

Imagining she was home, she imagined she had a right to privacy. Imagining she was home, she was sure her mother would check-in before going to bed herself. Silver hair in swinging plaits; the bedgown with lace cuffs

Augustine was disappointed. There was a knock on the door, and it wasn’t her mother. It never would be.

“Alistair,” Augustine gasped, startled to see the heir-apparent at her short-term quarters within the Arl of Redcliffe’s Denerim estate. Alistair appeared tired, ruffled, and regal. His traveling clothes had been traded for silks. Likely not by choice.

“Oh! Is this your room?” Alistair ran a hand through his hair. “I was looking for the, uh… cellar! Yes, the second floor… cellar. I was overw… -ome with the sudden need for a midnight snack—even though it’s only early eve—and so I…” Alistair’s bluster went out of him like a deadened wind. He sounded guilty, but not with a child’s variety. He seemed an old man tired of his own antics, and it tortured Augustine to see it.

“No,” Alistair recanted darkly. “I was looking for your room. I was hoping we could talk. May I?”

Augustine wordless bade him enter, closing the door behind.

“Don’t think I was ever in here,” he noted conversationally, looking around. “No surprise there. What with ‘raised-by-dogs’ and everything.” Alistair turned to her. “I want to talk about what happened today.”

‘Today’ was exactly the opposite of what she’d assumed to be on his mind—or, rather, what he’d allow on his lips. Not only because their afternoon had been emotionally-crippling (Alistair barely ate at the large, showy dinner thrown by Eamon), but they had more than enough ‘tomorrow things’ to discuss. They were to be consolidating their allies’ armies, and meeting the archdemon’s horde head-on within the week. The future held much more important discussion than the previous day’s regrets. The Wardens had Warden Things to preoccupy their thoughts. The past was the past.

“What is there to say?” Augustine wondered. “You’re going to be king. That was your choice. And it’s the right one. The people will rally; we’ll have support against the Blight…”

“And when the Blight is over, I’ll sit on my throne counting stacks of money while, what, wearing the fancy hat? I mean, that’s what kings do, isn’t it?” Alistair pinched the bridge of his nose. “You know, I’ve wanted very few things in my life. An endless supply of Ferelden cheddar; a hundred virgins to do my bidding. My taxes, for example. Trim the hedges—and that’s not a euphemism, surprisingly. But I mean, who doesn’t, right?” He shook his head. “All I ever really wanted was to be a Grey Warden. Then, at the Landsmeet, I realized I wanted the crown, too. Or, at least, that I didn’t want Anora to have it. And that I wanted to help Ferelden in a way that would only be possible were I king. But, laying in bed just now, I also realized that I…” His tone softened. His gaze
quieted. “That, for once in my life, maybe I can have what I want.”

“Alistair,” Augustine cautioned, hands raising. “Don’t. Don’t you dare. Because I am very, very tired. Today was incredibly long. And I was told I can’t have children or you, so if you give me false hope for even one second… That would be a real bastard thing to do.”

Alistair shrugged. “If the shoe fits.” He smirked. “Augie. It won’t be for lack of trying. Right?”

His lopsided smile tugged all her heartstrings and tied them in such knots it was as though she’d been tripped. Her legs went weak; she lost her breath. Turning away, Augustine took sticks from the kindling-pile and put them into the hearth.

She’d agreed with him. Earlier that day, she had nodded, taken his hand in her's one last time, and smiled so sadly. Given that Fereldan now faced political strife due (in part) to questions of legitimate progeny, Augustine had accepted Alistair’s need to marry someone else. Fereldan deserved to have that mighty, oaken Theirin family-tree be unbowed by rotten roots which Augustine’s barren womb would only nurture. The Blight had taken her ability to have children. It had stolen her chance to marry the man she loved. But she’d accepted. Because she loved him.

Unfortunately, Alistair was made of hope and optimism.

“If you want what’s best for Fereldan—and not just what’s best for your bed—you need to marry a woman with a womb that works.”

“Do you think me such a lecher?” Alistair needled. “You’re a noble woman. You have training in etiquette. You know the difference between a bann and an arling. And what forks are for what soups at the fancy dinner parties.”

Augustine’s brow lilted dismissively at his decent, surprisingly logical points. “Spoons are for soup, dear. Not forks.”

“See?! I’d be a hopeless king without you.” His arms folded across his chest. “Look, I’ve given this a lot of thought. I want someone with me I trust. Someone who believes what I believe; who will help me accomplish what I want. Someone who cares for me. That’s you, Augie. That’s only you.” He peered at her. “You’re the one who said I needed to stand up for myself after Goldanna. Why are you fighting this? I thought you’d want this.”

Augustine stared at the hearth. She burned while it simply sputtered.

“You know I want to be your wife,” Augustine replied. “But it’s as you said this afternoon: this is going to be hard for both of us, no matter how amicable our parting was. What we’ve been through, and what we mean to each other… It’s love. It was supposed to be love, anyways.” Augustine resolutely steeled her softening tone. ”But you need to have children. If you’re going to be king, you have to do it right, and that means marrying someone else. Someone who can bare an heir. Someone who won’t have to build relationships with The Bannorn’s lords from the ground up. And lands, and assets; lineage, and...” Her throat collapsed in on itself. “And a good name, and... And, Maker, this isn’t fair. It’s everything I’ve ever wanted, and I know I can’t… I can’t have it...”

A strangled cry slipped, thick and pathetic. A slap resounded as Augustine covered her mouth. Sobbing was for children; the weak-willed and relenting. Hyperventilation, however, was another matter: it was something she couldn’t help. Doubling over, knees clasped, the cobblestone went kaleidoscope as her vision spun. Augustine wanted to fall. “Alistair…”

It took him no time to envelope her in his arms. Hand on her lower-back; fingers in her hair: Alistair
was all over, patient and cooing. “Hush,” he suggested. “It’s alright,” he promised. He was very good at this for a boy who’d known no physical affection in his youth’s darkest hours, and Augustine clutched harder at him because of it. She was proud of Alistair for a million reasons, and selfish for more. She wanted to be queen for the status; she wanted to be queen because that was his wife. More than these warring motives, she wanted to be what Alistair thought she was: brave and noble. In the face of losing him, however, these ideals didn’t mean shit. She became weak.

The Warden trembled.

“You will be a brilliant queen,” Alistair reasoned as Augustine tensed against his chest. “Not only because I don’t know a thing about the rules of royalty, but can you imagine me in the family jewels? Pearls with this complexion? Hello! I don’t think so!”

“You understand the etiquette better than you realize,” Augustine answered, parrying the exaggerated self-deprivation. “And you’ll look amazing in pearls.”

Alistair rubbed her arms. “That’s my girl.”

After a few slow moments before the fire, Alistair stepped back. His hands remained resting on her shoulders, never breaking that luxury of his touch which made her feel grand, and safe, and rich.

“So. How about it? Want to be queen? The job comes with a very nice chair, I’m told. Benefits. Retirement plan’s a bit sticky, though.”

Augustine felt across his breast, searching for a heartbeat. His clothing was too thick, but she knew it was there: Alistair was all heart.

“If I haven’t had a child in five years, you find a nice, willing woman who will make a baby for us. Fereldan needs an heir.”

She swallowed. “I won’t ruin this for you.”

Alistair’s expression was grave with acceptance. “Alright. As long as I don’t actually have to do that, we try for Alistair Jr. every night of our lives except when we don’t feel like it, and… that’s about it, really.” He gasped. “Did we just write our vows? I think we did!”

Augustine laughed, curling against him once more. “You have to tell Eamon. Not me.”

“I think he’s in bed just now, but if you insist…”

Catching his wrist as he started to depart, Augustine pulled him back. “In the morning! Do it in the morning!”

“Oh…! Is that what you meant?”

They stumbled to the bed. Alistair fell on top of her, crushing, comforting, and sheltering. His eyes had stars in them: constellations set in an ink sky like a guide to bring the ships home. Augustine hoped she looked half as pretty, though she’d never match his heights of tousled gloriousness. Then she thought, it doesn’t matter. All the day’s misery was gone. Time had been cut-up and sewn together, the last afternoon’s anguish hemmed away and burned by one incredibly sympathetic, omniscient seamstress.

He dipped in close. Her breast rose, heart rapid as birds’ wings. Alistair smelled of rosewater cologne and citrus; Augustine gripped his clothing, unusually vulnerable. Alistair tilted to the left a little, Augustine to the right, the room warmed, and somehow they completely missed each others lips
during this madly-romantic moment. It left them flummoxed.

Alistair pouted. Augustine frowned.

Wordlessly, tenderly, Ferelden’s future king tried again. His skin glowed; the woman beneath him basked. He neared, Augustine shut her eyes, and Alistair overshot his mark completely, smooching her smack-dab between her lips and nose.

“Is it just me, or is this… surprisingly awkward?”

Augustine shook her head. “I have no idea what’s going on. Suddenly we’re children trying to steal a kiss while the nursemaid’s back is turned. It’s awful. Honestly. It’s like…” Her eyes rounded as familiarity found her like a slap upside the head. “It’s like when we were trying for the first time! When we…!” She laughed. “Oh, Maker. You’d think we had no coordination. Or that we were both virgins.”

Realization had Alistair’s voice going squeaky. “It is, isn’t it? I suppose we did break-up. Technically. So now we’re… starting over? I’m not complaining or anything, but I’d rather like to skip the, uh… finishing first in the one-peter dash, if you catch my meaning. Wintersend in Ferventis. A premature Calling, as it were.”

Augustine reached up, fingers sliding over the his neck, tickling his hairline. “There’s a few things I’d like to re-try for the first time,” she reasoned slyly.

“Saucy. Are you referring to putting my candelabra in your attic?”

They both moaned at the thought.

A few more awkward kisses followed. Their noses bumped; teeth clinked. Combusing in belly-giggling over the bad attempts, it was a long, hard day that had them both anxious and jittery. Laying together to gather bearings, Alistair was flat on his back while Augustine draped across his chest, ear hovering above his heart. She could hear it, now: the steadiest beat in Thedas.

“You’re not nervous, are you?” Augustine looked up at him. “Or worried?”

“About what? The Blight? The archdemon? Whether or not we have enough allies to, I don’t know, actually stop an invasion?”

“Marrying me,” Augustine clarified.

“Oh! That! Hm, now that you mention it…” Alistair chuckled, low and lovely. He looked at her, one hand pillowing his head and the other brushing through her hair. “No. Not in the faintest. That I couldn’t be more sure of.”

Eyes closing tiredly, the woman was tuckered. Midnight couldn’t be too far off. Although their short-lived separation was now behind them, there was a memory of its weight still lulling her to exhaustion. It remained a small darkness on her soul; a reminder of what it could be like to lose Alistair and all his boundless good. She wanted to sleep it away.

“I love you,” he promised tenderly, voice soft as a lullaby. “Wife.”

Until Alistair had said that.

“What did you call me?”
“.......wife???”

Suddenly alert, Augustine clambered up, straddled his thighs, clutched his face, and slammed her lips against his.

Her head swam. Her stomach swirled. Her smalls flooded. It was as exhilarating as ice-water dumped on a person sleeping. It was like being pushed out of bed by a strong, heavy boot, or some other surprising bed-related mishap, but there were no longer mishaps in their bed. The kissing between Alistair and Augustine was not fraught with anxiety or awkwardness anymore—it was just fervent, and quick: a twirling dance of tongues and hands.

“Like that, do you?” Alistair managed as Augustine continued working his lips with hers, fingers meanwhile working the laces of his pants.

“Darling,” she rasped, hands guiding him to shuffling down so she could get his pants off, “has anyone ever told you that you talk entirely to much?”

As she pulled his trousers away, he lay out on his back, looking up forlornly. “Almost everyone,” Alistair informed gloomily. “Almost always.”

Climbing back on top with dress hiked-up, her naked thighs tingled against his bare stomach upon which she perched. She dipped in close, clutching his tunic which she hadn’t bothered discarding.

“Don’t stop,” begged Augustine.

"Wife ,” Alistair repeated as the woman kissed and nipped his neck, hips rutting against him. Her womanhood grazed across his uncovered cock which thickened as she teased his length.

"My wife,” he hiccuped when she straightened her posture, towered over him, and began grinding. Head thrown back, fingers knitting with his, Augustine’s hips snapped forward and back, rubbing his cock easily between her slickened lips. She rode across him, every stroke pulling her deeper into desperation; every sensation of his blunt cockhead trailing along her labia causing her to cry louder and buck harder. Underneath her, the man’s face was red, jaw clenched, and mouth huffing. It was a visible torture not entering her; just feeling her dark, moist heat skim along his member somewhere beneath her skirt. Alistair tried to speak when Augustine started bouncing, but stuttered senselessly instead.

“My— whew! —griffon wrangling… wait, no, riding..! My… mgh… ” Alistair’s back arched as Augustine slipped him inside. Spurred on by the generous muscle and soft build of his lovely stomach, she searched for a rhythm. Forward and back bumped his cock up along her clit, prompting the need to take him deeper as she began throbbing everywhere. Up and down nudged that strange, inner dark into something light and static as he filled her completely, stretching her with surprising girth. Augustine settled on bouncing quick, hands playing with her own breasts, while she screamed like the whore she loved to feel like. Groaning, Alistair grabbed her waist and began thrusting, his big hands steadying and wonderful. The shift in control, and new, raw sensation of having him deep as he could go had her orgasm cresting, swelling, and stilling while Augustine held her breath, waiting helplessly for the rush that wasn’t coming. Alistair howled beneath her, sated, but she felt it go away: the humming in her stomach; the blood burning in her legs. Augustine hissed, fumbled for her clit, and stared into Alistair’s watching, hungry eyes as her bliss sparked, seered, stole her breath, and burst. She watched Alistair smile as she came.

Grinning and laughing, her stamina had not depleted, though it had certainly thinned. It wasn’t the best orgasm, admittedly, but where she pillowed her head was the best place in Thedas: Alistair’s breast. She smelled sex and his lingering soap. She heard his breathing, which was a little ragged and better than song.
“What,” Alistair wondered, voice pitchy with satisfied delirium, “is going to happen when I have to introduce you to people? You know—as queen of Fereldan and my wife? Are you going to jump me then and there? In front of people? Because… no. Just… no.”

“Oh, they’ll get a show, I’m sure,” Augustine admitted.

“And… what happens when I introduce you as queen of Fereldan, my wife, and mother to my own, little spawn?”

Eyes wide, jaw dropped, Augustine bolted up. Her expression said it all.

“I’m only one man, woman!” Alistair hoarsely lamented. "Let me rest! For all that is good in the world, let me rest!”

And she did. For about a minute.
"kiss (or not a kiss) of life"

There was only one other person who bothered to chance the barn’s badly-boarded staircase to access his hay-cluttered, spider-infested sanctuary. Blackwall braced himself, ears focused on the scraping footsteps. One shite thing about second-story living? The fall was harder when squeezing through the window for a quick exit.

Not that he would run. He just wanted to. He’d take his lumps, sugared as they were going to be. Blackwall would’ve disappeared (again) to put a finer point on how cowardly he truly was, but the Inquisitor deserved more. Today of all days, she’d earned a sodding break.

From the top of the stairs she looked at him. Late afternoon painted her up and down with licks of hazy yellow. Her eyes shone; her back straightened. Hanging from her broad shoulders was a white, Fereldan slip-dress that ran in three yards of bleached cotton to bare ankles. A Dalish waist scarf; washed face: she’d been meeting nobles, most like, hence the primp and polish.

It wasn’t surprising. This last blow against Corypheus had been kindling on his blight-ridden pyre while promising war’s end. Support would be geyser-esque. Coin would be coming their way, too. Offers of patronage; of a prolonged, prosperous future where influential families and feudal lords looked to them for guidance, law, and stability. The sun was far from setting for Skyhold, even in this late afternoon. Its Herald had a full life before her. She’d be taken care of.

Blackwall’s stomach twisted.

As she watched him, unusually tight-lipped, he stared back. Vinya brisked through the loft like wind, causing Blackwall to sit deeper in his chair.

“You saved my life today,” she teased. “Or tried to, at least. How you did it would’ve knocked me on my ass if I wasn’t there already.”

‘I save your life everyday, Vin,’ hovered in Blackwall’s throat. ‘Wouldn’t happen so often if you bothered to watch your rudding blind spots. Not that I mind watching them for you.’

As a follow-up, he could have grinned slyly, a lilt of his lips implying the obvious: watching her blind spots meant getting an eyeful of backside.

His dark, wry brow would’ve arched and bent, bringing down with it her poise as she purred like always; swooning and straightening simultaneously—the first to crumble at the suggestion of flirtation, but the first to regain her footing. Somehow leading as she followed his practiced machinations, coy banter would lead to the chase becoming a pursuit, a hunt, and, inevitably, the gentle kill as he crushed her against a straw and dusty mattress.

He would’ve and he could’ve, but his nerve dried up. Blackwall wasn’t like that, now: evil grins and velvet teasing. Because he was Rainier now, or again—or still. And he knew perfectly well how Rainier had played the elven girls once upon a time, even if Vinya would never know. Even if Vinya never found out, he’d still know how he sought them for an extra squeeze, and Maker take him if he ever allowed that self-interested behavior again.

Blackwall sighed.

“Suppose you came looking for a hero,” he said gruffly. He shook his head, voice laced with rejection. “I only did what any other would’ve, Inquisitor—you don’t owe me.”
“Except no one else did,” she insisted, standing before him. “Varric, Dorian; Sera. Even Solas, and the place practically had him at half-mast. But you—you came to the rescue, braving, I don’t know, demons, or possession, or… something else equally terrifying. You came to my rescue. Tried to, anyways.” Vinya kneeled before him in a rustle of cotton. Her calloused hands lay upturned in her lap, revealing what Rivaini seers had claimed to be a crippled lovelife (to his not-surprise). “You saved me,” Vinya repeated. “No one else. No one bothered to move an inch.”

Blackwall continued to brush off her sung praises. “Was just trying to get you breathing again. It was resuscitation, not a… kiss of life. It wasn’t magic.” He had the rising feeling of heat in his chest and upper arms—adrenaline simming, he supposed, as the impulse to go in swinging started to surface. Instead, he held back, a furious stare tightening his features. “Magic.” He tutted disappointedly. “What were you thinking? Trusting the word of that witch… Wading in without care of the consequences; forgetting those in the Inquisition that need you.”

But as his frustrations rang through the loft—bouncing off wooden beams and returning acridly to his own ear—Blackwall shut his fat mouth.

It wasn’t his place to question her decisions; to bring light to her seldom (but ultimately present) missteps. Doing so might’ve had her reconsidering her ruling as it pertained to him. Part of him wanted that: the shackles and slicked cell walls; the hangman’s noose and an end. Part of him wanted the Inquisitor to look at her choice for what it was, and put Blackwall back where he belonged. In these weeks following his Inquisition-sponsored jailbreak, the organization was facing great losses in goodwill (as well as finances) thanks to Vinya’s disinterest in public opinion regarding the reviled Thom Rainier, and that was his fault. All of it: it was his fault. It was because of him that remuneration was being sought by recruits and nobles inspired by the actual Warden Blackwall. It was his fault Orlais was less indebted to them, because Maker knew how many favors they’d cashed in for his custody.

Part of him wanted what he deserved. But that part of him—the outspoken soldier; the distant lover—lost his nerve. His voice died in his throat. It wasn’t his place to argue against her short-sighted choices, no matter how his expression sharpened.

“Do you mean you?” Vinya pressed, arms crossing at her chest as she continued to kneel. “Forgetting those who need me—are you talking about you?”

“You know I’m not,” Blackwall answered truthfully. He wouldn’t pretend he was worth her surviving the Well. “You have a duty to the people here; to the world. And you put that at risk, to, what, make a point? To say something about, I don’t know, shem stealing your culture?”

“I wasn’t—” Vinya’s jaw dropped open. She noisily scrambled to her feet just so she could stomp one of them. “I thought you, of all people, would appreciate that kind of point! You’re always so good about what we’ve faced… what we’ve lost…”

“Any other day, Vin, I would have.” Blackwall sat forward, elbows on his knees. “But if something had gone wrong—if you’d been killed—where would the rest of us be?”

“And if I hadn’t died, which just happens to be the case, where would we be? Where would my people be if Morrigan had drank from the pool?” Vinya balled a fist and slapped it distractedly against an open palm. She paced, working herself up. “I hear things, and it’s… crazy. I understand our old language so clearly, which I never did. But it was worth it, and I—”

Quieting, she turned on a heel. “Let’s get one thing straight: I came here to get mad about you.”
Blackwall chuckled despite himself. “Did you now?”

Dragging another chair over, Vinya plopped down in front of him. “Yes. You can’t go *slobbering* all over me in front of the Inquisition if you’re going to pretend we’re not together anymore.”

Coughing, the man readjusted himself in his seat. “*Slobbering*?”

“Sure!” Vinya perked right up. “I was laying on the ground after the Well exploded, you came over, and you shoved your tongue down my throat.” She grinned toothily. “*Slobberingly*.”

“Y —” Blackwall took a deep breath. “Maker’s balls. You weren’t *breathing*.”

The Inquisitor embodied the self-satisfaction of a lazy cat in sunshine. Her eyes alighted; her smirk was ridiculous. “Oh, I was breathing. The Well knocked me on my ass, but I was definitely still breathing. Someone just got a little ahead of themselves.”

Blackwall was suddenly furious.

“You can’t imagine how it felt! Seeing you there, knowing it was a bad idea from the start and fearing the worst. The world be damned, Vin, I thought I’d lost you.”

“Yeah? Well, good for you.” Vinya wasn’t one to let her hot-headedness be outdone. “How do you think it felt when I saw you in Val Royeaux? These guards, and the people… They kept saying things like ‘can’t wait to see him swing’; ‘wonder if his eye’ll bulge’—shit like that. I couldn’t *breath*. I almost passed out! Dorian actually had to catch me because I fell. I’d never felt so helpless; I…”

She hunched forward, holding her face. Blackwall closed his eyes.

“You know I wanted to save you from that. From seeing what I was—”

“Fuck that,” she spat through her fingers. “And fuck you. All you’d have saved me from was seeing a good man die to make a point. Making points is *stupid*. Right?”

That tidbit of insight sounded oddly familiar. The way she’d specifically put it sounded familiar in another way. “Been talking to Sera, have you?”

Vinya’s hands fell from her face. Staunch, reddened eyes glared. “Well, Creators know I haven’t been talking to you. You won’t let me. Except now, of course. And you probably only feel sorry for me today, which means tomorrow we’ll be back to the same-old nugcrap. You grunting once for yes, twice for no, and chastising yourself like a Chantry nun in here when you’re alone.” She smiled hesitantly. “Bull suggested that one, in case you were wondering.”

“I was, actually,” Blackwall confirmed. His heart fell from its cobwebbed cradle and hit the pit of his stomach. “Vin…”

“I was patient.” Vinya mustered as much pragmatism as possible while speaking atypically softly. “But it’s all in the open now. I’m not going to back-down. Or be scared away. When it comes to nobles running their mouths at my decisions, or you when you’re being hard-headed. So maybe next time you don’t agree with what I’m doing, and I’m asking you specifically for your opinion, you say something. Like when I’m about to soak my ass in a magical pool we’ve done no previous research on? *You say something.*”

Blackwall’s mouth opened. Thanks to a second-thought, it snapped shut. Sadly, a third consideration
smacked him, and he winced. “You didn’t drink that water to make a point about… me, perhaps, did you?”

Vinya blinked. “No! How stupid do you think I am?!” She shook her head. “Opening myself up to weird, old-as-balls magic just because you’re being a huge, stubborn ass? Really? You think I’d do that?!”

They’d come to a cross-roads. Having ambled down a long, previously untrodden path, they’d both said what they’d avoided. Due mostly to Blackwall’s mentioned stubbornness, they had yet to discuss what happened when he’d been dragged to the Val Royeaux jail. He couldn’t imagine what she’d felt, just as she couldn’t fathom how her assumed-death had affected him.

