# The Wrong Warden

**by CuriousThimble**

**Summary**

Hera Drakul has lived her entire, long life decadently, bravely, and mostly luckily- but always on her own terms. No stranger to walking the planes of existence, she’s traveled to many different worlds, fighting alongside her twin brother and their ever-changing circle of comrades for coin, pleasure, and sometimes even what’s right. That all changed when she and Zeus discovered their parentage, leaving them with more power and responsibility than they’ve ever wanted.

After the novelty wears off, she finds her new life beautiful, predictable, and utterly boring.
So when a mysterious mirror appears in the forest and whispers of adventure, she can't help but get closer. The temptation and curiosity that fueled so many escapades in her past lead her to Ferelden, where she has to determine friend from foe, keep a devastating secret, and discover who she is without her twin at her side.

Last, but absolutely not least, an enormous thank you to my beta, PadawanHilary, for picking up this project at the eleventh hour and working with me. If you haven't checked out her fic Monster, I highly recommend it.

Notes

Tag Explanation:

1. Though it begins in a totally different world, this story does, in fact, go to Ferelden during the Blight.

2. If you are familiar with Ravenloft and the Curse of Strahd, take this with a generous helping of salt. I needed a location to suit her, and when Hera was a D&D character, she found her way to Ravenloft, where many insane dice rolls and bardy bullshit happened. I can explain another time if you're interested.

3. I did NOT tag this with a romance, because of the fact that she isn't even in Thedas yet.

I will be altering tags when they become appropriate.
“All hail Hera Drakul, Queen of Ravenloft!”

Hera looks with approval over her court, bowing and curtseying as low as possible as she strides toward her throne. Her cloak—made from the feathers of ravens and once worn by her father—trails behind her, the weight of it slowing her steps to a stately promenade. *I can’t believe this is happening,* she thinks giddily. *I’m being crowned queen of a place that...well...that hasn’t had a proper sovereign in my lifetime. I am their sovereign. I saved them from the curse. The usurper is dead, and now the daughter of the true leader reigns. For a time, anyway.*

Zeus, standing beside her throne, bows with a small smirk. Like her, he is dressed in black and red, the same colors they found themselves dressed in when they first appeared in Ravenloft only a few short weeks ago. They never did find out why the Dark Powers chose to dress them so oddly, but the style and color marked them for what they were—vampiric nobility. But Zeus always shared her vanity—even now her twin’s white hair magically glows, making him stand out in the cavernous throne room.

Hera takes a moment to survey her small court, some newly arrived with the reopening of Ravenloft’s doors, others—like her new friend and lover Jami, who she met during this wild adventure—are here for the ceremony only. With a small smile, she sits, her black gown nearly fading into the shadows all around. *More candles and magical lighting,* she decides. *The court should be a bright spot amidst the darkness. Let them come to me for their light.*

“Never before have we had a Queen so courageous and true, the daughter of our own beloved Drakul bloodline. Princess Hera defeated the usurper Strahd and has agreed to take her proper place as Queen.” The Duke, her uncle by blood-bond, stands before her, an ancient, ornate silverite crown heavy with rubies and onyx in his hands.

For days she, Zeus, and the Duke had been going over the right of passage to make her queen, and Zeus her heir apparent; and for nights on end, she and Zeus went round and round about it. She had wanted to make him king and rule alongside him, but he had refused time and again, content to be a prince and heir. And now, after it was all over and her friends had all left Ravenloft, it was time.

Her uncle steps forward and places the crown on her head, giving her a moment to adjust to its surprising weight. As soon as he steps back and kneels before her, trumpets blare and the court cheers its approval.

“And now, for the Bonding,” her uncle says solemnly as he rises. “The first King, who brought
Ravenloft into existence and harnessed its power, extracted his heart blood, to be drunk by his successor so they may know the power and knowledge of their realm. Such a tradition has continued, and today our Queen Hera will drink her father’s blood, then withstand a needle driven into her heart to extract her own vial.”

A servant appears with a gold jeweled chalice, and the Duke breaks the seal on a small bottle of deep red blood. It had begun to glow since the rightful king’s death, ready for the heir to partake of the knowledge and history of Ravenloft. When her own blood is extracted, it will stay in the vault until her death, and on that day, it will begin to glow and heat itself for her own heir. Hera hesitates, knowing her father was a full vampire and she wonders if it will turn her as well. She glances at Zeus in apprehension, but he only smiles proudly and nods.

No turning back now, she thinks. Besides, to turn me is to kill me, and the Dark Powers were very clear about that.

The Duke comes forward bearing the chalice, and Hera stands to accept it. Like the crown, it has been handed down through the generations, both as an important part of the Bonding, and to show that Ravenloft and its mines have always been rich with minerals. Turning it in her hands, she can feel the warmth of the blood through the metal.

“Cheers,” she says lightly and drains the cup.

The effect is instant and intoxicating. Centuries of history and power surge through her, and she feels glorious and god-like. Her magic goes through her like a tidal wave, and to onlookers, she looks to be both glowing and impossibly shadowed at once.

Happy name day, daughter, she hears whispered in her ear.
Chapter Summary

The moment Hera is crowned, she has to settle a grudge nearly one hundred years in the making. Lives are lost, changed, and everyone sees just who they've crowned Queen.

Chapter Notes

TRIGGER WARNING: BLOOD, TORTURE, EXECUTION

As mentioned in chapter 1, if you're familiar with Ravenloft/Strahd, forget everything you know.

Good times are coming- and soon! I promise this fic isn't entirely blood and shadow.

Once she’s fully recovered from the Bonding, Hera gestures to her brother, who in turn nods to Jami. The fire wizard takes great pleasure in kicking one of the minor nobles in the back of the knee, causing him to fall with a cry. Hera walks over to him, the only sound the soft susurrus of her gown on the floor. Everyone around takes several steps back except Jamison, who looks surprised.

“Eh...sorry,” he chuckles, jumping back and knocking into his brother behind him. "Hey!" he snaps, brushing his wild blonde hair out of his eyes. "Watch it!"

“Bits is being scary ,” his brother whispers, breaking his near-constant silence. The enormous man cowards behind his scrawny brother, large belly rippling with his trembles.

“Shut up you!”

Hera ignores their antics and looks down at the dhampir trembling on his knees before her. “You opened the gates to the usurper Strahd,” she says slowly, her voice carrying through the silent hall. “You corresponded with him, giving details of my father the king’s itinerary so that he knew exactly when to strike. You even disabled the Duke and locked him away before the attack. Tell me, Cousin,” she says, spitting the word out as if it has a foul taste. “How did he seal the gates once inside?”
“T-T-There was a- a deal, Darkness,” he stammers, not daring to look up at her when she rises and begins to circle him. “With the Dark Powers. I do n-not know the details…”

“Yet you knew enough to allow my father, your king, to be locked out of his realm and hunted down like a dog,” she accuses, her expression as cold and impassive as stone. “Because of your actions, half the court was murdered by his assassins, and the rest trapped within our realm with no escape.” Her voice softens, and she lifts his chin with a finger. “Tell me, Nicolae, did you have help?”

“Yes!” he cries. “The Marchioness aided me! She swore-”

“Marchioness Arianne?” she asks, raising an eyebrow, but otherwise keeping her expression unsettlingly blank. She looks around those assembled, finally picking out the angelic beauty. “Come forward, madam.”

Unlike Hera, the Marchioness is a full vampire, dressed in the deepest blue to compliment her golden curls and sapphire eyes, her skirts swirling as she sweeps up the hall and kneels before the throne. “Your Majesty,” she croons, lowering her head.

“Is what the Duke’s son says true?” Hera slowly returns to her throne as she speaks. "Did you assist him?"