In the instant she lay lifeless-like on the dried tiles of Mythal’s Well, Blackwall had seen how utterly empty his days could be. There’d be nothing in the Inquisition for him; nothing beyond it, either. Dedicating himself to a worthy cause meant little if that cause didn’t want him around. Dedicating himself to her was what he had to settle for—and he’d settle duly on his knees.

So a crossroads it was: one where a path of self-hate intersected with the truth. Blackwall could despise his past, but he couldn’t hate her. And, as she so cared for him, he might have to forgive himself.

Which meant he was also going to have to insult her.

“I think I’ve seen you do some very questionable things, Inquisitor,” the false Grey Warden admitted, mustache shivering with a smile. “Slide down cliff-sides on cheese wheels; sneak up on a sleeping dragon to leave lamb-shanks under the sodding pretense of making friends. Challenge Bull to a drinking contest, a head-butting contest, and a ramparts-wall walking contest — in that order. I’ve seen you move mountain and earth to rescue a condemned man, and then you kissed him in front of your entire court.” Blackwall cleared his throat after chortling, shaking his head with honest disbelief. “I’ve seen you do any number of strange things, my lady. Who knows what you’ll do next.”

Like sun, cloud, and shadow, different emotions coloured her features. She decided on gratefulness in the end. Moving from the chair, Vinya perched on his lap. She teased him with soft hair-tugging and softer-still kisses. Blackwall choked on the nigh-forgotten scents of flowery lavender—it had been weeks since he’d let her so close—and he applied thinning restraint from tossing her on a table and going to town. He knew he needn’t keep in-check, but this moment… it was one to cherish.

“Ar lath ma,” Vinya whispered, holding his face in both palms. Her forehead rested on his, her gaze capturing his in the kindest, strongest grip.

Blackwall’s chest swelled. “And I you, my lady.”

“Do you like my dress?”

He grinned triumphantly. “Ah. So you did have me in mind today.”

“Yep.”

Mouth slack, Vinya’s head lolled when Blackwall’s lips trailed light across her throat. He could feel how she quickly swallowed; the hard breathing as his tongue darted over her windpipe. He licked so faint that the only thing she likely felt was a wayward spark in her belly, lighting from an unknown source.
“Knew there had to be a reason you were still in this.” Cupping her bottom, Blackwall’s brow quirked. “No matter the noble, you don’t gussy-up too willingly. Think it took, what, three guards to hold you down while Josephine squeezed you into that frock for Celene’s ball?”

“Mm-hmm.” Forehead pillowed on his cheek, Vinya arched her hips, pushing back farther into his hands, provoking squeezing as Blackwall enjoyed the curve and muscle of a handful of ass. “Three burly men,” she enlightened.

Vinya nuzzled his neck. Hot breath tickled like pinpricks through his beard. It was familiar; he knew too well what that warmth was like after a few tankards, followed by stumbling from the tavern to the loft, and to his bed where Vinya struggled to swallow around around his thickened, red, throbbing—

“Burly?”

“Oh yeah.” Vinya’s lips were close. She licked them, and rubbed her firm, perfect ass against his sweating palms. “Quite the fuss.” Pupils dilating, she dared him with a grin. “You, uh… want to hold me down and get me out of this dress?”

“Fuck.”

Blackwall hefted her up by the thighs while clamoring to his feet. Carrying her along as she wrapped around him, preoccupied with tonguing through her lips (and distracted by her hands in his hair), the man miscalculated, slamming them against a supporting beam rather than reaching the workbench. Violently pinning Vinya between the wood and himself, he hesitated only long enough for her to squeal eagerly, legs tightening to a vice around his waist. He hadn’t hurt her. Not in a way that mattered. Her lids were heavy; half-weighted with lust. She fucking loved it.

“Here,” she gasped, hand reaching up and grabbing onto the beam. “Just fuck me here.”

“Against this? Are you joking?” Blackwall wasn’t some faint slip of a man, but he wasn’t the spryest anymore, either. Added to that, the Inquisitor was a mountain of muscle. They’d be better off having her lift him up, support him against the wood, and screw him ’til sunrise. “My knees won’t take it,” Blackwall added.

“You never do anything romantic anymore,” Vinya lamented desolately. “Our love is dead.”

“Brat.” Blackwall drove her against the wall again. Not enough to harm her, but enough to get her eyes widening. “You want romance?” he grumbled rhetorically, nose-tip brushing hers.

“I want it from behind,” Vinya replied huskily.

Grunting, he pinned her harder. The thought of her round ass displayed and waiting had him staring at her lips like the desperate lecher he was.

“What else?”

She leaned in. “I want you to take me to your bed and get this dress off. I want you to bend me over, and… use your fingers until I’m ready. I want to hear how wet I am. I want… three fingers, and you to use a toy on me. I—ngh—I’ll suck you off. Fenedhis.”

Blackwall’s cock was well-and-truly pained by his tightening trousers at this point. Vinya’s state seemed just as bad: her legs squeezed around him while she bucked best she could, slamming her clothed core against him in little, wild ruts.
“That,” he smirked, “is quite the plan.”

“I’ve had nothing to do but plan things for the last couple weeks. Tried a couple practice-runs in my room, actually.” One more word was all she could manage; one raw, frantic request. “Please, Blackwall... just touch me.”

The bed wasn’t far. He tore her away from the support-beam, stumbled to the cot, and let her catch herself as she settled on the blankets. She stood immediately, grabbing for his shirt-hem.

“That wasn’t part of the plan.”

“Plan-shman,” she dismissed. “I want to see your tits.”

Blackwall laughed, pulling his worn undershirt off for her and was surprised at how she pounced. She kissed him, lips determined, while a hand raked through the acres of thick, curling black hair on his chest and stomach. She purred—actually *purred*—against his tongue as fingers wandered downward, stopping shy at his belt.

“Missed this,” she lamented without sadness. “Missed all of this. Missed you.”

“I’ve got a lot to make up for,” he admitted, holding the back of her head tenderly. “Damn fool that I am.” It was a miracle he noticed anything besides her hand so close to his crotch.

“You’re a fool for not having your pants off yet, but that’s about it.” Her lips split with a wicked smile. Vinya’s voice deepened. “Plan-shman, right?” And, dropping to her knees, she started for his belt buckle.

The man still had one solitary ounce of thought left. Taking a step back, Blackwall wormed his way in, taking over. “Take the dress off.” Buckle defeated, he went for the drawstring of his trousers. “I’d hate to ruin it.”

Standing up, the long, white dress came over her head, and the Inquisitor groused from within. “Stains on the knees would make it so much better, though.”

Belly-laughing, the man stepped out of his clothes and sat on the bed edge. He wanted a good seat for what was to come next, though he allowed himself a few tugs on his cock.

The three feet of white cotton fell to the floor. Vinya—a pile of long, muscled legs, chiseled forearms, perfectly tiny tits, and a fierce, honest face that was unforgettable—stood there beaming like fire in the dark.

“Come here.”

The woman tried to straddle his legs, but he stopped her, holding her at the hips and guiding her to turn. “Face the other way,” Blackwall said. When a flash of hesitance tightened her expression, he pleaded, “trust me,” and unquestioningly she did.

Vinya swerved about-face. It meant Blackwall was met with a sight he’d die seeing if he was the luckiest man in Thedas.

“Best rump in Thedas,” he said, reaching for her thighs. “Bend over a bit.”

As soon as she had, he adjusted her closer still, lower, until she was before him, cunt heady with salty, specific musk. He cleared his throat, mouth watering.
“Hold yourself open. Hands here. Like… fuck yes, Vin, like that.”

Blackwall went straight for her exposed, beckoning channel. Licking through her petal-like lips in short, quick flicks, Vinya’s legs jolted. He held her steady; tongued slow through her folds towards her ass, smoothing along her taint, then back and forward, wriggling his tongue with all the muscle he could, causing a broken holler. Shaking with the accumulated lust of weeks, Blackwall had her soaking by the time he switched from lapping through her folds to tongue-fucking her hard.

She was glorious; wailing. Blackwall put the need of his straining member on the back-burner, difficult as it was with her radiating heat upon his face. Every time he buried into her, nose pressing between her cheeks, tongue swirling steadily inside her, his balls found new ways to ache. When his thumbs together entered her, sinking and spreading her cunt, Blackwall felt beading precum drip along his shaft, slave to gravity as much as he was servant to the Inquisitor’s satisfaction. His thumbs slipped in and out; collecting her slick, spreading it, and then sinking in again, feeling her soften, relax and ready.

Blackwall’s probing—his sucking and tugging on her inner lips; the sloshing he earned while shaking his head left to right, soothing every inch of labia with his lips and beard—had Vinya quivering so terribly, however, that he had to hold her tighter. It became like riding an unbroken horse, which, lovely metaphor though it was, didn’t seem to be bringing Vinya any closer to orgasm.

“Anywhere near there?” he asked, surfacing. He could feel how messy his beard was as the cold air hit his face.

“Keeps coming and going,” Vinya rasped. “I need… ffff. I need… Just fuck me, already.”

Straightening up, she turned, attempting to straddle his lap again. Blackwall stopped her by the waist, maneuvered her to laying out on the cot, and propped himself up beside her, his eyes distracted by the sweat on her belly and her heaving tits.

“I want…”

“I know what you want,” Blackwall said more sympathetic than sultry. “But we rush things, you’ll end up hurt.”

“Oh, for—! Oh, frig.”

Blackwall’s middle finger had started slowly swirling her clit, just barely pressing upon the nub in deft, little movements. Vinya melted, head falling back and legs parting farther, a low, loud moan echoing from deep in her stomach. Despite being so unyielding, once in bed the Inquisitor usually sounded somewhere between a woman who’d never been touched and a rutting barnyard animal. As Blackwall carefully applied more pressure, playing with her in large, thorough circles, Vinya cried, kicked, and fussed in such a way the man might’ve thought it a show if he didn’t know her so well. His fingers were coated in her wet, her face was red from straining, and her expression was stark confusion at being so overwhelmed. He made her feel so good she couldn’t believe it. Blackwall could hardly believe it himself. Her variegated eyes were helpless, and pleading; waiting for more; waiting for all of it. He wanted to mount her, but Blackwall knew two, good thrusts would have him spilling, and he wanted to get her off just once.

“Blackwall, I—it’s too much, I can’t—”

She caught his wrist, stopping him, her lips letting loose a long sigh.

“That sensitive?” he wondered lightly.

“Get rid of my finest work? You’re daft.” Blackwall tried not to smirk and failed. “Thought about setting up shop, actually. ‘Used dildos for sale—three royals a piece.”

“Terrible,” Vinya remarked as the man made his way over to a knee-high chest, fishing around its contents. “Should be,” she continued, “‘three bits for a bit for your bits.’ Or something like that. You know, you keep bent over like that, and maybe I’ll just finish myself off.”

Blackwall chuckled. “Not a chance.” He grabbed a longish, thick shaft of polished balsa, the softest wood available, and returned to her side. “Ready?”

Their first time together had been an almost-disaster. By some miracle, the tall, gorgeous, confident Inquisitor turned out to be a virgin—a fact he learned three seconds before nearly pummelling into her like a graceless ox. Concerned with hurting her, over the months he’d crafted a variety of toys to stretch and ready her for their lovemaking. She’d made a joke about him wood-working so she could work his wood, and it had been bad, stupid, tasteless, and Maker her loved her.

“Spread,” Blackwall said, laying out beside her.

Pressing the head against her opening, he watched her calm and prepare, one hand curling on her belly.

“Now,” she said.

Sliding it in, the toy met no resistance. The Inquisitor was lubricated by her own want, relaxed, and—by the sounds she made—very friggin’ ready to get-off. Begging around hiccups and sighs for him to “go faster, Blackwall—fuck me faster, please;” her hand started on her clit and the man could feel her orgasm building just by watching her. He pumped her quick, noting Vinya’s hips rising to get it hitting against that perfect spot while she gave the ceiling a death-glare and sweat started on her forehead again. In and out his elbow worked her, careful not to thrust too deeply, and when Vinya’s hand started going erratic, he knew she was about to meet that precipice. One good thing about fucking her like this? His prick might not feel the satisfaction of her squeezing and sucking around him, but he could watch her face clearest this way, and it was wonderful. Her eyes rounded; she stopped making noise for just a second. While her flushed body stilled, lost to its deep, shaking internal bliss, her mouth made up for the stillness while shattering with screaming. Teeth clenched, she then cried out some more, letting anyone near know exactly what was going on. What was going on with whom.

Blackwall carefully extracted the toy from her, placing it on the stool-cum-nightstand to be washed. His lady glowed, smiling blearily.

“That was so worth the wait,” Vinya hummed, cupping his cheek as he looked down on her. That hand, seconds ago, had been whirling herself to a sodden end, and it absolutely smelled like it.

Blackwall kissed her fingertips.

“Really?”

“N—yeah.” It seemed she was done teasing him. Sitting up, she pushed him down by his shoulders, but for a third time Blackwall stopped Vinya from straddling him.

“I want to.”
“You will hurt yourself.”

“You’re going to get a lot worse if you keep saying that,” Vinya pouted, pinning his wrists and swinging a leg over his stomach. “You were perfectly fine going inside the night before you disappeared. So are we only ever going to honestly fuck when you’re about to leave?”

Blackwall wasn’t sure of his expression, but Vinya’s gave him a clue.

“I’m sorry.” Painted grey by heartbreak, she leaned down, holding his face. Her lips gifted him with a kiss upon his brow as her gaze flitted from one of his eyes to the other. “I’m so sorry. Fuck, I didn’t mean that. But I want this. Really. I want to try. If it’s too much, I’ll stop. I promise.”

“Alright,” Blackwall said. He gripped her waist with cautious love. “As you wish.”

Grabbing his prick and aligning herself, Vinya slowly sunk down, swallowing him in deep, wet heat. Hissing, Blackwall’s head hit it the pillow and he clenched his eyes, focusing on not nutting then and there. She was so tight; gliding up and down over his cock with slickened ease, the motions jolted his balls just enough that his desperation had it feeling as though she was pounding on them; slapping them with her ass. His hand went to her clit as he tried to distract himself, but she batted it away. Gripping the thin sheet beneath them, Blackwall felt that defeating roar within as she bounced, her small tits jerking, her pussy squeezing relentlessly, bringing all that static sensation into an electric mess in his belly. Blackwall shouted, cumming while cursing, Vinya grinning above like an idiot. He managed to roll his eyes at her expression even as his mouth slackened around satisfied groaning.

It had happened too quick, but he’d known that’d be the case. Vinya covered them up with the thin, ratty blanket, after which she played little spoon, Blackwall’s arm wrapping around her stomach, her ass pressing on his softened member. They fell into soft, drowsy chatter, which was unusual for them. Given their weeks apart, however, it was not surprising.

“Should I… mention the bet we made before I came in here? Me, Bull, and Varric?”

“Maker, don’t,” Blackwall groaned with knowing dread. He held her tighter, somehow invigorated and exhausted simultaneously by the furnace of her skin. “Was it something about… I think you said ‘chastising’ myself? Like a Chantry sister?”

“Actually we put money down on whether or not we’d end up in bed. Varric said yes, I said no, and Bull abstained out of ‘respect for romance’, as he put it.” She peeked over her shoulder. “Apparently I’m not a romantic. Or, at least—” She rolled on her back so she could gauge his expression. “I figured you’d go on like you were. Pouting and…”

Blackwall frowned. “‘And?’”

“And trying to protect me. From you.” She shrugged. “Which is kind of what you did.”

When Blackwall tried to look away, she softly called him back by holding his cheek.

“I know you’ll never stop trying to protect me.” Vinya’s brow arched so sadly. “I’ve finally decided it’s cute. But will you stop acting like you’re the enemy? Please? I know you, now. I still love you. I don’t want you going away.”

He nearly missed the despairing hitch in her voice she obviously wanted him not to notice. Nearly.

“We’ll… figure out who Thom Rainier is now. Together,” Blackwall agreed.
Vinya smiled shyly. “I hope he’s a guy who doesn’t mind me saying his arm there is not comfortable.” She made a motion with her chin. “Roll over.”

Chuckling, Blackwall turned on his side as the Inquisitor wrapped around him from behind, sighing happily.

“Brat.”

“You bet.”
"I've missed you" kiss

The Hero of Fereldan was due any moment.

The Hero of Fereldan had been due the better part of a day, and Fenris was distracted.

“That’s the third game you’ve thrown, Elf,” Varric teased, raking in the stacks of coin. “Something on your mind?”

“Heart’s not in it, I suppose,” Fenris admitted. With a wrist-flick, he tossed his cards mid-table.

Isabela laughed light and free. Said freedom had been bought by the various drinks purchased by numerous men, all whom had earned the privilege of looking but not touching. “Go take someone else’s, then. You know, with that fisting trick?” She sighed. “Take their purse while you’re at it. I’m as broke as the bedsprings at the Blooming Rose.”

She added her hand to the pile.

Crass and harassing, loud and coarse, the Hanged Man’s crowd was its usual self. Chairs scraped; patrons screamed for another cup. With the clamour adding to his strangely acute anxiety, Fenris was feeling exposed, but he wasn’t yet going to leave. This would be the second time he had the luck of seeing Fereldan’s Hero. Vanquisher of the Fifth Blight; quite the warrior from what he remembered: Fenris looked forward to saying hello.

Not to mention he had a bone to pick with her. She hadn’t replied to his letter.

Perhaps that was it: the source of his discomfort. Other than Varric, no one else was aware of their months-long correspondence which had led to Fenris becoming quite the wordsmith as his writing and reading improved. He hadn’t kept it secret—it just never came up in conversation. He felt oddly guilty nonetheless, but there’d been no reason to boast of his language lessons with the dwarf, nor of his growing association with the Hero. He owed no explanation, and he was owed no commendation.

Still—his stomach was uneasy.

There were other possibilities, of course, to his restlessness-cum-dread. The Hero was Merrill’s kin, and Anders’ old companion. Fenris thought he’d found a friend hidden in the lengthy letters written between himself and the Hero, but, should push came to shove, without doubt she would choose family or past loyalties over him.

Not that she’d need choose sides. Not that he’d ask her to.

She did tend to buck expectations, though.

After his timid apology, Fenris figured on nothing in return. He’d hoped to alleviate some personal guilt, naturally, but no more than that. He’d had Merrill make a little addition to the memo she was sending Mahariel, and it read formal and unfeeling.

*I apologize for my excess of wine and being a bad host.*

Obviously it was better than saying sorry for ‘getting blind-drunk and waking half-naked beside you’ in bed, but that wasn’t something he wished to cop to. Not where Merrill could see.
The Hero replied with a plethora of comments, questions, and concerns.

*It’s no problem. I had a fun night. I enjoyed our chess games. The wine was good. Are you Dalish? Your tattoos are beautiful! Where is your clan from? Have you been in Kirkwall long? How did you get such a large house? Are you going to clean it? Were you a warrior of your clan? Your skill is amazing! How old are you?*

And so on, and so forth.

After Varric deciphered the text, Fenris answered these questions over the course of months, offering queries of his own in turn.

*Did you learn your abilities with a blade from a parent? Do you remain long in an area while hunting darkspawn? When and how did you lose your hearing? Do you conscript all of your gear? Your weaponry is quite impressive. How far has your hunting taken you? What countries have you seen?*

He had been so afraid his list-like inquest came off as nattering, but, according to her easy answering, it did not. She went beyond Fenris’ expectations. She sent him a book of collected travelling anecdotes, which was nice (and unintelligible, for it was Orlesian). She asked if he liked poetry, but admitted she wouldn’t know a poem if someone slapped her with it.

As Fenris sat waiting, he hoped she would tell him what she’d been up to these last months. He wondered if she’d give him a break-down of breakfasts she’d enjoyed, as she had in the past. It didn’t seem possible that she would suggest avoidable inns along the roads, but maybe she would again.

Above all, however, Fenris suspected her time would be monopolized by more important parties such as Merrill and Anders. And, yes, now he was sure of his anxiety-source: he thought he’d made a friend, but that was, of course, impossible.

Looking at the new cards dealt to him, Fenris frowned. Not a face-card in the bunch.

He frowned harder.

“Oh! Here she is!”

Hawke, Anders, and Merrill came in from the cold. They were accompanied by a typically only-so-tall and thin-limbed elf, her reddish hair tied back for travelling, her eyes large and observing. Fenris realized he’d forgotten what she looked like for the most part. Her loud letters had given the impression of someone five times her height and as big as the room.

“How’s the woman of the hour!” Isabela greeted, nodding and motioning a salutation. “Anders, sign that for me. And see if she’ll lend me a sovereign.”

“Let her sit down before you start asking for money, Rivaini…”

Chairs from other tables were pulled over. The newcomers plopped down and got to talking. Sometimes Merrill or Anders interpreted for Isabela or Hawke’s clarification, but generally it was a three-sided conversation which everyone else watched silently. Sign-language was a mystery for most: a ballet of hands and gestures that was as rare in their area as Antivan.

When Anders went to rustle-up drinks for their guest, the previous, talkative commotion settled. Fenris noted that he’d been staring at the Hero who now looked his way just as candidly. Her blue-green gaze flashed with recognition. Fenris bristled, but reconciled that her written word belonged to
the unfamiliar face, and he understood that he knew her, too. He nodded, then smiled small.

In a flurry of momentum, the Hero dug into her rucksack.

“What’s she looking for?” Anders wondered upon returning, tankards in hand for those who didn’t have one.

“I don’t know.” Merrill leaned closer to her clan-mate. “She didn’t say. Oh, I hope it’s presents! It’s probably not presents. What kind of presents would you find hunting darkspawn? Nothing pleasant, I think.”

The Hero resurfaced with her target: a pile of folded papers. She handed them to Fenris who took them.

*Hi* was written on the first sheet.

The second read, *I’m sorry I didn’t reply to your last letter. I knew I was coming here. I thought I’d wait until I saw you!*

The third scribbled-upon parchment said, in letters that were pressed deep, *I found a book on card-games. I want to give it to you. Then we can play together. Orlais has some funny ones you may not have heard of. But if you have, let me know.*

Fenris nodded, showing her which paper he held. Mahariel fished around in her bag for the book, then came around to hand it to him.

“What’s… going on?” Anders wondered, voice confusion-pitched.

Getting to his feet while ignoring the mage, Fenris decided to try the one sign he was sure of: the sign for thank-you. Carefully placing the book on the table, he flattened his hand, put his fingers on his chin, and moved his hand in a downward, outward arch, a soft, honest smile on his lips. The Hero’s mouth dropped open before splitting into a large grin, her flashing teeth advertising delight.

“Hey! Look at that! That’s pretty good, Elf,” Varric complimented, his chair creaking as he sat back.

Isabela peered at what Mahariel had written.“Can Fenris… read?”

“He can, actually,” Varric enlightened, talking on in the background. “And write, too! About seven months back he came to me…”

But Fenris didn’t care much what the dwarf was saying. Or, rather, he cared more about Mahariel’s expression. That he made anyone so visibly pleased seemed a feat to take stock in, but with a heavy heart Fenris remembered he hadn’t the means of saying more. He knew only the one sign, and had no quill to write with. Their conversation was over.

Fenris’s shoulders fell. Then he spotted one last, little letter in her hand. He looked at her, brow slanted curiously, and pointed.

He didn’t get to read it. Instead, the Hero pulled him by the collar and pressed her mouth to his. Eyes widening, he watched hers clench shut half-an-inch away.

“What the…?”

It was a lot. It was a lot of physical touch he hadn’t instigated, and, ergo, prepared for. It was, by its very nature, violent—she’d wrenched and pulled and his feet were forced to follow—so he felt the
spike of vertigo storm through his spine, but the instinct to fight back muted. It got lost behind the thought *I don’t hate this. I’ve not been hurt. She wouldn’t hurt me. Her lips are soft.*

*I’d like to kiss her back.*

Anders, Merrill; Isabela: they all traded squeaking confusion as Fenris held the Hero’s hips. Tilting his head, changing the angle, feeling the electric brush of her lips as their mouths moved, Fenris knew why he’d been so nervous.

*I’d rather not lose her. I know her. She knows me. I trust her.*

*She is warm.*

Fenris broke the modest kiss. The last note was still clutched in Mahariel’s hand, and now wedged between their chests.

Pinching a corner, he waited for the Hero to allow him to have it.

It read *I’ve missed you.*

“Did you know he was shagging your cousin, Kitten?”

“No! Not a clue! Oh, it’s wonderful, though, isn’t it? He’s an elf! Not that it *really* matters, of course, but Marethari will be so pleased! After Tamlen… Oh, this is wonderful!”

“Wonderful—*right*. Wait until Nola finds out she’s with a bigot who thinks magic is evil.”

Rather than attempt to assuage three separate interrogations to which he had no answers, Fenris picked up his gift, nodded meaningfully to the Warden, then motioned towards the door. She smiled, and Fenris left.

He made for his mansion where he hoped to sort this mess out.

During the months of correspondence, they’d gotten to know each other. Fenris had detailed his distrust of magic (which Anders was so concerned about, it seemed). The Hero had answered by explaining she came to his house That Night because of arguments with Merrill over the Eluvian. They agreed on many things, magic included. And Fenris had found it easier to speak of himself in writing. The anxiety of visiting his past verbally was lessened when taking the time to write things down. It was a relief. Speaking to the Hero—their relationship, whatever it was—was a relieving; *comforting.*

Fenris paced, hoping she’d come. He leafed through the gift-book curiously. He owed Varric more than the dwarf would understand.

Finally there was a knock.

Seeing her there at the door—not surrounded by the others and there for him—made him smile. He wondered if the feeling of safety came from being in his secured house, or if it radiated from her: warrior, friend, and confidant. Someone who had sent him letters regarding the most mundane things simply to have his opinion; to know he was out there, somewhere. Because his existence was important to her. Not as a beast of burden, but as the man he was.

Nola was holding the piece of paper against her chest. As though she wished to repeat the sentiment. Fenris read the words, letter by letter.
I've missed you.

He took her by the hand and guided her inside.
Kirkwall was looking better everyday. Restored street cobblestone, new housing stretching from Lowtown to Hightown; a massive clean-up effort of the sewers well in its prime: six years on the coat-tails of a venge-bent apostate’s crimes, there was finally enough political stability in the city to get things moving towards recovery.

Kirkwall looked great. Gleaming, even. Sebastian, on the other hand, did anything but glow.

He marched hard on his heels, his thirty-six years threatening to mature the lines at his eyes immediately to wrinkles. Storming up the Viscount’s Keep carpeted steps ahead of delegates and escorts, he made for the main office. Guards scooted from his path while seas of petitioners parted waves-like.

Alongside the creak of dry hinges, the aimed-for door flew open.

“What are you—oh! Your Highness! We weren’t… expecting you.”

Behind a disheveled desk inspired by the way its owner approached his books (verbose, without a plan, and character-cluttered), Varric sat looking scrupulously at his guest while Seneschal Bran’s bow brimmed with thin, mustered respect.

Kirkwall’s Viscount waved rejectfully.

“No bowing, Bran. This isn’t actually the prince of Starkhaven... despite what it looks like. This is Choir-boy! Apparently come to sing us a very angry and off-tune song about, what, redemption? Love? Maybe not sleeping for the last forty-eight hours? Because I gotta say, friend, you are looking pretty…” Clearing his throat, Varric glanced at the Seneschal over the tops of his rounded reading-glasses. “Close the door behind you. And don’t let anyone in. Unless you hear Bianca getting excited.”

The second they were alone, Sebastian leaned over the desk.

“Where is Hawke?”

Taking off his glasses, Varric rubbed his eyes.

“Like I told you before: when I last heard from her—”

“But you have heard from her—that is my point!” Sebastian gripped the wood with white fingers. “Where have you heard from her? Where are her letters coming from? The Free Marches? Fereldan? Orlais?!?”

“If she wanted me to tell you, I would.” Varric—spinner of stories, hero of hyperbole—answered with such straight honesty he couldn’t be spinning a yarn. His stare was unwavering, whereas it usually took an evasive stroll when the dwarf was being less sincere. It was the implacable truth.

Sebastian capitulated immediately.

Hunching forward in the rickety wicker guest-seat, the prince closed his eyes. He didn’t wish to become enemies with his best trading partner over personal issues. He didn’t want to anger Varric, whom he considered a close friend, shrewd mind, and compassionate leader of his people. He simply wanted answers.
Hence the Kirkwall ‘vacation’. Scrambling together a short-notice retinue, he and a trail of white, tastefully-tacked Free Marches Rangers (the family steed) left in the night on the whims of Sebastian, who could not for one second longer live in the dark. Neither for his sake or his city’s.

Spiffed-up though it was, to him Kirkwall remained the same hive of miscreants and innocents. But the man’s life had become big enough that he found no reason to dwell on nostalgia. He’d returned these last few years for politic’s sake, and was therefore unsurprised by differences which had sprouted since Kirkwall’s chantry was ‘home’. Sebastian needn’t visit days-gone-by, heart fluttering affectionately, eyes smiling. This city was not the sum of his past.

Except he also remembered too easily the ring of Hawke’s laughter off the marble pillars. The marble walls, the marble floors; the marble bloody ceiling: they echoed still with her bell-like banter from a time when she’d charmed nobles with a flash of her gaze.

Those eyes. He hadn’t even been sure of their colour for months. He’d known how they comforted him while killing him with longing, but the colour? It took accumulating fortnights for him to realize, like some damned religious revelation, ‘blue. Blue like the sky passed the clouds.’

Sebastian groaned.

“Wow.” Opening the desk’s topmost drawer, Varric fished out two short glasses. “If I knew you were that easy, I would’ve asked for more on our quarry deal.”

“And I may have accepted,” Sebastian replied. “You were very generous.”

Pouring an inch of whiskey in each glass, Kirkwall’s Viscount scooted one towards Sebastian with a forefinger. “Hawke… had a hard time, I guess. Shit, we all did. Being in the Fade again was no one’s definition of a holiday. We lost Stroud. Weisshaupt was a shit-storm, apparently. I know it’s been a while—”

“A year and a half, Varric. It has been a year and a half since I saw her.”

Draining his drink, the dwarf rolled the taste around in his mouth. “Yeah. I’d say ‘hey, it’s not like you guys were married!’ , but… she told me. A secret engagement the night before someone disappears to battle the forces of evil? Even I couldn’t write that fairytale.” With a gut-born huff that embodied throwing arms up in the air, Varric squared his jaw. “I am sorry, Sebastian, I really am. But if Hawke wanted to see you, you’d know.”

The finality in his grief-chapped tone: an effective period at the end of a long, sad sentence.

Starkhaven’s prince stood, feeling that fifteen years had passed since first he sat down. “I’m thankful she has such a friend in you, Varric. Truly. This silence… It must come from a considerable weight. I am glad she has your aid.”

At the door, Sebastian turned with a last word. “The new Chantry is superb, by the way. Elthina would have admired it greatly.”

“Thanks, Choir-boy,” Varric answered, voice thick as he swirled the second whisky. “That means a lot.”

Sebastian left the office, requesting space from his attache.

Wandering unhindered by city guards, wishing he’d accepted Varric’s offer of drink, he knew that even undoubtedly well-aged liquor would not have delivered him from such a sobered, doured state. At least before, Sebastian had his anger; his passion with which to plan and provision for a plan B.
Now he had nothing. Or, worse, he had more of the same-old. A throne requiring him to arrange for an heir; a dozen nobles dragging their daughters along to council meetings so he could ‘have a look’. A guilt urging him to move-on for his city’s well-being; an old love that did not strengthen or weaken, but simply continued. The echo of his steps on the stones, and a faceless throng that—

“Mary.”

From beyond a second-floor baluster, a familiar, golden-haired figured stepped back and disappeared, but Sebastian was not so desperate as to be day-dreaming Hawke’s face. He ran, dodging crowds just short of rudely pushing through them, his agile, roguish instincts carrying him like a cat. His pursuit took him down empty halls, disused passages, and out into a large, private patio of pillars, trellised roofing, dirty stone, and the flash of wine-coloured velvet as Hawke ran still. She ran right into the corner, heels clacking on the stone.

The wind was sharp. As crisp as midnight in winter, or the stale air of mountains. Hawke’s demeanor was more chilling. Born with a queen’s strict dignity, curtsies and coy smiles were her customary mannerisms, but here she was, smiles become grimacing and her body bowed with terror.

Mary admitted, “I didn’t want you to see me.”

With that dimmed Fereldan lilt breaking the silence, the moment became real. Sebastian remembered how to breathe and did. She was alive, and with him. Whatever her doubts, they’d be dealt with.

“But why?” Sebastian closed in, heart pounding. He extended his arm, hesitated, then drew his fingers along an unfamiliar red scar on Mary’s forehead that went from hairline to hairline. Like a crown.

“This? You’ve not stayed away for vanity’s sake, I hope?”

Hawke frowned. “No. Not for that.” The saddest little smile lit her lips. "Would you be surprised, though? I was always such a... I was always so fussy."

She didn’t sing to the heavens her disappointment, nor suggest he was disrespecting her wish for space, whatever the reasoning. Lips parting, Hawke quietly let him touch along her blemished brow and down the curve of her cheek. She wanted it; sighed for it. She trembled differently than before when dismay had wrested her. Now she shivered, new and harder, under his skin as he traced her expression.

“Mary.”

Called by saints against the dark of his eyelids, his lips found hers. Sebastian felt no lust—only emotional hunger to express how badly he needed not her body but her soul. The most enchanting woman he had ever met, it was the beacon of her spirit he’d waited for. He heard her little gasps, and recalled those conversations of piety, and charity, coming from that same tongue. He wanted to drink from Hawke her sanctity; to taste it; to taste her.

She clung to him. Her perfume was thick: a clouding aroma of resinous spices and sweet jasmine. Sebastian remembered lust, now. It was somewhere below his belly, and between the curve of her hip and breast.

“I’m sorry,” Mary mouthed against his, face pulled with apology.

“Don’t be,” he murmured, grinning at such a silly thing. “Only let us go home. Allow me to take you home.”
Withdrawing from reverent touching, he reached within his breast pocket, withdrawing braided, looping gold bedding diamonds surrounding a sapphire at the centre.

“We shall return to Starkhaven properly betrothed,” he announced. “There will be no more secrets. When we walk through the gates of the city, the people will know their princess.”

Lifting the ring to her slender finger, he smiled.

Lifting her head to look at him, she moaned.

Mary pulled away.

“I cannot marry you.”

Sebastian laughed.

It was unfathomable. After seven years’ yearning, putting wants aside for their work as prince and viscountess, and finally privately making vows to wed after Hawke’s return from the Inquisition’s call… It was beyond the bounds of reality that he would not be carrying her across the threshold; showing her the rooms of his ancestors which now together would be shared.

“Whyever not?” he asked, bemusement fixed on his face.

It was an old game: coquetry offset with protocol; an ebb and flow of desire and duty. How many times had they said ‘we cannot’ only to steal a kiss in the shadows?

She would bite her lip, eyes lowered. She’d blush as she seldom did—as she only did—for him. That was how it always happened.

“Because I’ve lost my faith,” Mary answered instead.

He stumbled back.

“Liar.”

“I’m not.”

Covering his mouth watering with nausea, Sebastian cut off a barking, crying shout. “It cannot be! Not you. Not… ”

But it could be, and he could see it—that was the horror of it. The reluctance to meet him in Starkhaven and admit her treachery; the refusal to make Varric the messenger...

“How? How could you, of all people, lose your way? Your faith has carried not only yourself but me through hours of dark and hopelessness. Whatever has made you question, surely there is room for discussion.”

Her voice cracked, leaving misery to leak into her words. “But I don’t want to discuss it,” Mary argued with that damnable, sweet voice. “And I don’t want to explain it. I can’t bear the thought of telling you why, and when. You just need to know I’ve lost everything. I won’t delude myself into thinking you’d follow me into this pit, but on the chance that you would… I can’t explain it. So please don’t try to understand it. Just know that there’s nothing where I am.”

The tears in her eyes were poison in a cup: brimming, ready to spill, and they sickened Sebastian for he wanted to wipe at them as he had before, a few, cherished times. But that want was drying up.
The man could have sat down on the stone and cried, or slept. The last, forlorn months spread out before him in a terrible waste. “A year and a half I waited.” His voice shook. “Making priority of messages from Kirkwall; petitioning the Inquisition for aid in your location. And for what? For what, Mary?”

She sadly shrugged.

“Goodbye, Hawke.” Straightening his posture, Sebastian ran a hand over his coat. “I shall, at least, never forget the favor you did for my family. Andraste guide you—for all the good that will do.”

His lips were pulled by vicious grimacing on the quickly-gaited way to Starkhaven. He broke out into embittered sweating; tears stood in his eyes, waiting for the moment he found solitude in his room. Upon being asked as to its inspiration, Sebastian explained to his guard that he was in mourning. A friend had died, he said. Someone close, and someone dear. It had been a terrible death.
"war's end" kiss

The mystery of where the Grey Wardens’ conscripted finances went had been solved: it had gone into fancy abacuses.

Moving onyx beads across string with the force of her mana, Ann Hawke sat at her Weisshaupt desk calculating how long it would take a letter to reach Varric (who, in turn, would get it to Anders). The beads added up quickly. Days into weeks; months, maybe, depending on roads and couriers.

Not for the first time in Hawke’s 37-years, numbers-crunching was causing serious depression.

Somehow her uncharacteristically optimistic mind had convinced her others bits (a tired heart; her hardened spirit) that, following Corypheus’s defeat, it was home-time. But things turned out differently. With the Wardens in disarray following the false Calling, nevermind the depletion of their numbers, Hawke had become recruiter and secretary all in one day. The Order was issuing a massive collection of their forces at Weisshaupt for reassignment, which meant sending missives to towns across the world in the hopes that word would spread.

Hawke was helping with that.

The members who did show up were undergoing a new records-keeping process. Name, rank, next of kin; special talents: it was all going in the files. It’d been decided that tight-lips had sunk ships, and ignorance regarding Corypheus had led to the Order’s downfall. So although this information wasn’t going to be wide-spread, their history and the history of their members was to be recorded, respected, and utilized should some other old-as-balls darkspawn rise and attempt a second coup.

Hawke was helping with that, as well.

Her writing-hand was knackered. Spending the day documenting soldiers’ lives left Hawke too tired for a letter. Figuring out the weeks it would take to reach Anders’ deft, graceful fingers had started as a distraction, but it had two very fixating effects: it made her realize one extra day wouldn’t matter, and now she was fucking miserable.

A dry sob rolled over her, but it didn’t relieve the pain. Her cheeks flushed; her spine tensed. A wash of momentous self-pity had her eye-balling the blankets and seeing a refuge. Before she delved into hiding, however, a knock rattled the door, and Hawke’s stomach knotted at nearly being found snivelling.

“What is it?”

“One more for personal records, Messere. We know you said you were done for the day, but…”

She was smacked by a terrible nostalgia at being addressed with a Marcher title by a Marcher native. Hawke breathed in deep and made for the bathroom, calling over her shoulder.

“Show them in!”

Checking the mirror, she assessed damage. Her eyes were a raw, tortured mess. Tears now slicked her lips and chin. The war against Corypheus was over, she’d done what she was supposed to do, she was exhausted, and she should be riding home instead of counting the seconds until she could reread Anders’ words to her. A letter that once smelled of lavender and licorice, at this point it had
been refolded so many times it was torn at the creases, threatening to become illegible, and
guaranteed to soon fall apart.

It would lie in her hands, fibres crumbled, where once there’d been memories and promise.

“You know what?” Hawke’s voice garbled as a new, wet bawling tried surfacing. “There’s paper in
the desk. Ink; pounce-pot: you need it, it’s in there. Write your name, family members, where you’re
from, and if —” she covered her trembling lips with her hand —” and if you have any special
abilities. Lock-picking, um… shape-shifting. Things like that.”

“Are you alright?” asked the recruit in a husky Anderfels’ accent.

“Yes!” Hawke disappointedly punched her upper leg. “Just something I ate.”

Had it been helplessness dragging her down, Hawke would’ve simply left. If it felt as though the
Order was taking something from her, she’d hop on the nearest Anderfel courser (lovely breed), and
ride towards Kirkwall until the creature dropped. But this anguish wasn’t forced on her, or even
given. It was onyx on string; days tallied up and counted down until the next time. Even if she went home to Anders — even if they finally managed to make a home out
of optimism and basic poverty — it would be waiting. Turning the corner one day, there it’d
smilingly be: another Maker-forsaken war.

“Messere?”

Another way to tear them apart.

“Leave it on the desk,” Hawke pleaded.

And left it on the desk they did. The door creaked upon his exit. Shivering, Hawke swiped up the
parchment after slinking from the bathroom. Might as well buckle-down on the paperwork, she
thought bitterly, acknowledging that bureaucracy was a battle that would take her nicely into the next
 crises.

It took a second read, but the words on the page stopped her heart.

Name: Ser Timothy Kitten-Mittens the 4th, the Real Champion of Kirkwall.

Family: My mum, my dad, some elves, a dwarf, and one insufferable ex-Templar uncle. He’s
terrible.

Hometown: Oh, you know. A tom-cat gets around.

Special abilities: Charades. Also great back scratches.

The door opened. Hawke’s startled, clutching hands tore the parchment in half.

“Marian? Maker, you were crying!”

Crushed against his body, Hawke smelled vetiver and dew. His coat was soaked, and, soon, she
was, too: way down to her soul where she was washed with stark emotion. It seemed beyond
believable that she be given something so desperately wished-for, but no one held her like her him.
Anders held hard — too hard — like if his strength failed for a second, she’d be stolen away; taken to
face the torments he’d once been subjected to. The ones he’d vowed to keep her from.

“Anders?!”
In her ear, his throat was fraught with sounds. He gasped; he sighed. He laughed. He spoke half-strangled and half-sobbing.

“Yes, love,” Anders croaked. “I’m here.”

“Anders, I…” Pulling away, Hawke traced the angles of his jaw which bore a handsomely trimmed, rough-to-the-touch beard. Her voice was emptied by awe. “I told you never to call me that.”

Anders chuckled. “I know.” Crows-feet wrinkling, he cupped her face, staring her straight in the eyes. “And I don’t care."

Checking that the door to her quarters was locked, they began disrobing each other without discussion.

“Why are you here?” The man was heaven under her hands. “You should be at home where it’s safe. The Wardens will know what you are; they’re going to insist that — ”

“What? That I stay?” Anders’ fingers worked the laces at her leather vest. “Once they see the glowing skin — not to mention the deadly and beautiful Messere Hawke at my side — I think the Wardens will turn a blind-eye to my being here.”

“You’ve been alright, then?” Two heads shorter, Hawke peered up, looking for the tell-tale pout that thinned his top lip when lying. “The Calling isn’t bothering you anymore, is it?”

“No. Thankfully it’s just the one extra voice in my head these days, not two. It’s good you left when you did. Things were getting… a bit complicated, to say the least.”

Ann stopped loosening the drawstrings of his undershirt. He was down to that, his small-clothes, and a beautiful expression. She was in the same boat, sans happy facade: only so naked, and feeling the chill.

“I didn’t leave because things were…” Hawke looked down. “I didn’t want to leave.”

“I know.” Anders held her waist. “I mean, I understand. But still — you should have left sooner, I think. With Justice and the Calling in my head, I said somethings I’m not proud of. Particularly when you left. I was out of my mind, then; that’s partly why I’m here. When Varric told me you’d been in the Fade physically, I realized you could have died there, and the thing you’d remember me by was calling you a traitor!”

The man was terrified. Hawke slid her palms over his chest, carefully warming him with curls of mana which would wash through skin and lave love and comfort to his bones.

As Anders labored towards even breathing, colour returned to his cheeks.

Hawke appreciated his sternum with worshipping fingers. “I knew things were hard for you. I knew you didn’t mean what you said. I thought of you every day since I’ve been gone, and it wasn’t like that. Not once.”

Anders’ amber eyes flashed. “Oh? How did you think of me, then?”

Hawke snorted. He could go from panicked to plain horny in two seconds flat. There was something about growing-up in the Circle that really shuffled one’s priorities — or simplified them.

“Less beard and less clothes,” Ann answered. Pulling the shirt’s drawstring, she pushed the whole
thing over his lanky shoulders, exposing sporadic bursts of blonde curls and a much darker trail leading downward. Scars and shadows; the outline of his hip bone which was particularly ticklish: the sight of it all went straight to Hawke’s belly. *Now* she was home. “That is **much** better,” she purred.

Soon they were starkers: dressed only in birthmarks and freckles. Almost sooner than that, they’d both realized how exhausted they were — Anders from his adventure to Weisshaupt, and for Ann it was the *whatever* that had her emotionally sick. Instead of cajoling their old bones to any tiring sexual encounter, they snuggled under a blanket on the bed, enjoying the warmth of one another and relishing the fact that sometimes things worked out.

Eventually Anders guided Hawke by the hips to facing the other way, entwining her in a jumble of limbs. Normally she played the big spoon while **he** was in need of being wrapped up in another. But, now, he asked, “do you want to tell me why you crying? Before I came in,” and Hawke felt the whole thing unsettling.

Ashamed, she shrugged. “I was just… I was missing you.”

“That’s it? Ann, I know you better. Were that the case, you’d be out hitting things with your staff. Like a *barbarian.*” He accented the word with tickling, worming at an armpit.

Hawke grinned. “It’s fun to feel the crunch.”

“Mmm, yes, I’m sure it is. No wonder you can’t aim straight to save your life. A buggered-up staff *always* throws a shot. *Always.*”

“Phft. *Such* a perfectionist.”

Dragging along her thigh, Anders’ fingers worked in craze-inducing circles. “Talk to me, love. What’s wrong? Corypheus is dead — for sure, this time. We can relax, now.”

Ann answered sighingly. “Maybe. Or maybe we can just sit on our thumbs until the next crisis comes along.”

Anders pulled Hawke by the shoulder to laying on her back. Propping himself up beside her, a broad, beautiful hand cupped her face.

“Since when have you shied away from a crises?”

“Since I found something else to do.”

“Which is?”

Ann’s throat parched. She swallowed. “Teach?” she squeaked.

Anders’ head tilted. “*Teach*?”

Hawke glowed for the memories. “They had children at Skyhold. *Mage* children. I took a few days to gain strength — plus play cards with Varric — and while I was there I taught them things. How to work with the elements around you. How to borrow flame from a torch instead of calling it from the Fade, or use water from a canteen. It was… wonderful. Their faces… their parents’ faces…” Her dry throat cracked like dessicated ground. “I sound ridiculous, don’t I?”

“Ann, no! Maker, that’s wonderful!” Anders pulled towards her, kissing her forehead. “I’m proud of
you! But… why were you upset?”

Hawke wondered if he wouldn’t love her less. Their relationship had been conceived in blood, born in war, and nurtured by a lust for violence-bought equality. If she shied away now, she wouldn’t be the woman he loved: the hot-headed radical looking for a fight.

“Because it never ends,” Hawke answered. “Because there’s always something else.”

At length, Anders nodded. His thumb brushed her cheek. “I wish I knew what to say. But you’re probably right. Something will come along. I always thought the templars would be my biggest fear, but the Calling; Corypheus — they sure proved that wrong in a pinch. But it is over for now. You know that. Right?”

Hawke couldn’t answer.

Cradling her against his chest, Anders spoke directly on her crown, his breath warm and near. “I’m taking you away from this. It isn’t doing you any good. And you’re not a Warden — it’s not your responsibility. We’ll go to Kirkwall, or somewhere near Kirkwall. Things will be better when it’s only you and me. I promise.”

A burning blush scalded Hawke’s face. Embarrassed, she buried into his breast like a sad, little weasel. It was Anders who deserved the heroic reassurances. He’d ridden from the ass-end of Thedas to see her after months of going mad. Instead of receiving thanks, he’d been plopped into position of coordinator for her little pity-party, which was, Hawke decided, totally stupid.

She frowned. She pouted. She rolled onto her back and listened to the rain.

“You know one good thing about all these battles, and wars, and… and crises — don’t you?” Anders dipped in close, a hand working trails over her womb. “The kissing.”

After thinking about it, Hawke burst out laughing. She stopped, thought again, snorted, and shook her head. “What?”

“Really!” Anders smiled at her skeptical eye. “Remember last time? It wasn’t the end of anything, but it felt like it was. We left Kirkwall and had to sleep that in that dingy barn. We lay under my cloak — a little like this actually. I held you; you held me. And, oh, the kissing.”

Hawke remembered. Andraste’s tits, did she remember. They carved a new life for themselves in that barn just by lips-on-lips alone. Slowly—aching slowly—they took the time to explore; to see how long Anders could stand Hawke nibbling his neck (something he had once disliked) while grinding against his barely-clothed cock. And Hawke learned she liked the stark-white light found in the seconds between being on top and being forced back down. Anders could hold her still, steal her breath; make her beg while his tongue swirled hers.

Always afraid of Meredith’s templars, it was in freedom from them that the couple discovered time. They had the time to get lost in each other; they needn’t be moving from mansion, to clinic, to mission in some bid to buy their rights.

They realized it that first night. In a dingy, dark, soggy barn.

Hawke smirked. “I remember. You were… sloppy.”

“Sloppy?!” Ander’s voice hitched to un-Makerly proportions in his faked offendedness. “We were running for our lives! From templars wishing to punish us for freeing the Gallow mages! Our
identities had to remain secret. We had two sovereigns between us. But the Chantry was going to acknowledge the folly of the Circles. It was all we’d ever wanted. And all you can say is ‘I was sloppy’?!!”

Giggling, Hawke rolled over, burying her face in his neck, a leg resting up on his thigh. He smelled so like lounging in bed: old cotton and the salt on skin. A hint of ozone (Justice’s influence) hung around him, too. “Mm-hmm,” she grinned. “Your tongue was all over the place.”

“By rights, it was.” Anders pulled her on top of him. He grabbed at her thighs, groaning when he adjusted her to sitting on his stomach.

Perched there, Hawke watched. The body beneath her riled with what was and what had been. His breast rose; his hips jerked. Hawke knitted her fingers into his, then drew his wrists against the bed. “It’s over,” Hawke acknowledged.

“For now,” Anders nodded.

Hawke leaned down, lips ghosting above his. Lonely as she had been, as much as she relished the nearness of him now, she could stretch this moment out until it snapped. She could watch him for hours: his beauty; his deference.

So subtly she barely felt it, her mouth went left and right across his soft, silk mouth. Anders keened, eyelids fluttering. “Please, Ann,” he rasped. “I need you.”

With that, the war ended, and things went back to normal: to Anders needing, and Hawke giving. The war ended with her tongue sliding between his lips, tasting there what she always did: light, sky, blue, and breezing ozone. It was a sensation that swirled through her mouth: the flavor of right and Justice.

“Tell me,” Hawke said, withdrawing her tongue and licking his top lip. “How much?”

A self-evident, frustrated-forehead-veins and gasping answer was on his face, but he couldn’t speak. Hawke shuffled back and now sat on his half-soft cock which wedged between her folds and his abdomen. Arching her spine, the burden shifted to her hips, applying more pressure. Hawke rubbed herself on his length — forward and back, his cockhead’s curves smoothing gorgeously over her slit — and she felt him thickening, insisting fuller and fatter through her lips, parting them. From limp to rock-hard in sixty seconds — Anders clenched his teeth as she swivelling her hips, working him while sending new currents of arousal through her inner thighs. Just a little — less than could be measured — and he’d slip inside. As it was, Hawke could feel how much of a mess she was down there: soaking, with her arousal spreading as she slathered over him, rocking and gyrating.

“I need you, too,” Hawke hiccuped. She found a good spot for herself and bucked after that building orgasm, kneading her clit over his shaft.

Anders began to sweat — she could feel it on his belly where her hands now rested for support. Groaning, Anders looked down at his stroked, arousal-glistening member as she rode him. Gasping, the man looked into her eyes a bit sheepishly. “Ann, I might… I might cum.”

“Already?” She hadn’t meant to half-laugh like she did, but it happened. “I’m almost… Um — wait. I’m going to…”
Grabbing him less than kindly, hefting herself up with trembling thighs, she shoved him in. Anders moaned, honey eyes flitting to the ceiling as he slid deeper. Laying out on his breast, curving her back, Hawke let him set the ragged pace. She liked it best this way: listening to Anders’ heartbeat and hard breathing as he fucked her with even, upward thrusts, her breasts crushed against his scratchy, hair-smattered chest. Her bottom bobbing every time he pumped; the rocking against him, his chorus of desperate moans climbing. The angle didn’t allow for the wholest penetration, but there was a peeling over her clit which had Hawke suddenly whimpered into his chest hair. Her orgasm wasn’t sneaking up so much as rushing towards her, catching her, and tensing her body as her thighs shook, pounding with seething need which spun and twisted —

“Are you going to?”

Like ice and silver inside her veins, Hawke was breathless with anticipation; paralyzed because it was right there: under her skin; screaming to take her whole. “Almost. Fuck. I’m so close. Anders…”

Lifting herself up, allowing Anders just a little deeper, seeing the sweat sticking mussed hair to his forehead and his pinkened cheeks and slackened lips and glistening eyes had it all over for Hawke. She came surprisingly hard, feeling Anders do the same. It was the first time she came without fingers on her clit (which was a marvel). Not lasting long — but what relief — she watched Anders shiver beneath her, his look of post-fuck luster so damn beautiful that Hawke swallowed back the swift, confusing mixture of emotion and ebbing adrenaline without a second thought.

Both tsking and huffing as Hawke carefully climbed off, she flopped beside him, sticky and satisfied. She remembered where they were; she ruminated on those who had most certainly heard their bed-cracking, moans-accented reunion.

“Fuck.” It was a mark of approval, not embarrassment.

Anders laughed a thick, quiet one. “I know. I’d say something about going away more often, but… no. Never again.”

Hawke’s hand found his. “Never again,” she agreed.
Starkhaven under its year’s first snow was a wonder.

Dripping beeswax candles and red-velvet banners lined down-blanketed streets. Bakers kept their doors open through the night, offering fresh bread or cake to travelers. Furnaces and fireplaces burned away; the Chantry was open past midnight, with warm hymns crossing the bared threshold to beckon the penitent in.

Fir boughs and branches brought life to the shop fronts, and berries and green wreaths to homes. Starkhaven under its first snow was a wonder, certainly, but Starkhaven’s first Wintersend under the rule of its rightful Prince was unworldly. And its palace was heaven.

Much of the city, made of marble, granite, and wrought gold, lost its luster under the snow, but, within the palace halls, nothing was covered and everything shone. For Wintersend—the great holiday of the Maker—every passageway and room was spruced up in its Sunday-best: brocade, polished brass; silver and satin. The napkins on dining tables were cinched with lace and pearls. There seemed diamonds in the curtains, for they shimmered.

The fete’s sumptuous supper and lengthy dancing had died away to idle chatter; however, with a hundred nobles about the great hall, ‘idle chatter’ was more of an unrelenting roar. Adding to the din enough sparkle and shine to blind a bat, even Mary Hawke, shiniest of them all, had grown tired.

In need of a tiny respite, she took a last glance around, ensuring she was in no-one’s line of sight.

The Duke of Val Falaise, her main suitor of the evening, had his back to her, which was a blessing: had he spotted her, he’d be at her side leaning in too close, finishing-off a wine-flute, and wondering loudly why she wasn’t his wife already. It was flattering, but exhausting.

The Reid sisters (local nobility) were also distracted. Attached at the hip, they’d attempted to attach to her hip for whatever reason, though Mary couldn’t fathom it. Their older sister—a gorgeous girl—was a strong contender for Starkhaven’s princess. She was eligible, educated, pious, their family-name carried weight, and those generous hips could carry an heir into the world without complaint. Topped off with the kind of strawberry-blonde curls most would kill for, she was a catch.

A catch who, presently, was at Sebastian’s side and speaking with leaders of Starkhaven’s merchant guild.

Happy to see the prince distracted, Mary ducked down a small hall and through a door, finding herself in the rose hothouse.

She wondered how strongly the garden smelled of flowers. The dinner’s pies, duck, spiced soups, and sweet desserts had utterly ruined her nose for delicate fragrances, so she sat on a little granite bench enjoying their unfurling loveliness but nothing of the scents.

The hothouse was thankfully tepid. Her low-cut, Orlesian-styled gown left little to the imagination and much to be desired as far as keeping warm was concerned. Despite high temperatures, she still huddled into herself. She was tired; chilled. She ruminated on how many minutes would pass before she was missed. Mary figured it wasn’t long.

Hothouse door opening loudly, an intruder navigated the maze-like trellises, after which Mary was no longer alone. Sebastian handed her a glass of red wine which she took graciously, bowing of her
head. He stood sipping his, one hand folded at his back.

“Stephan chased you in here, did he?”

Mary smiled. “No. A long day and looking forward to an early morning chased me in here.” She tasted the wine. Oaked, rich; sweet. “Besides, the Duke of Val Falaise is charming, even with all his forwardness.”

“He’s pretty is what he is.” Sebastian frowned. “A man ten-years his senior would not be forgiven for such behavior, but him?”

“Don’t be jealous. You were the young, pretty thing once.”

“Yes, and look at me now. Forty and balding.”

Mary laughed. Her shoulders shook as she covered her mouth. “You’ve at least three years before it’s very bad,” she promised with utmost seriousness. “Besides, I don’t think the luscious, young Becca Reid will mind. Do you know why her sisters have been following me all night?”

“You’re the enigmatic viscountess of Kirkwall,” Sebastian reasoned while sitting down on the bench beside her. “You’re beautiful; unyielding. And there’s a rumor that the alliance between Starkhaven and Kirkwall is one of great convenience. I imagine the girls were after gossip.”

“Oh, Maker!” Mary scoffed. “As though every relationship between powerful leaders ends up in the bedroom.”

Sebastian took a long sip, finding either it or the conversation sour by his expression. “Those pampered petticoats study their Orlesian smut more seriously than their lessons. Or the Maker’s word.”

“From the sounds of it, their sister may be well versed in both, then,” Mary replied wickedly. “Better scoop-up Lady Becca before someone else does.”

“For example, the charming Duke of Val Falaise?”

Mary rolled her eyes. “Oh, that boy wants someone with apron strings to swing on.” She sighed wistfully. “Although, you know, he did say if we married I’d need never lift a finger in my life again. And I do have ten fingers. That is quite a few fingers, and quite a lot of lifting.”

Sebastian barked a disbelieving laugh.

“You,” he said, leaning in with a skewed brow, “would go mad with nothing to do but perch prettily on some nobleman’s couch. You cannot even rule Kirkwall without dashing off to fight some great evil halfway across Thedas.”

Mary’s mouth opened but no retort came out. She didn’t even have one. Draining her cup nearly to its end, she looked at Sebastian. Perfect posture; magnificent profile—and not the man she’d met nine years ago. As youth’s roundness was lost, his cheeks had hollowed. His nose appeared sharper; he’d gained a manicured goatee which flaunted suggestions of silver. There were lines under his eyes, and his lips pouted less, but he looked as much the dashing prince as always. His bearing was impressive; the portrait of polished. His fine hand held his wine-glass carefully.

“How long will you be gone this time?” Sebastian asked.

“It’s hard to say. Varric wishes me to speak with Andraste’s Herald regarding Corypheus. I’ll send a
letter telling you everything about her. Then, I suppose, I’ll go seek Stroud, lest anything else on red lyrium crop up. The way it appears to be spreading... Varric says he’s seen it all over Fereldan, which is madness.” She glanced at her hands. “I already thanked you for looking at your book, but again—”

“No need, Mary,” Sebastian insisted. He squeezed her wrist reassuringly. “I hope it aids you in your quest.”

“It will. At this point, any information, no matter how little, will help. It has to.”

His fingers lingered with hers.

“Will you ever return to your seat as viscountess?”

Mary shrugged. “I’m not sure. Bran Cavin is doing a remarkable job as provisional viscount, despite the complaints. About him or from him. I really can’t say how long I’ll be away, and Kirkwall deserves a leader who doesn’t abscond to ‘chase evil’, as you say. When a ruler is away, the populace tends to forget them. Unless, of course, you’re the charming prince of Starkhaven.”

Sebastian’s heavy forefinger slowly drew up the inside of her wrist. Mary caught her breath.

“And how long before I may take you as my bride?”

Lips thinning, Mary stood in a rustle of silk and samite.

Sebastian sighed behind her.

“My entire court is here. What better time than now to announce our intentions?”

“When I return, Sebastian!” Mary rounded on him, brow bent. “Until then, what good would it do? If I don’t return—”

“Mary!”

He sounded badly betrayed. As though the possibility of her death—the very idea of it—was traitorous. She could not blame him. The last two days had been marvelous in what had once been impossible. To suggest the ultimate end to it was unkind.

It was, however, practical.

Under the guise of political discretion, Kirkwall’s viscountess had come to inform Starkhaven’s prince of a power-shift. She warned that she was stepping down in favor of pursuing information vital to Thedas’s Andrastians (as well as a few outside the faith). Red lyrium; its corruption: it was an affront to the Maker. And so Mary Hawke would see it explained and destroyed.

She told Sebastian that was why she’d come. She stayed the two days because he asked.

The first evening there—twenty-four hours previous to now—they had spoken as old friends while wandering the grounds in their fur-trimmed cloaks. They talked of good-times. They whispered their regrets.

“Perhaps if I’d retaken my throne earlier, I may have stopped the actions of Kirkwall’s maleficar. I may have saved Elthina. Your mother, even. With aid from Starkhaven...”

“It would have seemed like pressure, and you know how the city-states love their independence. Dumar would not have accepted. Especially from a prince so young,” Mary smiled to think of those
years. Then her happiness failed. “She was such a wonderful woman. Her stories about my mother were kind. That she was the one thing keeping you in Kirkwall speaks to how much she meant to you.”

“Bah.” Sebastian made a dismissing sound. “That isn’t fair. To force me to deny a dead woman’s memory… You are better than that, Hawke.”

“What are you talking about?”

Halting his step, Sebastian straightened his posture, standing tall and implacable. “She is not the only reason I remained so long in Kirkwall, and you know it.”

By the end of their walk, Starkhaven’s prince had proposed. Mary had him swear promises, however. Their impending union was to stay secret, for which there was good reason.

“If I don’t return, then you will need to find someone else, and why burn bridges if you can avoid it?” Mary reminded him. Placing her wine glass down, she sat at Sebastian’s side amid the roses and took his hands in hers. She stared as hard into his eyes as she could. “If I do not come back, and everyone is aware of where your heart truly lies, then that will only scorn your future wife and what alliances her family gains you. What good is that for Starkhaven?”

“Your prudence,” Sebastian replied testily, “sometimes goes too far, Mary.”

She sighed dramatically. “One of us has to plan for Starkhaven’s future. Maker knows it won’t be you.” Taking his hands to her lips, Mary kissed his knuckles. “You fickle, fickle boy.”

Forcing a laugh, Sebastian sighed. “Elthina called me that. Often.”

“And you still haven’t learned,” Mary tutted.

They sat for some moments together, hands clasped and foreheads touching. Mary could hear his breathing but not feel it, although he was so close. His black satin and tartan looked lovely, clinging to his body while boasting of the still-fit physique beneath. Mary recalled those toned forearms; the bulk of his shoulders employing his bow.

Mary glanced his way with a raised brow. Perhaps he’d lost a little muscle tone. Maybe it made her want him more.

She could feel herself melting before his beauty. The understanding in his face; the love in his true, blue eyes. It would take nothing for him to sway her, had he a mind to, which meant it was time to go.

“We should return,” Mary said, standing up. “You will be missed.”

With a little groan, Sebastian stood, too. Avoiding the mournful expression she knew he was sporting, she looked to the roses. She touched a few before she realizing she did so.

“When you return,” Sebastian vowed, “they will be yours. All of this. And you shall be mine.”

Mary’s chest was heavy. “I’m leaving as soon as the sun rises.”

He pulled her to him. Pressing against her in a desperately sad goodbye, Sebastian cradled her head. Keeping their kiss chaste, his body burned in her hands nonetheless. His palms went to her waist; she touched his neck, and his cheek. A little sigh from her; a moan in his throat which rumbled through his chest: their lips parted enough to herald darker, needier things, but they pulled back, both of the
same mind as they gasped for air.

*When married, there would be no holding back.*

Until then, Starkhaven’s prince had a city to rule, and Kirkwall’s Champion had evil to chase.
kiss on the nose

A gesture of clichéd passion, it came straight from the prosaic, porny (and probably stuck together) pages of The Randy Dowager.

Or did it? Augustine considered alternatives, heart melting its cell of ice.

*This is honesty. This isn’t the gift of a suitor looking to get some. It isn’t a trade. Maker, this is his heart.*

Having warmed away the jaded cold, her heart lay in a puddle, delirious, giggling, and more than a little wet. With the rose pinched between finger and thumb, Augustine pressed her lips to Alistair’s soft skin coloured by the caramel sunset. It was just small; just a sinless and tickling peck. She’d aimed for his cheek, all chaste and maidenly, but he shifted and instead she got the peak of his regal schnoz, which was where her lips remained as their confused stares met.

Moving back, Augustine’s brow bent. “What was that?”

Alistair’s mouth hung open. “I was… helping? We were going to kiss, weren’t we?”

“Well, *I* was going to kiss your cheek as a thank-you. You don’t think I’m that cheap, do you? One admittedly-lovely flower buys you the entire holding?”

Truth was, she *was* that cheap. But she knew Alistair wasn’t.

The way he suddenly paced as an apology; how sorry he was for smut-based assumptions: Augustine watched the man panic, marveling at their differences. He stumbled over himself for the misstep, whereas Augustine would have taken it in stride. He thought he’d *offended* her, but her own sensibilities would’ve seen her on her back, chain-mail hiked up, were it anyone else. He was a gentleman, and she was... less than a lady.

Beet-red embarrassed, the man disparaged adorably. “And I’ve screwed it up as usual, right? Of course I have! Stupid, stupid Alistair!” Twigs snapped underfoot as he fidgeted. “I thought it was too soon. You know: for… steamy things. But I didn’t want to be rude, so I… And all I really wanted was to say something nice. About this whole situation. You’ve been here for me; listened to me complain. And in return, I—”

“Alistair…” Augustine stepped in last, putting a hand on his arm. “Calm down. I’m not actually offended. It’s beautiful. Really. The whole situation. The flower, the sentiment; the... whatever just happened. Maybe especially what just happened.”

“Right,” Alistair drolled sarcastically, stopping just short of rolling his eyes. “Because that’s the height of dashing romance right there: *nose kissing*. Or beak, in my case.”

Staring into one eye, looking at the other, Augustine searched his expression like hounds on the scent. Dissatisfied, the woman grabbed his wrist and hauled him towards a fallen tree that presented the perfect perch.

“Sit,” she instructed.

Alistair sat.

“Romance is overrated.”
“Phft!” This time, Alistair did roll his eyes. “Right. And we’ll be wearing nug-leather jerkins into battle against the darkspawn. Hottest fashion this season.”

“No, Alistair—I’m serious.” Augustine leaned closer, rose held in both her hands. “Do you know what a thing like this could have costed me six months ago? What noblemen expect for these sorts of favors? Romance…” She tuck a strand of black hair behind her ear. “It isn’t what you think.”

Alistair’s voice was quiet. “Well, I think romance is something great and beautiful. And the men you knew were just rakes.”

Abhorred (and retroactively flattered), she could recall their pledges and promises; the tender, trinket-accompanied compliments; the offered visions of the future, though they only went so far as five minutes in a dark closet. Augustine couldn’t blame some of them now, but before… She’d been a child, once.

“They were,” she agreed. “You aren’t like any of them, though.”

Thumb catching on a thorn, it served as a strange catalyst. Blood slipped towards her palm; where it poured from her, it was replaced by candor. “It’s hard to explain, but all your awkwardness—it’s part of what I like about you. It’s charming! As daughter of Bryce Cousland, I had suitors who were trained in decorum, and formalities—all the ‘gentry arts of seduction’, as mother called them. And each one had an older brother who told them just what to say to get what they wanted. Perfection was expected of them and me. You are anything but that kind of… rehearsed romance. Everything you do is surprising!” Her voice cracked under the weight of the sort of sincerity her mother had warned against. ‘Show them your hand, and they’ll take the pot’, she’d say.

“I’m grateful for it,” Augustine admitted despite ghostly maternal warnings.

Frowning, Alistair scoffed amidst a sullen shrug. “Good to know I’m not just a one-act show. I’m the Too-Much-Cheese and Falling-Over Guy.”

She had to admit it: he had a point. Alistair’s sarcastic, stumbling, evasive humour usually made short work of impressions aimed his way, and they were this: Alistair is clumsy, Alistair is silly, and Alistair is stupid. He was none of those things, obviously, but being so neglected as a child had led to very specific means of coping. Laughter born of foolishness meant he received attention. Attention was love to the skinned-knees and ruddied-cheeks child abandoned at the Chantry by those meant to care for him.

Most importantly, though, Alistair was not the sum of his lonely upbringing. That he was so often relegated to group jester obviously stung, and Augustine was terribly close to calling him silly boy like all the rest.

But she’d meant it. Alistair couldn’t be less like the high-bred men she’d known. And she couldn’t be more grateful for shy grins, artless and ardent staring, and things like rescued flowers.

“You’re the Too-Much-Cheese and Falling-Over Gentleman. That’s worlds different. Hard to call a man completely inept when he just gave me a rose in such a dapper way.” She chewed at the inside of her cheek. “Whatever you thought it was going to be, you didn’t have to return my kiss. I recall very clearly a certain conversation between you and Leliana. It had something to do with the birds, and the bees, and young Alistair not taking these things lightly…”

“I just—I don’t take these things lightly, it’s true. Especially with someone who… Who I’ve watched slay darkspawn with her pinky, and bandits just by looking at them, and whose hair smells like—wait, no, not going there. That’s creepy.” Alistair rubbed at his scrunching forehead. “You are an
amazing woman, Augustine. I wanted you to know.”

“Yes. And you wanted to kiss me.”

Alistair shrugged. “Alright. You caught me. Guilty.” Quieting seriously, he held her gaze with all the figurative seduction of calloused fingers sliding over her cheek and cupping her chin. His down-soft expression was excruciating and words barely above a whisper. “But, for the record, it was… you know…” smiling tenderly… voice like velvet… “mostly the other thing. The telling-you thing.”

Clearing her throat, Augustine ignored the urge to fan herself. Her voice was husky. “I suppose things could have been a little clearer.” She was being cruel, now. “And actions speak louder than words, good sir.”

“Lest we burst into flames for impure thoughts, my fair lady, I think we’d better not.”

Ah: the hesitant, nun-raised gallant. It wasn’t about Augustine planting one on him out of lust. It was about accepting him—every bit. Missteps and all.

“Close your eyes.”

Choosing to trust her, he did, brow furrowed, and she kissed him. On the nose.

He laughed at that. Distantly, but so happily, he laughed. When she pulled back, there was a lot of light in his dark eyes. “So the beak really does it for you, I guess?” There were two inches between them. Two small, nothing inches. “Lucky for you I have plenty to go around.”

“And I’m greedy, so there’s that.” Shoving aside bashful inclinations, Augustine sighed. “Where does this leave us?”

“With the others wondering where we are, and some tents in need of… tenting. Assemblage.” He tilted his head. “You know.”

Nodding, Augustine slipped her fingers between his, surprised, as always, at the lovely, sweaty warmth there. “How’s this? Too much?”

“This,” Alistair said, grinning, suddenly humming with his usual humor, “will make Morrigan sick to her stomach. It’s perfect.”

Hand-in-hand, they walked back to camp.
Trekking across the Exalted Plains’ humid hills had two competing thoughts coming to the same conclusion. They pertained to the region’s sizzling air and the posterior-focused view the Inquisitor earned in walking behind Blackwall: *damn that’s hot.*

The breeze was empty and sweltering. His butt was generous. Yet both had Vinya a little gloomy regardless of the latter’s very nice niceness. Getting down to gather lakeshore blood-lotus, the wind off the water still didn’t cool her spirits, as various circumstances had her pouting sourly. Blackwall’s conversational prattle didn’t help her mood, either, and she felt herself breathing harder and sweating worse in exasperation while he spoke.

“There’s not much here, is there?” the man postulated, looking over the banks leading to the shore. Barren land ran for miles, disappearing into dust and dancing soot. “Perhaps that’s why it was given to the elves. Says a lot about the ones doing the giving.”

Falling to her knees, Vinya wrenched the sought-for vegetation from its buried roots. She also rolled her eyes.

It was for the elves that they gathered herbs — and yet it really wasn’t. Enough concessions had been made to gain the support of Keeper Hawen, but the act of it was for *her.* Vinya craved familiarity lately. Doing chores for the local Dalish was the kind of mind-consuming distraction she hankered after. Manufacturing the blood-lotus into tar, a little aravel-repair, and traps-setting would have made her day.

The joy of discovering a clan was immeasurable. The amount of homesickness it stirred-up was tremendous. And the frustration born from seeing men scar the local soil with battle while the elves barely got by—well, that was par for the course.

Blackwall’s comments were on point: the sort that normally had her appreciating her vhenan anew. His words, however, were coupling themselves with a newly-discovered habit of his, and it left Vinya suspicious.

Alongside the heat, said skepticism boiled, simmered, and thickened to a stew.

“I wonder if the elves will ever find a home,” Blackwall lamented.

“You don’t *need* to feel sorry for the elves,” Vinya huffed over her shoulder. “Even with all the shit we’re putting up with here, we’re still surviving. Maybe not thriving, but, given the circumstances, Howen’s people are doing pretty damn good, thanks.”

“It’s not pity for them — it’s pity for the fools who think this is right,” Blackwall clarified. He put his basket beside her while remaining standing where the breeze was. “I pity the bastards who think using slurs like ‘knife-ear’ make them bigger men. Every deserter here deserves a reminder of just how sharp the elves keep their arrows. Maybe while taking a piss?”

The Inquisitor’s nostrils flared. “Uh-huh. So the ears *aren’t* embarrassing, then?”

“Vin… *what?*” Blackwall, clearly attempting to dissuade the tension with toilet humour, jolted like he’d been shoved. “How can you think that?”
“How can I—?” Vinya hefted herself up by the knee. Oddly enough, yelling wasn’t making things better, but she decided to try again. “Really?! You say all these things which are true and… self-aware, I guess—seeing as you’re human—but then you act like these ears aren’t here. And you keep doing it!”

“Shouldn’t I?”

Vinya clenched her fists, expelling a whistling, incensed air stream. “Y…! No? I just wish you’d touch them sometimes, that’s all.”

“Touch them?” Brow furrowed, Blackwall folded his arms across his chest. Gambeson abandoned, dressed in his thinnest layers, sweat had his loose, long-sleeved undershirt clinging in patches across his stomach and arms. The material was thinned; delicate — almost as delicate as his next query. “Is this an elf thing?”

“This is a sex thing,” Vinya informed fumingly, crossing her arms as well. “I’ve nibbled your damned earlobes enough at this point that you should have caught on, but no.”

“Well, I… may have been avoiding it. Didn’t realize it bothered you.” Squinting apologetically, he put his hands up. “Before you show your displeasure by throwing me in the lake, let me explain. I knew men—bastards, really—who chose their servants based on their ears. The bigger the better. Saw them as exotic. Still treated the elves like shit, of course. And I… I wouldn’t want to be anything like them.”

“You… wouldn’t.”

Fanning air across her face, Vinya looked out over the water. She was between the rocks in her head and the hard place which was admitting she was wrong. His reasoning was sweet, if overly cautious. It went to his usual considerate nature: both for the put-upon, and her.

“I… am… I’m stupid.” She ran a hand over her hair, stomach sinking. “I’m really, truly stupid.”

“Don’t say you’re stupid, Vin,” Blackwall tutted. “Just apologize.”

“I’m sorry I’m so stupid?”

It was a lucky thing his arms were crossed because it meant less work to look annoyed. Brow bending, lip jutting, Blackwall lavished her with stink-eye.

“Alright, yes — I’m sorry.” Vinya walked over shyly. “The heat is driving me crazy, the demons are driving me crazy, and… I was looking for a fight. If I’d thought about it for more than three seconds, I would have realized I was wrong. Which I was. Sorry.” Close enough to touch him though she was, she refrained. “Really sorry.”

“All’s forgiven, my lady. So long as you forgive me for making my own assumptions. And —”Blackwall smirked“—so long as you don’t actually throw me in the lake. I know you could.”

“Damn right I could!” Grinning madly and feeling better, she knocked his empty basket over with her foot. With that nonsense done with, their day could continue. “Back to it?”

He nodded. “Back to it. Although…” Somewhere between standing there and starting for the blood-lotus, Blackwall got distracted with looking smug. “I’ve a question. You’ve, uh, been thinking about this a lot? The ear thing?”

The Inquisitor shrugged. “I guess so. No, not really. Today, maybe.”
“Then perhaps it’s not the weather getting you worked up? Or the demons?”

Vinya bit her lip to steele her grin from getting too real. Unable to keep it checked, she turned to face the water, hiding her acknowledging, bubbly beaming. “Alright, smart guy.”

“What I’m saying,” Blackwall rumbled darkly in her ear as he sidled up behind, “is maybe something else was getting you hot and bothered. Someone else.”

It was a testament to his finesse that he had her frigging shivering in temperatures that saw flames spontaneously starting. His big, hard hands held her waist; his wet breath breezed over her—

“Oh! Nuh-uh. No way.” Vinya hopped away a few feet, fanning herself again. “You start that now, and someone is going to be on their back. And no matter who it is, you are going to be complaining. ‘My knees… these rocks are hell on my knees…! My back, oh… my poor back...’”

Chuckling, Blackwall shook his head. “Your ears are that sensitive?”

Vinya nodded.

The man glanced thoughtfully at the clouds. “It has been sometime since I had a good rut in the dirt.” Feet crunching through sand and pebbles, he walked closer. “Perhaps I should remind myself how much hurt it does my knees. My poor, old knees.”

“Aw, you’re not old.” Vinya smiled as he grabbed her by the waist. Leaning in, she nuzzled his cheek. “You’re ancient.”

“You little shit.”

Hard to say who was going to get the better end of the bargain. With the heat, it was likely to be whoever did less work, and according to precedent that was the Inquisitor.

Blackwall circled her; pulled her back against his chest and puffed over her ear. She shivered because it was cooler than the air, and shook for the little, humming vibrations it sent through her skin to her core. His hands worked the strings of her trousers while he took an ear tip between his lips, twisting, nipping, and tongue flicking at the tip. Vinya moaned, pressing deeper into his chest, gyrating her hips against his crotch happily.

“You do like that, don’t you?”

“Mm-hmm,” Vinya acknowledge drunkenly, hands gripping his moving arms for stability. “It sends nice, little tingles to my… my mmm…!”

He pinched the ear tip with his canines. The pain was acute and electric. An intense tweak went straight to her nipples—stiffening under the layers of leather—and to her smalls, where Blackwall soon shoved his fingers.

“Soaked already?”

Vinya jolted, her ass digging into his thick, blunt, trousered cock. Blackwall’s fingers cradled between her legs, dabbing at her slit.

“Told you,” she hummed, head falling back. “It’s nice.”

Blackwall’s fingers curled, the tips just entering her scorching channel. She shouted.
“Where I am?” The man smirked salaciously. “This is better.”

Unable to properly penetrate due to the angle, Blackwall’s massive fingers rapidly assailed her clit, his tongue meanwhile laving over her sensitized right ear. He flicked at her nub, nipped her eartip, flicked her nub, nipped her eartip, and set into a pattern that had her delirious and huffing, unable to catch her breath for the constant stimulation. A new sweat broke out as she thrashed against his chest, but this added to the general heat and unfortunately Vinya sobered as she found herself uncomfortably warm.

“It’s too… bloody… It’s too hot.” Vinya jerked, pulling Blackwall’s slicked hand out of her smalls and moving away. She looked at him from beneath half-hooded lids, aware that she was full-on sweating as beads of salty, stinging water trickled from her brow. “How about I be the one with the sore knees, and you can owe me tonight?”

“Oh, you?” Blackwall repeated, frowning. “Is that what this is? Some sort of… barter system?”

She knew he was teasing. “I’m going to be the one with the sore knees,” she repeated.

Blackwall laughed. “Right. Get to it, then.”

Vinya settled on her butt, pulled his trousers down, and popped his red, ripe cock in her mouth. Tried to, anyways. Blackwall’s girth was plenty. She usually spent as much time trying not to bite him as get him off.

“Yes. Fuck, Vin.”

He wasn’t quiet when she sucked him.

Gripping him with one hand, the Inquisitor’s tongue circled the ruddy tip, licking leaking precum in little laps as she milked it in solid pumps. She glanced up, wide-eyed, because that always made him hiss, which he did, now, with one hand working through her hair, caressing then gripping; tearing at, then smoothing back. Sweat had stuck his hair to his face and shirt to his stomach. He was a mess and she’d barely started. He was gorgeous from down here — a tall, unbending oak about to be felled. Or some other bad metaphor relating to wood.

Drawing him in halfway, Vinya’s stretching jaw twinged. Her tongue slid over veins and velvet skin, tasting salt and musk which the temperatures had thickened to a memorable flavor. Exploring delicate, veiny curves, the bottom of her tongue squirmed against his swelling member. Blackwall lost a throaty, quivering rumble above; Vinya set to pace, pulling back, moving forward, lips working up and down, bucking at Blackwall’s cock while making little desperate sounds of her own. She loved this: his grunting just enough to coax her on; the challenge to make him spill. Blackwall was much more practiced; she had things to learn, but those things left him with a dopey smile that was beautiful, and she loved all the spit and jaw-aching it took to get him there.

Anticipating the triumph of a good going-down, Vinya carefully took him to the back of her throat, but the Inquisitor’s emboldened eyes suddenly watered. Sputtering, she wrenched away, gasping as her gag reflex was left unimpressed, while Blackwall elsewhere hollered, aimed away, and spurted across the sand. In a blink, it was done. Touching over her sore throat, Vinya watched his jutting bottom lip and slouching posture as he leaned into the last few seconds of ecstasy, hand pumping his cock of its last pearls.

“Really?”

Blackwall glanced at her with that torpid, creeping smirk. “What can I say? You’re getting better.”
“Mm-hmm.” Forcing herself to stand on limbs that were oddly tired (and definitely flushed), she struggled to put her hands on her hips. “If you like hearing me gag, you should come to more meet-and-greets with Josephine’s nobles when they visit Skyhold. Then, at least, I’d have your battering-ram to threaten them with when the get lippy.”

Chuckling, Blackwall put his trousers in order. “As my lady commands,” he relented. “I imagine with all their nice words and knives aimed at your back, they're rather bothersome. And if they learned of your… sensitivity, shall we say? They'd be down-right irritating.”

Preoccupied with gathering up their baskets, Vinya considered what was said. Snapping to attention, her eyes scrupulously zeroed in. “Did you just… actually say that?”

Blackwall shrugged. “Sorry. It was ear-resistable.”

Dropping the baskets, shoving her hands in her hair, the Inquisitor stormed off, melodramatic mortification flabbergasting her features. “You did! You did just say! And I let you put your… your you in my mouth! The betrayal!”

Ludicrously grieving, Vinya was followed by Blackwall back to camp and their tent. Where, thanks to her aforementioned sensitivity, Vinya soon became a whole lot more incoherent.
kiss on the neck

She hesitated.

“How’s this?”

“It’s… good. But you don’t have to hold back. Let go. Your weight on me isn’t a prob—oh. Perfect. Sweetheart, that’s perfect.”

The cot croaked with protests more pointless than Kirkwall’s mages’ requests for respect. And it was about to get worse. Down to their smallclothes, Hawke lowered herself upon Anders’ stomach while the healer’s lithe hands rubbed her thighs.

“Just keep talking,” Anders reminded.

Knobby fingers scraped across the rough cotton of his undershirt. “You too.”

“Oh, you know me.” Anders grinned. “Chatterbox. So no worries there.”

It was warm where they were: the apex of embroidered pillows, scavenged quilts, ratty blankets, luxurious carpets, and anything else either ritzy or ruined that had been collected for their nest. Behind the clinic now idled by late-evening, a home had been amassed in book-stacks, equipment for potions prepping, clothing-piles and kitchen stuff. Hawke liked it lot more than the mansion. There was no pretending here. It was dirty, straight, and — right down to the bad smells — immensely honest.

A concept she struggled with.

Hawke swallowed uncertainly. She spoke with the marshaled bravery of someone staring down a hurlock rather than enjoying snuggle-time with their sweetie. “I want… I want to kiss you.”

A roll of Anders’ hips suggested the same. “I’d like that.” She could feel him beyond her smalls: the stomach muscles and heat shivering against her core. She bit her lip as he begged, “touch me, love.”

So Hawke leaned down and did.

A week ago, the circumstances of her presence here had been worlds different. A gaping wound; a bloodied heart: given what she had lately done to him, Hawke hadn’t expected Anders to treat either the situation or her with much patience (a clinic patient though she was). The able hands peeling away robes stuck to her open injury, however, tremored with an old feeling; a habit unforgotten.

“I… Look, Anders. Last week—”

“Please don’t. I said I would come to you if you door was unlocked, and it wasn’t. Given the kiss, and what I said… But there’s no reason to drudge up the past. Let me finish here, and you can be on your—”

“I love you.”

Provoking Meredith’s men; smuggling mages from the city: that was how Hawke had always explained her feelings. Supporting Anders implicitly was her way of circumventing saying stuff like “I” and “love” and that last part because words were hard. She’d grown up on lectures concerning the paramount importance of staying hidden, so that’s what she did: Hawke hid away behind silence.
Impossibly, she met a man to whom she wanted to explain her soul. When it came time to do so, Hawke didn’t know how. Hence Bodhan turning Anders away that night; expressly, and plainly, saying no one wanted to see him.

The following loss left Hawke so numbed that the Carta blade in her belly didn’t mean a thing until she realized it was a reason to visit the clinic.

“I’ve been,” she started, “stabbed,” she choked, falling and bleeding out on the floor.

He carried to a patient’s bed. She told him she loved him. Tale as old as time: girl gets stabbed, and then goes chatty about her feelings.

So they made a promise: they had to communicate.

Leaning down, Hawke kissed him carefully, every second of this intimacy a lesson. It wasn’t necessarily about learning what he liked, though that was her goal. It was about learning what she could do; how she could touch someone, and what it would lead to. Because she was, without doubt, the most virgin-est virgin in the Free Marches, although most women her age were married and a mother.

Hawke pressed close, tentatively sucking Anders’ bottom lip. He laughed.

“Don’t think too hard, love.”

“I don’t want to…” Hawke winced. “Hurt you?”

“You won’t.” Anders’ hands, resting on the small of her back as she lay on him, worked relaxing circles. “Promise.”

Going for gold, Hawke threw herself into the deep end. Those waters were situated specifically along Anders’ cheek and jaw as she roamed, kissing and trailing light, exploring the rough of his scruffy, sort-of beard. She went back to his lips, and the softness of them — like pink silk — made her accidentally lose a little sound of consideration as she thought just how pink, soft, and silky they really were. Her eyes widened, and Anders snickered quietly, gorgeously and kind.

“That’s it. Get lost. You’re wonderful, Ann.”

She blushed. Dipping in again, Hawke tried to do just that. Turned out it wasn’t hard. Anders smelled wonderfully and distractingly of soap on his skin and hair, having spruced up pretty meticulously as far as washing went. She could feel his nails — also cleaned — scraping up and down her spine as she kissed his jaw, went to his ear, and tried his earlobe. Underneath her, Anders twitched, groaning deep in his throat. Hawke smiled on his skin and pulled this time. Anders laughed breathily this time.

“I like that,” he said.

Hawke continued, kissing and pinching with her lips, darting her tongue out once in a while over his soap-soured skin, though she tried not to lick too much (it seemed weird). Inching downward, she made it to his neck, and Anders really reacted to that. Or, rather, he didn’t, but that was just as telling. He stilled and his breathing harried as she worked his neck in hard, solid, smacking kisses. Down the side, along the crook; across to his windpipe. Back arched, Anders swallowed, his bobbing Adam's apple teasing her. Hawke went for it, kissing small and gentle, then pushing harder, wondering if she could get a groan from him. He was so still beneath her she imagined he’d soon burst with held-in breath. Ann reveled in the warmth of him; realized she could just stay here, curled on Anders’ chest and kissing him, and if it was forever that was fine.
Her hand joined her lips. A finger traced down the thick neck muscle, mouth following. The scent of washing faded to ozone, weird and light. The hair on her arms snapped with static. Something was wrong.

Sitting up, Hawke gasped at the sparks of blue criss-crossing Anders’ flesh. Scrambling off, Ann stood at the bedside as Anders took a deep breath, arms and legs quivering, his body stiff as a dry twig ready to snap, the air buzzing with wayward mana.

**This** made sense to Hawke. Not the why of it, but the situation itself. Sitting back beside his straining frame, she spoke quietly, finding Justice easier to talk-down than Anders to talk to.

“It’s alright,” she cooed, palm on Anders’ chest, attempting to be an anchor. “Just breathe. Think of where you are. In the clinic, where nothing can hurt you. Hawke is here, and she won’t let anything happen to you.”

Blinking, Anders’ eyes lost the glow and returned to their honied shade. He looked at her, ear-tips blushing.

“Got a little… carried away. Sorry.”

Ann tilted her head. “It was that good?”

He looked away. “Um… not really.”

Oh.

Standing, Ann wrapped her arms around herself, pacing over the carpet. “I didn’t, uh… *Shit*. I should go, or—”

“No, Ann.” Anders’ legs heaved over the side of the cot. “It wasn’t you.”

“Was it… Justice?”

“It wasn’t really him, either.”

Ann bit her lip. She laughed, gusty and nervously. She didn’t know what went wrong, and couldn’t figure out how to ask. “Can we just… lay down? Together?”

Colour back at his cheeks, hair in his eyes and those eyes brightening immediately, Anders flashed a grin. “Absolutely! I’d like that.”

And they did — they lay: Anders on his back, a hand under his head, and Ann curled against his chest. The hopeless hesitation within was almost debilitating. Hawke was the sort to go fists-swinging (and mana flying) into conflict, but there were eggshells here. The thought of driving Anders away again thanks to wrong things said had her quiet; uncharacteristically timid.

“I’m sorry.”

And she was apologizing so much. She’d never said sorry so much in her life.

“It’s alright. Really.”

Their gazes caught together, though — one of them like day and one of them like night — which led to Anders humming regretfully.

“It’s my fault. I should have said something. I’m not…” He looked at the ceiling consideringly. “I’m
not really a fan of having my neck touched. If I’d thought it’d be an issue… But I should have known better. Sorry if I scared you.”

“Scared? Nah. I’m not scared.” Her confidence sounded a bit thin. “I could have… asked…? I guess?”

Anders’ free arm wrapped around her firmer as his stare came down from on high to scrutinize hers. “I’m your first. I can understand if finding out my list of turn-offs wasn’t the most preoccupying thing on your mind.” He half-smiled pensively. “Though, for the record, slapping my face is likely to make me react in the same way. I don’t mind being tied up… sometimes. Have to be in a mood for that, though.”

Hawke lifted herself up to gauge the sarcasm on his face. Finding none, she balked. “You…? What? You sound like Isabela.”

“Oh, no. That’s tame compared to the things I’ve heard come out of her mouth.” Shimmying up, Anders sat as well. “Is there anything you don’t…? Or is there anything you’d like to try? Repressed girl like you, I bet you’re just bursting at the seams to try, I don’t know, whips and thigh-high boots?”

“Repressed? I haven’t been repressed!” Ann shoved at him playfully. “I’ve just been waiting for someone who met my incredibly low standards.”

Anders grinned thin but wide. “If you went any lower, you’d be in the dirt.” He brushed errant strands of hair (behind which she’d partially been hiding) from her eyes. “So. Is there? Anything you like, or think you’d like?”

“I like…”

Plumbing the depths of her paltry stores of sarcasm, Hawke searched for something evasive. Comfortable as she was — as completely trusting and transparent as this moment had her — it still seemed inconceivable to admit to all the things she’d imagined Anders doing to her in her private time. Some of it surprised even her. A lot of it made Hawke shrink with disgust, even if at the time they’d seemed kind of sexy for one brief, sharp, legs-tingling, amazing, explosive moment.

Looking at Anders and probably blushing, she decided to go with a sardonic Grey Warden motif, but instead “I like to watch you eat,” tumbled out.

Anders rolled his eyes. “Yes, Ann. I know you think I don’t eat enough. But I’m being serious.”

“So am I,” Hawke admitted to her own amazement. “You get very… into it? You slurp, and you shovel. You lick your fingers, and lips, and you’re kind of… I mean, they aren’t great manners, but it’s… Plus you made those dumb, cute sounds while scarfing down that Antivan chocolate, and I thought —” Her brain finally caught up to her mouth. “I’m an actual idiot, aren’t I?”

“No, Ann, you…” Anders face split with the largest grin. “You called me cute! That’s huge!”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake…”

As she made to move away, Anders pulled her back. “Sweetheart, we almost stopped talking because you were afraid of saying how you feel. And you just called me cute! Cute!” He smirked. “Which is a good call because I am, in fact, quite cute.”

Warming both with embarrassment and glee, Hawke cuddled against his chest again, fingers tangling in the bursts of chest hair. They got comfortable, again; drowsy, and quiet.
“You’ll have to make me a sandwich sometime,” Anders suggested with a purr against her temple.

Keeping her laughter in with the rest of her soul-cradling joy, Hawke nodded. “Any time.”
Nola's finger upon her cheek; eyes expectant and wide: Fenris frowned the first time it happened.

Hercinia was a Free Marches port-city. Profusely luxurious, it took little scuffing to scrape the glint and reveal grime. Exorbitant taxes imposed by its city council meant a small portion of the population lived fat-happy while the rest were emaciated-miserable. There were palatial cheese shops and winding slums; five families living to a three-room house, but the rich built mansions for their dogs. The docks swelled with sickly slime come from the sea thanks to both the saltwater and slavers passing by.

The latter was why Fenris set sights on this spot. It seemed strange that he, variously wronged by magic, would be glad of the emptying Circles; however, it offered advantage. After Kirkwall’s devastation — and the rebellions that followed — these power-added maleficar were drawing the attentions of Tevinter, whose slavers came extending friendship, after which they slapped the mages with indenturement contracts. It meant they were bait Fenris needn’t set himself. It meant he had the hunt, and a small way of forgetting the loss of Kirkwall.

The coastal city offered great convenience for catching those who were shipping boat-loads of chattel back to their new magister masters. Hence entering Hercinia with its salty air, frigid noon winds, and the side-eyes from city guards who wondered if ‘this weird elf’ had paid his visitor fees.

When he was stopped the first time, a ham-sized fist clamped around his upper arm. Fenris turned sharply as a rush of fury focused his vision. His marks flickered; he became bold. Taking a breath, he anchored his feet, turned to face his aggressor, and said with thin civility,

‘*I travel with the Hero of Fereldan. Do you wish to be conscripted into the Grey Wardens?’* 

Needless to say, the bastard backed off.

Hercinia was his choice, but it offered Nola opportunity, as well. The lulling of the Calling; a means of staving off seeping corruption: the Hero was starting a tentative search for Blight counteragents. Although not widely known, an ex-Grey Warden named Fiona had managed the miracle, so now the Hero sought similar reprieve, conscripting information and lore from nobles’ archives — which Hercinia had in abundance.

Fenris wasn’t hopeful. It seemed inevitable that she be taken from him. The good things in his life usually were, after all.

Their first morning in the city was an early one. A hot, summer sun came in thick beams through the curtains, highlighting dancing dust. Because Fenris was woken gently by his own body (rather than, say, a ruckus outside the room), he did not jolt. His eyes opened easily, and he grunted appreciatively for the pressing closeness at his back. Nola was curled around him, an arm tossed over his side, a leg following suit, while her face buried in his neck.

Fenris turned. Nola’s gaze was hazy; smiling. She nuzzled his nose with her own. Fenris’ arm wrapped around her waist, and he pulled her closer. Half an hour passed with the couple dozing peacefully.

Finally Fenris began readying.
“How long will you be out?” Nola signed, sitting backwards on a chair while watching him wash. She wore one of her over-sized shirts, her long, bare legs extending past the hem.

Dressed in black, leather leggings, Fenris squeezed the drenched wash-cloth over his recently cropped hair. Clean, cool water cascaded over his lips, ears, neck, and stirred his sense to wakefulness.

He placed the cloth down, and shrugged.

“Early evening,” he signed back. “It shall depend on what I find. If I am hunting, it may be later.”

“When should I come looking for you?” Nola asked with a teasing lilt to her lips. She tucked hair behind her ear, and rested her chin on the chair’s back.

Fenris frowned. “You do not allow me to hunt darkspawn at your side, so you will not hunt slavers at mine.”

Nola rolled her eyes. “My reasons are good reasons!” she gestured quickly. “You could become tainted! I come with you, and the worst thing that happens is I ruin another shirt with shem blood. And I am very good at getting those stains out.”

He could see she meant this as a humorous peace-offering. Water-trails cooling on his bare chest and shoulders, he walked closer.

“You have your own work. Do not let me distract you.” He cupped her cheek after saying so. Nola leaned into his palm and then sat back.

“Take the food-pack,” she signed. “I’ll be in rich peoples’ libraries all day. They can feed me. I’m going to fill myself with salty fish-eggs and fancy cheese until I burst.”

She laughed.

It took some time for Fenris to get his armor in order. Nola sat on the bed, papers surrounding her, eyes skittering over the varying scribbles then rising to the ceiling as she considered.

Fenris scooped up his sword, secured it in his sheath, and called her attention with a flurry of his wrist.

“I’m off,” he signed, nodding. Moving to the door, he shot the Hero one last glimpse, happy to take with him the intimate image of her dressed only in a loose shirt, her bottom lip pinched thoughtfully between her teeth. Instead, she had a finger pressed to her cheek, and her eyes were expectant.

The man shook his head.

“What does that sign mean?” he asked curiously.

“It means,” she signed back, drollness painting her round features, “that you give me a kiss before you leave.”

Fenris chuckled.

Attuned to absorbing even the slightest of habits or manners, it took only once more for Fenris to learn what was wanted from him. The next morning was more of the same: lazing in bed; wishing to remain in Nola’s arms but looking forward to dispatching slavers. Rising, and washing; dressing, and going for the door. Turning to say he may be late (having been given good leads the previous day),
Fenris saw her finger on her cheek, and her expression one of waiting.

He watched her scrupulously. She looked back at him just as pointedly.

This time she pulled him in, his armor and weapon clanking on the bed as Fenris laughed quietly, always caught off-guard by the love in her touch. He left and he’d learned: Fenris did not go without giving Nola a parting kiss.

They remained in Hercinia for a month. Realizing the slavers would catch wind of their danger should they come to the city, Fenris decided to depart and give the scum room to breath and gain confidence of their safety. Once that happened, he could return.

Which meant it was the Warden’s turn to determine their path. She took them down blighted roads and through dead towns. Fenris saw the lingering extent of the darkspawn’s terror from a decade passed. It was bleak, and black. He found he wanted to forget this was the lot of his beloved. A respectable duty, its realities were a lot less romantic than that of simple heroism.

Fenris and Nola slept in a tent while on a road (Nola’s preference, though Fenris couldn’t say he shared it). Mornings were early. Often too early. Nola would slip out hours before dawn, returning with the reek of battle. Breathing hard, she’d lay there, and he’d lay there, too, wishing to reach out, but he’d abstain. Nola would have been sorry for waking him.

Not all mornings were so bad, however.

“Good morning,” Fenris greeted after exiting the tent to find Nola combing their night of intimacy from her long, knotted red-brown hair. She grinned, motioning with a jut of her chin towards from whence came the savory smells of ‘meat porridge’, as Nola called it: rehydrated jerky soaked in hot broth, chopped up, spiced, and simmered until it was a ghastly, lumpy mess that in fact was delicious.

“My favorite,” Fenris signed approvingly. Spooning a day’s-worth-of-walking sized portion into a bowl for himself, he sat beside her, cross-legged, in the grass. “Then last night was adequate?”

Nola rolled her eyes. “It’s my favorite, too,” she teased, indicating personal preference being the only reason she made his preferred dish. They leaned in, smirking against each other’s lips, kissing soft.

More than adequate, said her sighing.

He dealt with dishes; she washed her body upstream, and donned her Warden’s armor. Fenris was settled against a tree, reading, awaiting the tent canvas’ drying so he might pack up when Nola came over, heavy boots shuffling through the sand.

“Those darkspawn have gone north,” she explained, fingers signing fast and face grim. “I’m a little worried over why they stayed in one spot for so long. We’ll meet twenty miles along the river?”

“I’ll have a fire burning,” Fenris promised, “should it be dark.”

He settled harder against the tree, watching her secure her daggers. Then his eyes slid to the pages while his finger went to his cheek, the man attempting to copy her passed employed look of impassive expectancy.

His heart flip-flopped. It was a playful thing, not a demand. He was, as usual, a little unsure of uncharted territory, and disliked appearing as though he had a right to her body or motions.

But Fenris was rewarded. With a throaty, approving squeal, Nola fell to her knees at his side, planted
a long smooch on his cupped cheek, and followed up by crawling into his lap, her weapon tossed to
the side and smile warm.

Fenris had once known routine to be waking to a day under Denarius’ thumb, but now his rituals
were so far removed from that darkness it was hard to understand. And wonderful. Putting a finger to
his cheek again, she kissed him. Repeating it, she pressed against him harder. Laughing, shaking his
head, Fenris blushed himself into looking down, surprised at his happiness. The Warden’s love
was his most cherished routine of all.
There was none within the Kirkwall Chantry. Sisters, initiates; penitants: all had scurried to their beds, or chores, or lives. The only suggestion of presence were candles lit for the dead, paying homage to bodies that had once been.

Their spectral memories soon had company.

Following the cracking of old wood and opening doors, perfuming frankincense accented by Orlesian lily followed the woman, her black samite singing with swishing against her legs, and each step carrying a tune as the bells on her slippers rang. She sat motionless in the deserted nave which amplified any slight sound. The quiet perusal of a personal hymnal, for example; the nearly imperceptible sigh as it was placed back down.

His steps, of course, might’ve woke the dearly departed.

“Do you ever go home?” Sebastian’s tone was teasing as he walked the length between pews to sit at Hawke’s left.

“What makes you think I haven’t?”

Lifting her head from its lowered, pious position, Mary cast him a skeptical look.

“Rudimentary mathematics,” he answered. “You were here for the morning chant and left later than most. While in Lowtown with alms for the poor, I noticed you speaking with your laborers. And as I searched the Gallows for a decent length of bowstring, a shopkeeper mentioned he’d sold you a spool some minutes earlier. Now you’re here. According to my calculations, you couldn’t possibly have found the time to go home.”

Sebastian sat on her left, one leg bent upon the seat, and an arm stretched along the back.

Hawke tutted with impassive sarcasm. The candlelight enriched her yellow, plaited, and piled-high hair to glowing gold. “You seem very invested in my schedule, Brother Vael. Was there something you needed done? Perhaps another mercenary company is in need of dispatching?”

Sebastian shook his head. “No. Only…”

It wasn’t his place. Her domestic concerns; her public life: Mary Hawke had gone the miles to exemplify all-around propriety, thus casting dark light on any doubts where her conduct was concerned. Beyond merely laudable, she was a champion. When the citizens of Kirkwall required justice that the law failed to provide, Hawke stepped in. Upon learning that a penniless family deserved sympathy, she made donations through the Chantry while remaining anonymous. She leveraged her new position in society to realize better rights for foreigners living in the city; helped organize new guilds for lace-makers and laundresses so that these women might have established wages and economic freedoms.

She was a wonder, but it wasn’t his place. These last weeks Hawke was faltering — Sebastian could see it. She was working harder, but not kinder. And, as Sebastian also knew, Mary was spending little time at her estate, often sleeping in her Lowtown offices while sending for Bodhan to bring fresh clothing in the morning.

“Only what?” Hawke repeated.
“Your servants say they’ve barely seen you. The elf is particularly anxious at your absence.” Sebastian tilted his head as Hawke turned to face the front. “Go home,” he urged softly.

“I’ve **been** home,” she replied, her delicate nostrils flaring with tempered ire. “And I’ve been busy. What business is it of Orana’s if I’m away?”

“**Hawke,**” Sebastian warned, surprised at her callousness.

The woman blinked rapidly. “You of all people should approve, really. Mother, she… She left half her wealth to the Chantry in her will. I’m trying to match the amount. It will be a very generous endowment when I’ve managed to put it together.”

“That… is generous.” Sebastian’s lips parting in surprise. “I had no idea.” He paused. “Your mother was an incredibly gracious woman.”

Hawke’s eye twitched. Beyond that, she seemed of wax.

Sebastian sighed.

“Will you walk with me?” the man asked.

He could hear nothing but dress fabric moving against long, lithe legs. Through a few forgettable corridors they found a private garden tucked away behind the Chantry. Full of sleeping flowers and lively foliage, there were benches, planters bearing budding herbs, fireflies, and a few unlit braziers shaped to the image of Andraste cupping flame.

Sebastian sat down on a granite bench, watching Hawke follow suit. He hoped the added intimacy might convince her to find, in him, a confidant, but unfortunately Hawke said nothing. Fingers knit in her lap, a mask of reservation deadened her features.

“Do you know what I think?” Sebastian posited conversationally. “I think you’re avoiding your empty nest. Without your mother — without your family, and the people who make cold stone a home — without them, your mansion seems lonely. And I do not blame you. Not a day goes by when I do not wonder what it would feel like to walk my father’s halls without him present. With my brothers gone; my mother...”

He stopped. A regular speculation, ice pricked his veins at old thoughts: that of the soul-numbing suffering he’d endure should he ever return to Starkhaven. The city was his family’s legacy. Not a brick or marble-slab stood without suggesting the name ‘Vael’, and yet the city stood inviolate while his parents — his **brothers**— were ash.

Hawke bit her big, bottom lip. “Really?” She looked kinder at him now, body inching closer. “We’ve never… I would have asked, but it seemed impertinent. I —”

“Say it,” Sebastian softly urged when Hawke had fallen silent with genteel restraint.

“I meant so often to ask after you and how you were dealing. Following what we discovered. Then time passed, and it seemed pointless to ask.” She put a hand on his, which was balled into a fist. “You are kind, Sebastian, to care when I did nothing of the sort.”

“Nothing of the — ?” Smiling, Sebastian shook his head. “The woman who avenged my family — who made it possible that I discover who ordered such a vile deed and why — did nothing of the sort? It is not always our words but our actions that speak loudest to what we feel. And your actions were very… vociferous.”
Humming approvingly, Hawke smiled, taking her hand away. In an instant her eyes snapped back towards him, mouth ajar, and Sebastian knew that expression of mortified self-appointed revulsion. She had smiled while her mother was dead. She had smiled, and it was insulting and disrespectful according to some unspoken custom of mourning.

“Actions are well and good, but it is alright to speak, too.” The picture of pious, brotherly feeling, he took her hands in his again. “Speak to me, Mary. Share your burden.”

Her fingers clung to his. Shoulders straightening decisively, her eyes lifted to the stars beyond Kirkwall’s cloaking smog. “I don’t regret these trials the Makers has thrown at me. But again and again it happens, and I can’t help but wonder if it will stop. In fact, I’m afraid of when it will stop. That it hasn’t stopped. The Maker has mother and father and Carver with him, and Bethany is in the Circle, but… what happens when he takes what I have left? And I hate myself for fearing it, but I do. What happens when the Maker takes — ?”

She looked at their interwoven fingers and shook them free, a burning sadness warming what could have been a cold expression.

Sebastian swallowed, throat tight.

“What happens when the Maker takes the last someone?” Hawke finished.

Knowing well who she meant, and realizing the road they were now on was hazardous, the man still put an arm around her shoulder. Hawke leaned into him, forehead pillowing on his cheek.

The weakness of grief; the crumbled modesty of mourning melancholia: Sebastian was shocked that Hawke let herself so low as to need him to physically support her exhausted frame, but then, he supposed, the way she turned her head just slightly to bring their lips closer spoke volumes as to her rationale. If she was going to allow misery to so heinously offend her conduct, then misery would bring her to ruin in fantastic fashion.

“Mary,” Sebastian whispered warningly, shifting. His lips were at her temple.

“Don’t you want me?” she asked.

Her forwardness wrenched his stomach.

“If I broke my vows to be with you, I wouldn’t be worthy of you.”

“I know.”

It was the most they’d ever discussed their unsaid, storming-beneath-the-surface, kept tempered but always present affections for each other. The avoided admission was as much a part of their relationship as bonding through Hawke’s good deeds or their shared faith. It went unsaid because that’s where it had to stay: on the heart in a silent song.

But now it was out. And although understanding was on both sides, it wasn’t better. Sebastian felt worse; sick. Holding her closer — comforting her better with his arms wrapped around her; with consolations whispered at the crook of her neck as he kissed her reverently — was beyond the bounds of his vows. And pretending he was there as a brother in faith, and that his touching was a gentle and chaste thing, was no longer viable.

Sebastian straightened his posture, taking his arm from around her. Hawke stopped pressing against him, and folded her hands in her lap.
Then she looked at him, eyes dulled by grief, voice without life, and asked, “just once?”

Sebastian shook his head to himself but kissed her anyways.

He found warmth and fulfillment. It broke his heart.

Pulling away, breathing in her perfume for what he swore was the last time, he stood. “I will always be here if you need to talk, Mary.”

On her feet, Hawke smoothed down the front of her dress. “Thank you, Sebastian. Will you show me to the door?”

He did.
exhausted parents kiss

“Alright, I’ve nearly… Where’s Oghren’s gear? Where’s Oghren?”

“Down by the lake, I expect,” Alistair informed. “Trying to see where the water ends and ale starts. He’s been sober far too long and it’s getting unsettling. The man actually tried having a serious conversation about the local flora. Something about soil integrity and, I don’t know, roots? Ghastly.”

Slogging over with the kitchen-bag, Alistair dropped it in a clank of cast-iron near the impromptu fire-pit over which Augustine fusses.

The woman’s voice was emptied of all but bone-deep exhaustion. She stared dully at her task. “What a day…”

“Mm. Chased by werewolves… darkspawn… bandits.” Groaning as his tired butt hit the ground, the commiserating Alistair lay flat out on his back, legs akimbo. “Think they coordinated?”

It had started early. Well before dawn, both Wardens shot from their bedrolls, the song of darkspawn seeping through their dreams like something greasy and sick. After dispatching a small, encroaching horde, the group half-packed the camp, but were soon running from flocking werewolves attempting to make them breakfast.

(And not the sort that comes after a late, romantic evening of roses and bubble baths. The kind where the Wardens ended up on a spit-roast surrounded by drooling fur balls.)

Shortly following a foodless lunch, there were bandits followed by bandits trailed by bandits. One by one, groups of highwaymen attempted to gouge them with tolls for walking on certain roads, or crossing certain bridges, and, in one case, they simply out-right tried to take their gear.

(The honestly was appreciated, if nothing else, though the lack of creativity had been disappointing.)

At last, things settled. Overhead, the clouds were now a massing murkiness colour-tinged by ribbons of sunset. It was pretty, but Alistair’s pretty eyes were pretty tired, too, so they slipped behind heavy lids, saying goodbye to the sky.

Wriggling, the man scratched an itch on a stone and rambled. “It was just so timely. One after the other. Bing, blam; wham-oh. My socks got soaked before breakfast, and… Oh, look, they still are; would you look at that. Neat.”

Despite soggy tootsies, Alistair was comfortable for the first time all day. Relaxed. In a second, it was stripped away.

“Considering the fire has seemingly proved to be beyond the bounds of your immense capabilities,” mocked an unimpressed Morrigan from beyond the safety of Alistair’s eyelids, “perhaps you might tend to another matter?”

Augustine’s voice was stuffed with that reserve she usually reserved for speaking with stuffed-shirts. Her nigh-implacable good-humour when it came to The Witch astounded Alistair. “What’s that?” she asked.

“Your mongrel refuses to move from the spot I’ve chosen as my resting place!”

Alistair piped up. “Resting place? Isn’t that where your ashes go when, you know, you die?”
Planning on bettering a very terrible day by keeling over, dear Morrigan?"

“You!” groused the woman, face stricken with exasperation. “I won’t squander what little patience I have left on your inane prattle.” She turned pointedly to Augustine, voice evened and tense. “If you will, Warden?”

“Alright. I’ll be right there in…”

“Can someone please explain to me,” demanded Leliana as she stomped over, shoes pounding across the dirt, “how, after such a day as ours, we have chosen such a… such a dismal, lowly place as our campsite? The water is barely a teeny, tiny pond fit for birds, and we shan’t be able to bathe, never mind cook!”

“Do not speak of birds!” Shale boomed offendedly, tsking their thick, rocken tongue. “I like the crunch and crack of an enemy’s body beneath my foot as much as anyone, but today was sorely excessive — and now you speak of birds?”

“I will speak of whatever I wish!” Leliana shot back, brow crinkling with fury. Apparently intent on disagreeing with the mountain of sentient, blood-lusty stone, she rounded on Shale, walking over with her fists balled.

Alistair and Augustine exchanged horrified expressions.

“I’m waiting!” In a flap of leather skirts, Morrigan flew off.

“I’ll get Leliana,” Alistair said, pulling himself to his feet. “You see to Morrigan.”

“Whoever makes it out alive finds Oghren,” Augustine agreed.

Three hours (that felt like five) later, the Wardens were hauling their tired, sore skins into their shared tent. A conspicuous silence had fallen over the camp, strong and obvious. The absence of sound seemed to have a sentience of its own, and, with lips sewn shut, no one tried to offend it. That is, until Alistair found his bedroll.

“Oh. Oh, Maker. This is better than — well, I won’t say what it’s better than, but you know what I’m thinking!”

Their old, thin blankets could have been lain atop rocks and roots, and still the muscle-soothing comfort of finally laying down would have been nigh-orgasmic. Alistair stretched and purred, finding the perfect spot, and his head swam with the knowledge that he could, at last, truly do nothing.

“Puppy sacrifices! Sacrificing puppies! That’s what this is better than.”

“Everything is better than puppy sacrifices,” Augustine reasoned.

“So what you’re saying is I’m right.”

The miffed silence across the camp morphed and warped to something more intimate. Everyone was cranky, but everyone was cranky— the day’s complaints were shared by all like supper’s lumpy stew, meaning present company was in the same boat. And sharing was caring. At least, Alistair hoped it was. He thought of the times Leliana’s bow brought down someone trying to put a dagger in his back, or Morrigan’s barriers which saved him pain, or Oghren’s axe which bought him time. No one really liked anyone else right now, per say, but there was appreciation. Somewhere. Probably at the end of a long, deep sleep.
Rolling onto his side, Alistair immediately made an alteration to his sleepy ruminations. He didn’t really like anyone right now, but Augustine? He loved. 

Reaching out, Alistair pulled the blanket higher for her, admiring the painted arch of her brow and curve of her cheek.

Augustine peeped his way. “Thanks.”

Like a starving woman dragging herself towards bread, or a parched person pulling their body to water (was he thirsty? hungry? Alistair couldn’t help but wonder), Augustine laboriously snuggled closer to him. It was so much work, but she put in the effort, and Alistair was charmed by the reek of sweat in her hair as she pillowed her head upon his chest. He hadn’t really washed, either, so there they lay: dead to the world while stinking like it.

It was smelly work saving the world.

“How’d you deal with Leliana?”


“Sock-puppet show?”

“Exactly.” He rubbed her back. “Honestly, I just listened. She talked about whether this was what the Maker truly intended for her; complained about the, uh, amenities. I’m assuming the amiable Morrigan was dealt with as easily.”

“I got the dog to move and helped her set up her tent. She was bitchy, but…”

“… but she always is?”

Augustine adjusted, laying her chin on his chest so she could look him in the eye. Alistair thought it a stellar idea.

“Hey,” he greeted warmly.

“Hey,” she repeated just as drowsy.

“How’d you placate our miserable walking book of bad sex jokes?”

“Oghren? Showed him my breasts.”

Alistair laughed. “Ha! That’s… that’s… You didn’t really.”

Augustine squirmed into a better spot. “Too bad being cranky isn’t in your nature, hm?”

Feeling strangely satiated, Alistair had been about to generously defend their stalwart berserker when, from a calm so beautiful it could make you cry, Morrigan’s horrified shriek cut right through. It was a sound reserved for one lecher only, and followed by understandable cursing.

“Oghren!” Alistair boomed, voice brimming with authority. “Don’t make me come over there!”

“I wasn’t… ah… hm, uh… hehe …”

Augustine bit her lip. She whispered, face forlorn, “I may have given him my flask.”

Alistair’s brow bent formidably and he took a deep breath. “Oghren!” he called again.
“Alright, alright, keep yer britches on, weren’t gonna hardly…”

In the wake of Oghren’s murmured retreat, things dulled again. Augustine was smiling cheekily, and grins gave way to giggling. Burying her face in Alistair’s chest, she snorted, continuing to cackle over a joke only she was in on.


“It’s just…”

Peeking up, a red-faced Augustine sighed happily, leaned in, and kissed his lips. It was lazy — there was no passion in it — but Maker it was easy. And snug. Like a blanket, or a hug, or cocoa on a cold evening. It was different. Decidedly so. When Augustine locked lips, she usually had steamy things on the brain, but this… It had Alistair melting with affection; with a touch more about communicating than foreplay. It was love — slow, idle, comfortable love, and leading to nothing more than a silent declaration of tenderness. It was wonderful.

Augustine pulled back, glowing. “You sounded like my father. Or, wait. No. Ew.” She frowned. “You sounded like a father. And I realized that, at the worst of times, we’re almost like parents. To a group of randomly assembled, fashion-dense and mannerless oddballs, but parents nonetheless.” She looked at him bluntly. “They take almost entirely after you.”

“Mm, yes. Parents. I can see where you get that.” Alistair crooked his brow. “We’re withholding; we never read them bedtime stories like we used to. There’s spanking.” He wiggled his brow but then quickly stopped. “Ew. Bad. Bad analogy!”

“I think you’ll make a wonderful father someday.”

Alistair just watched. He watched as she said no more; as she snuggled up to his chest after a long silence, letting sleep finally take her. He should have said something — just as he should have said something those weeks ago instead of springing “surprise! I’m a secret, bastard prince!” on her — but Alistair wanted what they had for a little longer. The love; this impossible need Augustine seemed to have when closing her eyes. She had to touch him — huddle against his back, or have him wrapped around her — because if not she was restless; a wind-swept leaf without tether to the earth that tossed ridiculously and annoyingly in bed. It usually ended with the bed sheets wrapped around her legs, or on the ground, while she hummed and hawed, and really? It was a mess.

More than that, however, she wanted to make a family with him. Although Alistair didn’t believe a family needed babies, dogs, distaste towards Orlais, or any of the other ingredients apparently required to make a happy Fereldan marriage, he still swooned at the idea of being Augustine’s husband and father to her kids. Just the idea of that — of ma, pop, and Alistair Jr. — was, like… wow. Just wow. There were no words which could get to his lips passed his swelling heart. It wasn’t something he’d ever dreamed of because it wasn’t something he’d thought he deserved, but Augustine? She deserved it. She wanted it. Which meant he probably wanted it, too.

Pulling a blanket around them, Alistair held her close. He threaded a kiss through her knotted, sand-gritty hair. “Good night, mother,” he whispered, testing out the epithet she could be called in some distant, dreamy, wonderful version of the world. Another world where they’d met randomly, courted, and tied the knot. Had babies; a home. A life without violence.

Then he frowned, icked and grossed out.

*Still weird* Alistair thought. *Bad. Bad analogy!*
His last, pre-passing-out thoughts were of Augustine's opinions on the name *Duncan* for their first son.
The late hour had conspired with a day chock-full of travel and equally exhausting anxiety. Creaking up the cracking steps to her quarters, the Inquisitor was beyond sapped. It was miraculous how doing nothing had rung the life from her like a wrenched rag, but Point A to Point B on horseback was draining.

Almost asleep on her feet, nearly landing on her face at the landing as she topped the steps, Vinya spotted *The Idiot* and dizzied from an energy-concerned turnaround. Full of face-slapping surprise, the now alert Inquisitor crossed her arms as she watched the man’s fidgeting hands fumbling together. All the worry she’d been wrapped up in that day had convinced her this was impossible, but here they were. Alive. Together.

Blackwall was in a chair by the hearth.

“Been waiting long?” Vinya asked. “Because I was in your loft for at least an hour.”

Blackwall groaned.

“Of course you were there. I *did* wonder.” He shook his head to himself. “I came here first. Would’ve gone to the barn but I wasn’t sure you would. And I... wanted to see you.”

The fact that she’d worked herself into a nervous disaster all day was lost on him. Blackwall’s tone made his mood clear—he was obviously happy to see her—but that did not mean he was getting off the hook.

“How could you think I wouldn’t go there? Where else did you think I’d go?” Vinya’s arms tightened at her chest. “And how could you *do* that?! Just... take off! After you left, I had no idea where you went. None of our scouts on the coast reported seeing you. I had to assume you slept in the rain. You said we could talk when we got back, but I didn’t think that meant you were going to disappear until then!”

She’d been hopeful—too hopeful—in making a pit-stop on the Storm Coast. Blackwall had wanted to show her “something privately”, and her heart jumped at the chance a few, short seconds before the rest of her leapt, too. The rising, rocky extremities of the region were impossibly slick, hell on the knees, and she still had bruises from a few vicious tumbles, but after their last discussion Vinya had been desperate.

And hopeful. Too, damned hopeful.

He’d said often it didn’t matter what she was: human or not, male or female; divine or less than saintly. As long as she did good, and stood for good, then he’d stand beside her. Upon arriving at Skyhold and finally talking about their feelings, however, Blackwall turned her away. His tone suggested things would change after a trip to the Storm Cost, except then he vanished after another heart-to-heart. Not only had her maybe-sweetheart left, but her lethallin had left, too. Her close, important, *she’d-throttle-someone-if-she-lost-him* friend. Vinya hadn’t only been desperate: she’d been *terrified*.

“*I was terrified,*” she told him.
“Really?” implored Blackwall. “And here I thought nothing scared you.”

It was a challenge. An apology, too, thanks to the evocative emphasis on things unsaid.

And here I thought nothing scared you. You brave, courageous, damned crazy woman.

Vinya went on the defense. “Spiders, wet dogs looking to shake off, and you being stubborn. Those are the things I’m afraid of.” She shrugged relentingly. “Plus Antivan food.”

Blackwall chuckled as he walked closer.

“I’m not stubborn,” he insisted, smile hiding in his beard. “You’re the possibly infuriating one.”

His brow bent, ink-black and deep. It was as though he saw into her, and, worse, her secret thoughts about him. The effect was headier than four successive shots of Antian Sip-Sip. Contradictory as it was to the things she wanted to say, and the places she wanted to shove her boot, Vinya found herself confused.

Blackwall wasn’t sweet. He wasn’t dripping honey. His voice was raw like sand in the throat; like skin scratched on rock after a hard shove. He was a blistering flame and someone she burned for. But he had disappeared. And for a fair few awful hours she’d thought he’d never return.

Yet here he was. Present; accounted for. Alive; breathing. Gorgeous; et al.

Vinya frowned. Despite her frustration, she didn’t want him to go away.

“Well… alright.” She tried for coy around her forced smirk. “Just how infuriating am I, then?”

Blackwall was close, now. Close enough to pull her in and slip his tongue between her lips like he’d done it a thousand times.

Vinya froze.

Creators, was he smooth. Months of fruitless flirting and stolen glances hadn’t prepared her for things like tastes and smells when all she’d thought at night was ‘I bet it’s like wrestling a bear’. There was ale-breath and dry lips. They tasted rough as she pressed into them, her limbs weightless and head lust-drunk. Realizing what was happening, Vinya angled so he could go deeper, welcoming him like she’d wanted to for months.

Blackwall’s beard smelled of smoke. His crushing touch at her hips was outmatched only by the strength of his kiss as he took her, their tongues swirling and scraping, her jaw aching as bad as other places. He pawed and pulled at her ass; she tugged and teased at his hair. They set a messy, desperate pace and precedent for future moments of intimacy while Vinya tried to feel more of him, cradling his head and sighing at the feel of his skin which was soft and softer except in those places where it wasn’t. Soon both of Blackwall’s hands were groping below the belt, and, as he greedily kneaded at her, Vinya’s previously swimming head fell back, full of blinding clarity.

Fuck being mad. Fuck being angry.

It was so, so stupid. Blackwall was finally here. With her. After they’d waited for frigging ever.

With new need, Vinya broke their kiss as she went to rain soft, happy pecking on his cheek, but Blackwall pushed away. Avoiding her eye, his gaze darted around as though double-checking for the retreat-line.
“I needed to see you,” Blackwall panted, gloved hands balling at his sides. “But I didn’t… I shouldn’t be here.”

Vinya laughed, the bright smile on her lips without falter. “But you are! And I know you don’t want to go. You keep coming back. You keep making excuses to be around me. Alone.” Her brow wiggled salaciously.

“And what kind of man makes excuses? What kind of man can’t tell you the truth? I want to give-in; Maker knows I want to…”

It was ludicrous. One short (but fairly worthy) smooch and she was already losing him to sulking and dramatics. Damn his—what, chivalry? Bottomless well of self-deprecation? Exhausting sexual fixation on playing hard to get?

“Is this because of the Warden thing?” Vinya asked, shrill from shortness of breath. “I just… I don’t understand why you do this! You get close, and then you back off. If it’s because you’re leaving after we get rid of Corypheus, that’s something we can deal with later. If it… Damnit, Blackwall, this isn’t you. You don’t play games. You don’t.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t meant to anger you. But what I am… That ruin on the coast—it said more than I ever could. Should have said more.”

“Well, it didn’t. It was a ruin. Hardly even that. There were bodies, and they weren’t talking much. You lost someone—another Warden—and that’s awful, but you’re not going to lose me. You couldn’t if you wanted to. I’m never going to die!!”

A cough-chortle hybrid burst from Blackwall as he smiled despite himself. “That I’m sure of.”

The light in his eyes didn’t stay, though. And his eyes didn’t stay focused on her. He looked away into the corner, doubtful, silent; hurt.

“Oh, Creators,” moaned Vinya. No. Please, no. “It’s the other thing, then, isn’t it? The Inquisitor thing. You don’t think you’re good enough.”

“Vin,” Blackwall pleaded. “End this.”

Vinya rounded on him. “No! You do it! After getting my hopes up and telling me nothing I didn’t already know? After… abandoning me on the coast?! You damn well do it! Because me? I love you, and I am not going to do it. It’s not fair! It’s not fucking fair! I—!” She swallowed. She buckled. She started swearing through three layers of clothing. “Oh boy…”

Staggering off, she could hear Blackwall trailing behind, mouth dragging on the ground.

“You… love me?”

Self-conscious about being exposed, Vinya’s nod was a blushing one. She’d thought about having this conversation several times, but actually saying the words felt ridiculous. “Yeah,” she admitted sheepishly. “Since… Not since that kiss after we sealed the Breach, though it probably should be. Since the walk from Haven. You let me wear your coat the whole time, and you were around a lot, and I’ve been going crazy since then. But you knew that already. You knew!”

Blackwall blinked. “I didn’t realize you felt that strongly.”

Vinya frowned. “Which is silly. Because you are not stupid.” Before he could rebut the obvious, the woman continued. “You’re not stupid and you’re a good man. So stop with the games. Please. It’s
exhausting.”

Blackwall appeared tentatively accepting. He stepped forward in a singular stride, bringing his chest against hers. “A good man,” he said, testing the taste of it.

“Not any good man,” Vinya proclaimed, placing a hand on his cheek. “My good man.”

She gasped at saying that, feeling flush and electric as the words echoed. It was just a real satisfying, wonderful, fulfilling, truthful thing to say. He was hers—could be hers—and that would do away with the heart-breaking back-and-forth; the wondering on when and where. He’d love her. She’d know it. She was aching to know it.

“Yours?” Blackwall repeated.

“Mine,” Vinya confirmed like she was begging.

Blackwall pounced.

Teeth clacked, tongues missed, and feet stumbled, as yearning-addled desperation made mockery of good aim. Throwing her arms around his neck, Vinya moaned ridiculously, unable to keep the want measured by months inside. Sucking and tugging, nipping and licking, Blackwall bruised her bottom lip while grunted into her mouth, fingers finding places Vinya didn’t know needed to be touched. He guided her backwards as they kissed, legs snagging on clutter while making for bed or baluster. She couldn’t kiss him enough; he couldn’t touch enough, though his roaming hands went from back to breast to waist, slipping under the edge of her shirt, his gloves strange and spongey on her skin.

“Blackwall,” Vinya whimpered

“Vin,” he growled before tonguing through her lips once more.

And after a clamor of steel and wood snapping, the both of them careened to their asses.

“Oh!”

Trying to catch themselves, Vinya slammed here and Blackwall crashed there. Things fell over—loud and cranky things—and Vinya was laughing herself silly as she tried to sit.

Nothing quite like cracking your tailbone to sober-up.

“You okay?” Vinya asked, pulling herself to her feet. “That was, uh... That. Next time we’ll meet in the barn. Pretty bad when a place full of horse-shit is less chaotic than my room huh?” She looked at Blackwall. His face was sheen-white. Her heart stopped. “Fenedhis. What is it?”

Blackwall, on the ground and holding his ankle, swallowed hard. “I can’t move.”

Twenty minutes later he could move, but not very far. A healer had come and gone, and Blackwall’s leg was sprained.

“Well, this is fun,” Vinya decided.

Sitting on the bed against the pillows, the man grumbled under his breath as he positioned himself, his boots and gambeson shed. “What will the servants say in the morning, I wonder.”

“I meant about us, Vin.”

“Oh.” Biting her lip, the woman considered. “‘Good for her’?”

Blackwall shook his head.

Climbing onto the bed, Vinya got in beside him, cuddling up to his warm, broad, honestly massive chest. Black curls poked out from the loose neckline of his shirt, and it was like a kid given access to the cookie jar: Vinya went for the dark strands, touching and playing, totally absorbed, while Blackwall watched on (probably bemused).

“I remember this one time when we were in the Hinterlands,” she said. “It was passed noon and blazing. We all shed what we could, and you were down to this, basically. Varric would not stop teasing me about looking at your chest. ‘His eyes are up there, Muscles.’ ‘He’s more than a piece of meat, you know.’ It was the first time someone called me out for staring. And I got real mad at myself. But I guess it was a relief, too.” She looked him in the eye. “So. Regrets?”

“Besides breaking a hip, you mean?”

“You didn’t break a hip! Creators, you’re dramatic.”

As Vinya lay her head upon his chest, Blackwall admitted into her hair, “I regret not doing this sooner.”

While he in-and-ex-haled, her pillowed head bobbed with the motions. “Mm. Me, too. So, uh, when you’re rested up, we’re going to break the bed too, right?”

Blackwall chuckled. He rubbed her back. “Down the middle, my lady.”

_Hm. My lady._ Vinya rolled the epithet around in her head, measuring the courtly politeness of it. There was something there: an inkling of who he’d been before giving himself to the Wardens. It was something from another world of lords and ladies, but through that sparkling shem nonsense he’d made it to where she was.

Vinya was _never_ going to care about what he’d done before—only that he was here now.

“It’s better than sugar-tits, I guess,” was what she decided to say, and snuggling closer she watched him nod off.

Apparently Blackwall was beautiful when he slept.

Chapter End Notes

_this chapter is dedicated to Jeelynasaurus for all their amazing words which really helped get me out of my funk (even if it still took my lazy ass months to post). seriously--thank you!!_
There was fizzing Val Chevin champagne in crystalline flutes on crowded silver trays. Newly-buffed marble walls gleamed with candlelight incandescence. The granite floors shone and gold-wrought column features glistened. Frills and samite; velvet and lace: it was luxury piled on decadence topped with style.

Every face disappeared behind a mask.

Every mask was heavy with pearls, silk, and luster.

There was decorum and candelabra; nug and shit. Sera was not having a bloody good evening.

With the obvious foresight gifted to Rivaini mystics and other weirdos, Sera had said Halamshiral would be bad. The servants were scared to look straight. Noble knobs hid their faces, and who knew what deals were going down alongside so much going-down while puckering for each others’ tight places. Worst thing? Every one of ‘em wanted a piece of the Inquisitor, which wasn’t fair. Her pieces were supposed to be Sera’s.

“You’re not looking too pleased,” noted Blackwall.

Leaning against the wall, eyes assailed by glint and gloss, Sera frowned.

“Right. Observant you are,” she tutted. “Surprised we ever see a Blight. Or aren’t all the Wardens on their balls like you are?” Sera winced apologetically. “Get it? On the ball? Except…” She huffed loudly. “Don’t mean it, Beardy. It’s just…”

“Not your kind of party. I get it.” Blackwall sat on the couch she stood beside. “Think Dorian is the only one truly enjoying himself, and that might be out of spite.”

“Forgettin’ Lady Viv.”

“Phft.” Blackwall groused. “Would that I could.”

She watched her: Ori, or Lady Inquisitor Ori ly Lavellan; Shepherd and Leash of the Wayward Order of Templars; Purger of the Heretics and Blah-Friggit-Blah! as she’d been announced by the announcing-tit some hours earlier.

Ori was among the bigwigs on the dance floor. Speaking for the most part, but sometimes putting those Josephine-fueled dance lessons to use. Sera wondered how she could stand it, all buttoned-up and cinched. Five minutes in, and she herself had lost a sash and opened the collar. But Ori looked calm; clear-eyed. She even smiled.

Sera was aghast.

“It’s a game, you know,” Blackwall warned.

Sera grimaced. “Yeah. Right. A game. And she’s well playing.”
It was bollocks. Ori wasn’t like this! Ori was pies at uptights and pies at midnight. But a munchies-run in the dark, with maybe a side-mission to steal cookies for refugees, was so far from how Ori was acting right now. Sure, Coryphyshits’ plot had been boffed, and Sera could understand the feeling-good—she herself was plumb relieved at how things’d played out—yet Ori was almost unrecognizable.

Especially with her hair spiffed-up. A little color on her cheeks, the same shite on her lips; a dusting of sparkles on her face, making her glow more than she already did. She looked friggin’ gorgeous, obviously, but that wasn’t the point.

Grunting, Blackwall stood back up. “You need a distraction.”

“Was just thinkin’ the same thing,” Sera agreed sourly.

With pockets bulging, they climbed to a higher level where they could crowd-watch from depths of shadow. At this vantage point, no one would notice or even suss them out, if one had a mind to.

Sera took from her pocket one plump, round, peeled grape.

“On our right, second story; hat with the orange bits.”

Blackwall peered down. “I think those are actual oranges.”

Sera snorted. “Wha—!? Why?” She rolled her eyes and readied her arm. “Orlesian tossers.”

With that, she decidedly tossed her grape at its intended destination. Having been assaulted by fruit, the ritzy noble stared around incredulously, but chalked it up to imagination rather than hat-inspired revenge.

“Right!” Sera sniggered, looking at Blackwall. “Your turn.”

And so it went: target acquired, munitions fired; blazing glory. Blackwall eventually suggested they simmer down when the floors became gory with grape corpses, but Sera stubbornly went on, same as before, while the Warden slunk off.

“On the left, eye-glass thingy; chattin’ up the neighbor’s wife. Score!”

“Mr. Prides’-Too-Big-For-His-Breeches upfront makin’ his servant carry the wine-glass! Oh, frig.”

It was easy to see where suspicions were rising, but the rogue was bored and miserable. Watching her lady-love walk alongside some stuffed-shirt was too much. Watching said stuffed-shirt slip on grape-juice with Ori at his side, however...

“Shite.”

Sera’s stomach sank. In the commotion of feet flying and bodies falling, she wondered if Ori was hurt. The remorse was gone in a wisp, however, as the expression-savvy Sera scrutinized that crossed look the Inquisitor was sporting. Embarrassment and pain were two options, but only one was really acceptable. The other was a damned waste.

“Sera!”

She was going to bolt. But then she thought better of it. Ori was walking up, fists clenched, and Sera warmed to the thought of a row in front of the frocked idiots. Some harsh words would follow, plus a broken heart, but at least Sera was in Orlais again—back where she’d been when this started. She
could begin again. No worse for wear.

*Always starting over...*

“Sera.” The Inquisitor frowned, standing before her. The teeming dancefloor was wide-eyed and open-mouthed.

“Yeah?” Sera parried, voice deep with grit.

Ori kissed her. **On the mouth.** Arms around her shoulders; lips doing a sloppy sucking thing: it was a flippin’ *whopper*. Ori pulled her closer, and there was a lot of smacking and slurping and groping, but Sera was honestly too stunned to take note. She knew what she felt—breathless, bubbly, whole and invincible—but her brain was emptied of every word, statement, expletive and question ever concocted on the Maker’s shiny green earth.

When the Inquisitor finally stepped back, hands still at Sera’s hips, Sera blinked hazily.

“You… you’re *serious*?” she sputtered. Ori could’ve shot fireworks from her arse while yelling ‘*surprise!*’ and it would have been less subtle.

The staring crowd went back to their thing—whispering and tongue-wagging—but the Inquisitor didn’t stop touching Sera. Left hand gripping affectionately; right fingers on her cheek, playing along the curve of skin. In front of all these monied finks, Ori loved her with a dauntless expression.

“I’ve been waiting for you to rescue me for *an hour,*” Ori insisted, teasing with a tone that said *you shoulda’ known*. “Where’ve you been?”

Sera sighed. Her voice was soft; glowing. “It’s not where I’ve *been*, Tadwinks. It’s where you’re *going* to be.” She grinned. “First one to the Empress’s quarters gets to sit!”

In a commotion of clicking heels and stark-mad giggling, the women made a run for it.

“I can’t believe you left me dangling for so long!”

“Dangling, eh?” Sera wryly echoed as they ran passed the frilled and the frocked, seemingly to nowhere specific. “You’re a head cheese like the rest of ‘em! Why didn’t you just—you know—leave?” she snorted. “*Head cheese!* Ha! Geddit?”

Ori said, “ew!” when she got it.

“I promised Josephine I wouldn’t out-right avoid anyone trying to talk to me!” the Inquisitor explained loudly as they started quick down an empty, gloomy hall of doors. “I was waiting for you to show up. Then I’d say, *ah, yes, pressing business*, *hem-hem rightsy-ho*, and happily fuck off. But you never came! You and Blackwall got to screw around, but I had to talk to those morons! One asshole blabbed for ten minutes about a wedding he’d thrown, and it was for cats! He threw a wedding for his cats! What *is* that?! Friggin’ Orlesians…”

Sera suddenly dug her heels in, stopping them dead halfway down the abandoned hall. She grinned slyly and spoke with self-congratulations towards her own bangin’ wit. “A frocked-up pussy? Sounds daft. Let’s fix it, yeah?”

Sera pressed Ori against the wall and went for her pants.

Too breathless from running, they put the kibosh on kissing to conserve energy for the main event, their lips giggling against each other. Ori watched as Sera did her thing; *her thing* was sliding belts
and sashes away, slipping pants down thighs while she went to her knees, and dipping in to place a pretty, little peck on Ori’s mound.

Still snickering, Sera suddenly burst out belly-laughing.

“What?” Ori asked, smiling stupidly, too. “Waiting to see if I’ll stop you?”

“Well… yeah!” Sera fell back on her butt, staring up at her lovely, stick-figured Tadwinks whose pants were around her ankles and peach-pit out for all to see. “Figured Lady Orilya the Templar Leash—or whatever—might be too nose-up for this sort of good-time.”

“Oh, come on!” Ori frowned, crossing her arms. A creeping grin bloomed into a scheming smile. “Actually, a leash sounds good.”

“Ha!”

Righting herself, Sera hooked one of Ori’s legs over her shoulder, and pressed in. A heavy, sweaty night of bashing baddies had Ori’s bits smelling musky, but that only made Sera hum approvingly. Ori smelled like Ori, and that was good. Both of them adjusted—the Inquisitor holding her own leg up, and Sera coming in from the side—and soon Sera’s lips were suckling slowly at her lover’s her petals, tongue laving at the clit, and face rubbing against a damp labia.

“Always ready to go, eh, Tads?” Sera asked against her folds. “Love that, yeah?”

Ori, as a rule, was quiet when faces and fingers were crammed in sunless places. Something about not wanting to look too into it? It was stupid, but Sera knew one day she’d have her screaming. Plus it weren’t her place to judge. Two broken cups pouring into each other to keep full: that was them. Ori had hang-ups, but she wasn’t so hung on them that they’d become a noose, and Sera kind of like showing her the ropes, anyways. The fact that Sera had someone to teach was bonkers but brilliant, and boy-howdy could Sera show her a thing or two.

Sera flicked harsh then rubbed soothingly at Ori’s clit with her tongue, working her up with the warring sensations. She gave her the middle finger right where it counted, and sliding in and out in long, slow movements had Ori gripping Sera’s head for stability, the hand around her own thigh tightening. Her eyes were closed; her lips were in a line and pulling a little tighter: Sera knew that expression.

“How ‘bout a two-finger salute for all those arse-nut Coryphshit sad-sacks we slagged tonight?” Sera’s forefinger joined the middle in filling Ori’s channel. Bringing them out, the pads played with her slit, rubbing and fumbling along the length, before sliding back in. Ori’s eyes clenched harder.

“Yeah, you can take it,” Sera approved before moving back in with her mouth.

Messaging her nub with the soft middle of her tongue; curling her fingers once they were in to the knuckle—it wasn’t long until Ori’s bits were red and the sounds of Sera’s finger-fucking got splashy. Determinedly, Sera licked long furious strokes at her clit, her fingers not bobbing but filling, stretching, and scissoring. Ori groaned, and along with that came the rest: suppressed squealing as she clamped around Sera’ fingers; the ragged gasping while she orgasmed as long as Sera kept at her clit, which was torturously unending for a good thirty seconds. Finally Sera moved away, leaving Ori standing still and dopey-faced, a hand creeping over her crotch and cradling it.

“Fuck, that was… hard.” Ori looked down at Sera. “I came real hard.”

“Tell me about it,” Sera answered, wiping her glistening fingers on her pants as she stood. “Think you broke these.”
Ori could be seen smirking to herself while she put her uniform back to rights. “As long as you can still flip people off, it's all good, right?”

Sera nodded. Gingerly flexing her middle and forefinger, she was happy to report that “yep! We’re good.”

She was pulled into a drowsy, solid hug. Ori exhaled happily into Sera’s hair, her voice heavy with satisfaction. “Definitely. We’re real good.”

Snorting, Sera relented to the lovey-dovey gesture, humming just as dreamily. “Yeah. Nutters, that.”

Chapter End Notes

originally prompted on tumblr
Ferelden autumns were really just early winter. As soon as frost spidered across the ponds and rain puddles, an icy grip held the land ransom until snow descended. Grass and leaf yellowed and died; soil stiffened; animals slept. And chimneys smoked harder than the summer kitchen hearths had, clouding forests with lingering fogs, making the rainy mornings a shadowy, beautiful thing.

That was what they first noticed. Or, rather, the lack thereof.

“Chimneys not lit,” Blackwall mentioned.

The mare upon which they sat kicked up pine cones as it stepped. Dismounting in a clanking of tack, Blackwall went about securing the horse’s reins to a tree while Vinya walked towards the cabin. Pressing up against a dirt-mottled window, her hand stuck to the glass, leaving a foggy imprint of warmth upon the cold surface.

Focusing, she inspected the contents of what was likely the main room. With the absence of candlelight, firelight, or even sunlight (most of the curtains were drawn), Vinya concluded loudly,

“No one’s here!”

“What?” Blackwall came up close, joining her in peeping through the window. “Well, I’ll be. Masters said this was the place. Looks to be abandoned some…two months? Two and a half?”

“Let’s see if we can get in,” Vinya suggested, moving for the door.

Once inside, it became clear: no one had been there for fortights (as in plural). There was dust, bad smells, and stale air. Blackwall searched the few rooms while Vinya wrenched open window coverings, eyeing the makings of a life that had once undoubtedly been lovely and now was nothing.

The curtains were mostly yellowed lace. For a simple Ferelden landowner and his family, paying for finery wasn’t economical, so obviously the wife had made it. There were simple, faded tapestries and rugs; cushions on the kitchen chairs, threadbare though they were. Drying herb bundles hung from the ceiling, but they were so old the colour had gone, along with the leaves and petals.

Such neglect could be measured in years. Vinya might’ve been confused if the man at the tavern hadn’t explained a thing or two.

“Poor, ol’ Patricks. Wife dead thirteen years with the Blight. Son gone too, now. Year before last.”

Vinya saw the house of someone who’d left it untouched as a testament to his wife’s home-making. He had lived like this, among her things and memory, until his son died. And now no one knew where poor, ol’ Patricks was.

“Damn.” Blackwall returned from the other rooms, crestfallen. “Clothing; hunting gear: none of it gone. Seems the man just walked off.”

“And away from such a nice place, too,” Vinya added, frowning. “It’s too bad.”

Her eyes lingered to where she’d pressed against the glass. The imprint had filled with a cobweb of criss-crossing, silvering strands.

Pulling one of the chairs from the table, its legs scraping all the way, Blackwall sat down hard.
“Shame, really. I was in the area a year back. Could’ve talked to the man then. Given him hope; convinced him to move on.”

“Not everyone wants to move on, Thom,” Vinya reasoned helpfully. “Some people want to stay. To live with it. It’s all they’ve got. When everyone else is gone, this is a way to be with them. Their family, or whoever’s passed on.”

“It’s not right,” Blackwall argued, looking off with tired eyes. “Everyone deserves a chance.”

His words were dark; echoing from a cave of brooding. Bottom lip bitten, Vinya fell silent.

For the last nine months, they’d been travelling together. With the Inquisition disbanded, Vinya finally had a chance to say farewell! to responsibility and encroaching irrelevance, and squeal hello! to seeing Blackwall for more than a smattering of weeks throughout the year, which had been their lot following Corypheus’ defeat. Although Vinya loved the trinkets he brought back, or the letters he sent, or all the reunions which had been very sexy indeed, being with Blackwall was obviously better.

They saw the world. Having grown up with Lavellan, the elf was a confirmed life-on-the-road creature of knowledge, well acquainted with blisters, sore feet, pillowless bedrolls, and pitching tents in a pinch when the rain starts a-coming.

With every laden, dusty step taken at Blackwall’s side, Vinya realized how much she’d missed it—all of it: the bug bites, rashes, the itches, and all. Waking every day to new sights; meeting people, the good vastly out-weighing the ghastly. Under the weight of her pack or in their mare’s saddle, she saw what she’d missed as Inquisitor: there was such differences in all of life’s sameness. Existence was similar for everyone—they woke, they ate; they worked; they survived—but out in the little villages, where one celebrated their Maker differently, or dressed or spoke particularly, the diversity was made wonderfully obvious.

It stirred senses which had dulled with her Inquisitor’s duties, and tired following the events of the Exalted Council. Seeing the world had woken her up.

Which was why Blackwall, unusually standoffish this last week, had been leaving her worried. And why Blackwall, more broody than he had been in months, was making her wordless. She was happy, but unable to share. She was lonely.

Watching the gorgeous, gambeson-ed oaf hunched forward on the table, his gloved hands clasped, his breath heavy with gloom, Vinya finally decided she was sick of it.

“Alright!” she said loudly, causing the man to jump. “That’s about enough of that. You promised me you wouldn’t sulk every time we couldn’t help someone. Because, as we both knew when starting out, saving every crook in Thedas with a rallying speech wasn’t necessarily going to be most successful endeavor. So.” Hauling a second, clattered-to-the-floor seat to the kitchen table, Vinya settled in, leaning forward formidable. “What’s wrong?” she pressed.

“It’s not what you think,” Blackwall promised.

“Oh, I’m sure of that. Patricks is a today problem. I’m talking about the problem you’ve had for the last week. You’ve been distant, and quiet—”

“I apologize.”

“Yes, and, unless you tell me and we work through this, you aren’t forgiven.” Vinya hadn’t meant to be so damned forward in her frustration, but, then, there was something to be said about setting an
example, so she went full-gusto into honesty.

Expecting him to recoil, Blackwall just chuckled. “Becoming more obstinate by the day, my lady.”

“And you”—Vinya pulled herself up, leaned across the table, and smooched his sun-ruddied cheek—“aren’t.”

A reminder, a suggestion; an ominous threat given in honest-to-goodness adoration: he could take it as he liked.

Blackwall sighed.

“You’ll—hm-hmm.” He cleared his throat. ”You’ll think I’m… old.”

Vinya snorted at his dejected, slumping shoulders.

“I already do,” she revealed so sweetly that the man laughed.

Tone taking a complete turn-about, Blackwall went from depressed to making a sales-pitch. “What I mean is—what would you say to settling down for a spell? Just you, me, and a plot of land. We could grow…” He searched for the most alluring example of vegetable-goodness. “Beans.”

Watching Blackwall as he awaited a reply, Vinya realized she was confused. “I don’t exactly see the train of thought here. You’re being broody because I’ll think you’re old, and I’ll think you’re old because you want to stay in… ah.” Her head, canting left with curiosity, now canted right in understanding. “Is this about this morning? Your back seizing up?”

“It’s not just that,” Blackwall confessed, his dark, sorry tone returning. “My knees, my shoulders; my elbow. Sitting on that horse, day in and day out, is—well, let’s say I’ve never been quite so aware of my age until of late.”

“I know you’ve been stiff,” Vinya said, reaching across the table and touching his hand. “But I… didn’t realize it’s all been so bad.”

“Not planning on falling apart just yet, Vin,” Blackwall promised, squeezing her hand before sitting back in his chair. “After a short respite, we can be back on the road.”

Watching relief born of being unburdened of secrets stretch across his face, Vinya tapped her forefinger on the table. “I don’t care if you want to stop for a while. Wait. I mean—alright, that sounded bad. What I meant was: if you want to stop, I’m totally fine with it. But is this honestly why you’ve been so quiet lately? Thom, you have to tell me when something is bothering you. Especially if it’s pain. I have… I need to know.”

“And admit to the world I’m an old, frail geezer?”

Sputtering at such utter nonsense, Vinya stood and walked around the table towards him, smiling.

“And admit we need to slow down,” clarified the woman, stroking his cheek. “You were beyond patient when I first started going about things… uh, doing things… after I, um…”

Taking her hand in his, he pressed her palm to his mouth. “You understand. Don’t you?”

Vinya nodded. Her chest seized, but she pushed through it. For him.

“I do. Asking for help is stupid, and hard, and…” She grit her teeth while remembering wrestling
with her pride not so long ago. “And it’s flipping necessary. You were… I am so grateful you were there after I lost my arm. I needed, you know, some assistance with things. And you were always there. So let me be here for you.” She shrugged nonchalantly. “Because, if at some point, I need to throw you over my shoulder and carry you, I’m alright with that. It’s a great opportunity to get a handful, if you know what I mean.”

Laughing from his belly, Blackwall pulled her to sitting sideways his lap. He nuzzled at her neck, and Vinya enjoyed the smells of smoke and him collected thick at his hairline.

“How I managed you,” he conceded, “I’ll never know.”

“Oh, I think you do know,” Vinya purred. Cupping his jaw, she brought Blackwall’s mouth to where she might make it her own, and then she did just that. Kissing slow and lovingly one moment, she was sucking on his bottom lip in the next, pulling at it, running her tongue across it, moaning invitingly, and attempting to instigate something rather salacious considering they were all but squatting in someone’s house (missing though they were).

“Luv,” Blackwall harrumphed, torn between scandalized and stimulated. Clearing his throat, he wondered incredulously, “here?”

Closing her eyes, Vinya’s answer was to nuzzle his cheek, breathing softly, feeling dreamy. His last week of brooding hadn’t just cock-blocked her at every turn, but some nights, while renting tavern rooms along the road, the man would sit in a chair while staring at their private fireplace until he passed out from frowning so hard, leaving Vinya alone in a cold bed.

“Here,” she affirmed, tongue nudging through his lips and lapping at his. Creators, how he tasted, and fuck how he felt as their pace quickened, Blackwall’s mouth working against hers, heavy, hungry, his tongue dipping in and out, as he slathered over her desperate mouth, wet, sloppy, and—

“Nngh.” Vinya moaned, pressing closer for more, which caused the chair to creak, and for them both to nearly topple. Squealing, she clung to him as the dust settled and they righted themselves, after which they traded glances.

“Here?” Blackwall repeated, brow slanted wickedly.

“Can throw some blankets on the bed,” Vinya reasoned, thinking of the dusty mattress. “Slept in worse. Fucked in worse.”

“True,” Blackwall confirmed as she extracted herself from his lap.

As they made their way to the bedroom, Vinya’s mind-marbles were rolling. Approaching the bed, her creeping smile had stretched her face with ridiculous, anticipating grinning, and, laying out the quilt someone had brought along (she couldn’t remember who—too excited), she hurried towards Blackwall, fingers yanking at his gambeson’s laces.

“Eager, are you?”

“We’re going to freeze if we don’t heat the place up quick,” Vinya explained, loosening the strings until she reached the belt she then wrestled with. “Which means—damn it, you wear too much clothes!”

“Only when you want my cock,” Blackwall chuckled, watching her go. “Perhaps we could start a fire…?”

“No.” Belt clunking on the floor, Vinya pushed the gambeson off Blackwall’s shoulders, though it
remained laced below his hips. Impatiently, she pulled the rest of the article to his ankles, then hopped back up to contend with his undershirt. “Two silvers says the flue is full of crap. You’re not getting up on that roof, and I’m busy getting off. We’ll start a fire after.”

Dragging the under layer of cotton over Blackwall’s head, she was met with that gorgeous field of thick, curly hair which made her go stupid. Hands splayed on his chest, she herded him backwards towards the bed. Making some approving, throaty sounds (plus some creaks at his knees), Blackwall got on his back.

Vinya unceremoniously dropped her coat to the floor, then went for her partner’s boots.

“That’s it?” Blackwall pressed.

Shoes tugged off, his pants were next. “Yep. Gotta warm this room up before I take anything else off.”

“And me?” Blackwall asked, bemused. His woolen trousers and smalls were torn off, tossed away, which left him naked save the knitted socks running up to his knees.

He painted a very tasty picture.

“I’m going to warm you up,” Vinya explained.

She did, in fact, untie the laces of her pants before descending. Shoes off, too, she hopped on the bed near Blackwall’s ankles, bending in to kiss his knee.

Nudging his legs apart, she settled between them, her stomach flat on the mattress. Her senses spun as she smelled nothing but his ripe, warm body, and, looking up towards Blackwall’s face, she saw little but his thick thighs, his soft dick resting on his sack, and the bulge of his stomach beyond that.

If Vinya wasn’t careful, she was actually going to drool.

“Are you cold?” the woman asked, worried.

Blackwall readjusted himself a bit higher up on the pillows. “Just get on with it,” he said, eyes smiling, his tone noticeably less patient.

Dipping in, Vinya kissed his inner thigh. Kissing again, and again, she sucked at the skin until Blackwall gasped softly, his chest puffing up and falling. Licking the welt, Vinya moved on, continuing her trail of purpling skin and lapping. Nearing his goods, Vinya smiled, sat up, bent his legs at the knee, and seized a pillow. Stuffing it under Blackwall’s lower back (which he reacted to with grunts and surprise), Vinya said, “hold your legs.”

“Yeah?” Eyes raw as his voice, the man hooked his beefy arms around his knees, pulled back, and presented himself. This was why Vinya had been scrambling to get his clothes off; why she’d not bothered with her own, and why she’d been smiling with anticipation as they walked into the room. Vinya wanted to pamper the poor idiot who wrongly thought he could do anything to disappoint her, and that pampering was going to start with eating his perfect ass.

“Keep ’em spread,” Vinya smirked, shuffling to her knees and elbow.

Her one hand palming the broad expanse of an ass cheek, she parted him further, hearing Blackwall grunt. Vinya dipped in, licking his stretched hole in a long, broad stroke. She set a rhythm of lapping forward once, slow and meandering, after which she returned to wriggle her tongue tip at his puckered ring, feeling it clench and soften for her. Pressing closer, her lips crushed against her teeth,
she sucked, slid her tongue in, sucked, slid her tongue in, and was rewarded by Blackwall shouting and jerking.

Taking her hand away from spreading his cheeks, using it to support herself instead, Vinya moved up a bit, licking his taint with the broad flat of her tongue towards his sack. Sucking at one of his balls, she pulled it with a pop into her mouth, tugging and moaning around it. Blackwall’s breathing was in tatters as Vinya did the same with his other ball: taking it in, slathering it up, her lips smacking around it. She saw one of Blackwall’s hands go for his cock, giving it a few tugs, as the red, pre-cum slathered digit came to life.

“Look at me,” Blackwall muttered. He wasn’t asking.

Digging back in, Vinya stared up, eyes wide, as she licked his ass, lashing quick and constantly, her tongue numbing from rubbing. Tiring jaw twanging, she clamped her mouth over the softened hole, lay her tongue there, and shook her head vigorously, still staring at him; still watching him clench his eyes, his hair sticking to his cheeks as Blackwall’s mouth moved with silent, frantic sounds like a caught fish.

“What do you want?” Vinya asked, absolutely in awe of his sweaty, gorgeous face. “A finger, or…?”

“Suck my cock, Vin,” Blackwall pleaded, letting go of holding his legs at last. With a wince, Vinya realized he may have been getting stiff (and not just where it counted).

As Vinya shuffled up to do as he’d asked, he implored again, quietly this time, “fuck, suck my cock,” with a slackened, lifeless mouth, meaning the man was well relaxed, as she’d planned.

Sucking him was always a struggle. Blackwall’s girth was generous, and Vinya’s mouth, unlike the rest of her, was small. With a jaw already aching, the woman chose to work his cockhead, sucking the tip, running her tongue along its slit, while she pumped him. Blackwall’s hand found its way into her hair, and his palm slid back and forth as she pulled his member out of her mouth, her fist still tugging at she looked up.

“Warm yet?”

“Fuck, girl,” Blackwall chuckled, hand playing through her hair affectionately. His eyes darkened further, and he asked, expectantly, “you wet, yet?”

“Oh, yeah.” Vinya kissed the tip of his cock as her wrist slowed to lazy flicking. “Sitting in a damn puddle down here.”

The corner of Blackwall’s mouth twitched. He cupped her chin. “Come here.”

Vinya shook her head, licking up a noticeable vein in a defiant stroke. “I’m pampering you.”

“Is that what this is?” Blackwall wondered. “Feeling bad for this old man, are you?”

“Fuck off,” Vinya dismissed with a laugh, still slowly, ever so slowly, gripping and working his cock. “I can spoil this old man because I want to. It’s got nothing to do with your creaky, brittle bones.”

“Brittle?” The playful, threatening, challenging promise in his tone had her wetter by the second. “I’ll show you brittle.”

Before Vinya knew it, he was pulling her by the armpits, attempting to pin her beneath, which,
naturally, she fought. Squealing and giggling madly, she thrashed without serious intent as Blackwall laughed, too. After some idle fussing (which was really an excuse to touch more of each other), the man, flipped and retrained her beneath him, her stomach flush against the blanket, chin jammed in the mattress, and Blackwall smacked her ass hard. **Real** hard.

“*Brat.*”

Without bothering to wait for other interested parties to turn sights on her clothes, Vinya rolled onto her back, discarded slacks and smalls, and spread, watching Blackwall stare, eyes eating-up the sight.

“Still cold?” Blackwall asked, nodding to her remaining shirt, as he climbed onto the bed, settling between her legs.

“Just impatient,” Vinya shrugged. “Come on.”

Her back arched as Blackwall’s icy fingers found her slit. Sucking in, gripping the blanket, she was torn between disapproving of the cool digits sliding through her petals, and absolutely **loving** them. Her thickening lady-lips tingled with the cold; her core clenched out of reflex and nipples stiffened, scraping against the shirt’s rough cotton, but *Creators*. The cool was new; different; not painful, necessarily, but strange. Her body begged her to twist away, yet, after a few moments of Blackwall’s cold fingers stroking her, all she felt, throughout her whole body, was her cunt, her lips, and the chill coating them as Blackwall rubbed her numb. Moaning pitifully, Vinya's head fell to the side.

“Cold?”

The iciness had turned to a heatless burning; a raw biting across every inch of labia. Huffing, the tensed Vinya glared at Blackwall situated between her knees, his thick, warmed fingers now fumbling at her clit because fumbling meant sloppy, irregular; flicking once second, swirling the next, and the woman was devastated by his artless, jerking precision. Moaning, Vinya's eyes rolled and head hit the pillow, cold-based complaints forgotten.

“Thought not,” Blackwall said.

Everywhere his frigid fingers had touched, they’d left a trail that pulsed raw, and that pulsing throbbed her right towards a vicious wanting. Groaning happily, arm settled euphorically by her face, Vinya leaned into him, inviting fore and middle finger to cram themselves where it counted. To the knuckle he filled her, wrist rotating round, fingers scissoring, as the nerves of her entrance got jostled, working her up and up to sweating. She saw that Blackwall’s mouth was slightly ajar, the flash of tongue visible while he watched, mindful of his work.

“Fuck,” Vinya cursed.

“You close?”

Wrenching her eyelids closed, she thought. “No. I need... something.”

“You’re soaked,” Blackwall reasoned, fingers coming out to dab at her clit.

“No shit. Thanks—ah!—for the update.” Huffing decisively, Vinya pulled his wrist away, turned over, and hefted herself up on her hand and knees. “Kay,” she informed the wall in front of her. “I'm ready.”

“*Are you?*” teased Blackwall, incredulous and shocked. “Don’t I get a ‘please’?”

“Thom, can you **please** just fucking—fucking **yes.**”
His plump, weighty cock had pushed inside, doing exactly what she’d needed: *something*. That something was stretch her wide; that something was roll against her throbbing walls, the curves of his cockhead rippling through her as he hilted himself, drew out completely, and filled her again, slow and whole, slow and whole, slow and whole how he knew she liked.

“That’s it,” Vinya purred softly as her legs spread a little more, spine curved more, though her arm started to hurt, needing to hold up her weight on its own. Repositioning, Vinya rested her face in the blanket, hand snaking between her legs as Blackwall kept thrusting. Before going for her bud, her fore and middle finger inched further, touching at his cock. She liked feeling where he entered her, his dick gliding through her fingers, slicked by her wetness, all hot and messy.

“This what you needed?” Blackwall asked, gripping her waist, pulling her back into him. “Face in the pillow, cunt all mine?” A palm slipped to splaying out greedily on an ass cheek.

“*Mm-hmm.*” Toes curling as her fingers frenzied, Vinya worked her clit hard and fast, realizing, “yes—fuck, Thom, yes. *Fuck.*”

His thrusts came shallow and short, now, but it was time for that—time to drive them home. She hated not being able to see him from here—hated not seeing those gorgeous, thick hips snapping—however, those tasty, heaving groans he kept making had the rush of orgasm building quick. Vinya started screaming with every thrust he gave her, and cried as she got to that consuming precipice that burned in her belly, core, and thighs.


“I—*nngh!*” Vinya was shaking all over, tortured by the orgasmic swelling that wouldn’t burst. “I—*fuck. Please let me… please*…”

Her voice, raw and pathetic, went back to screaming into the bed as Blackwall sped up again, ramming brutally into her, the sounds of their slapping flesh filling the room and she was done. *Wrecked*. Crying, quivering, Vinya came, clenching so hard around Blackwall that it was painful; that it had him spilling, too, which he did away, in the corner, or somewhere —she wasn’t sure. The only thing Vinya knew at that moment was the dusty smells of the mattress she’d collapsed on, and how the echoes of her orgasm had her cunt still clenching in periodic rolling, like waves in the sea.

*Creators*, could he screw.

Laying flat out on the bed, she hummed gleefully, happier still when Blackwall joined her.

It took three seconds of *that* for them to reach for their clothing.

“Why didn’t we start a fire?” Vinya asked, dancing in place, as she untangled her pants enough to put on. “Why did I think ‘after’ was a good idea? Why?!”

“Because some things get you hotter than a fire,” Blackwall enlightened, lacing up trousers. *Hm.*

Stomping over, Vinya punched his arm, pushed his waiting gambeson off the bed like a petulant cat, and went back to her pile of clothes. “*Bad. That’s bad,* Thom.”

“Always a critic.”

Dressed, the obvious next step was to gather their things and go, but Vinya crawled onto the bed instead, huddled into herself. Blackwall settled behind her and they spooned, his large body not
necessarily a furnace, but certainly a burly buffer against the cold.

She turned, burying her face in his neck.

“I could get used to this,” Vinya said.

“Rutting in strangers' beds?”

“Rutting in a bed,” Vinya clarified. “In our bed. In a bed that’s… I mean, that’s the only thing about Skyhold I miss, if I’m being totally honest. Our bed. And the bar, I guess.”

“You’re truly not bothered? By my needing to… stop?”

“No! No.” Pulling back, she looked him in the eyes. “This is your mission. It’s what you want. And I’d follow you anywhere. Even if it’s nowhere.”

“And if we stopped for good?”

Vinya bit her lip, counting seconds; counting lines. Blackwall had gained some wrinkles since they’d met. The bags under his eyes were more pronounced; darker, too. It was awful. It was awful how fucking gorgeous he still was.

“I don’t know,” she answered honestly. “I’m okay with us stopping for a while. I want to. But… forever?” She sighed. “I don’t know. I don’t… know what I want.”

Blackwall nodded. “We’ve defiled Patricks’ bed enough, I think. Time to leave. Back to the tavern, then?”

Vinya groaned approvingly, peeling from the mattress. “Absolutely. That cider was amazing.”

And soon they were enjoying a cup each.

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