The woman’s head raises, a look of utter sincerity on her face. “No, your Majesty,” she says evenly. “He will say I promised him the blood, in exchange for my help. Everyone knows he cannot bear being only half vampire.”

“And did you?” Zeus asks from beside Hera. “Did you promise to turn him fully once Strahd was on the throne?”

Arianne has the grace to look away. “I promised Nicolae the blood, yes,” she admits. “But only because we were lovers! I had thought that I could not bear to be without him, but when he opened the gates against the Duke’s orders, my heart turned against him.” To emphasize her feelings, she shoots the handsome man a scathing look. “I would not spit on him were he on fire.”

Hera has to stop herself from frowning. Hiding her feelings is not part of her art, but it is always part of her politics. Zeus would be better at this than I. A gambler gives away nothing, but a courtesan gives away everything. No sooner had the crown rested on her brow did the Duke bring
up the charges against several members of the court- the first being his own bastard dhampir son- accused of aiding the usurper Strahd in his campaign against her father. He was right to do so, of course; they could not be left to plot against her now. She taps her fingernails against the arm of her throne, studying the marchioness.

“What would I discover if I cast a spell just now, Arianne?” she asks. “Would I discover that you’re telling me the truth, and you had nothing to do with it?”

“He did ask my help, but I never promised him anything,” the woman says. “Majesty, why would I harm my own standing at court? I am your true family- we are bound by blood through your very father! King Vlad was my Maker as surely as he was the Duke's!”

Hera nods, considering this. Arianne is one of the few turned from human to vampire by her father- otherwise, there is only the Duke and one other who is said to have died long ago. She is well aware that Arianne is also in line for her throne, and that the only reason Hera holds it is because she is both a natural child of the Drakul line and the one who killed Strahd.

_However...she knew_ , she thinks and makes a decision. Rising to her feet, the courtiers all fall into deep bows or curtsies, holding them until they know for sure what she will do. Hera lifts a hand, and a black mist creeps from the shadowed edges of the hall.

“He asked you for help, did he?” she asks, a cold smile spreading across her face. From the mist comes darker tendrils, like icy fingers wrapping around Arianne and Nicolae.

Nicolae struggles against the shadows holding him, his face fearful. Hera’s heart aches for him- he is dhampir, like herself, the bastard son of the Duke and some long-lost human- but the pain he has caused turns it to stone.

Arianne goes pale as she is lifted from the floor, suspended by the tendrils of shadow. “Yes, Majesty!” she screams. “He asked, but I didn’t do anything! Have mercy, please!”

Hera steps closer, and Arianne is lowered to eye level. “No, you didn’t _do_ anything,” she says, drawing a black-lacquered nail across her cheek. “That is the problem. Tell me, dear Aunt,” Hera croons, “do you love him?” The woman’s face says it all, and Hera makes a clucking sound with her tongue. “What a pity. I’m sorry, Arianne,” she says coldly. “You will have to do nothing once again. But you’re good at that, aren’t you?”
The shadows hold them both in place, and silver bowls appear on the floor. Nicolae’s arms are
stretched out, and Hera uses her magic to tear the sleeves away from them. The court watches,
murmuring softly as she walks over to her brother, taking something they cannot see from him.

“I would do this for you,” he offers softly so that no one else can hear him. “Or the Duke. You do
not have to do this.”

Hera meets his gaze, her face impassive and her eyes cold. “Yes, I do.” Slipping the sharp onyx
claw over her fingertip, she approaches Nicolae. “Ravenloft bled because of you,” she says loudly.
“Now you will bleed because of me.”

With a quick movement, she slashes both his wrists, watching the blood seep along the cut. He
struggles, fighting the shadows, but they hold firm. Hera waves her hand, and a heavily jeweled,
silverite chalice appears in it. Catching the first spurts of blood, she drinks, her eyes meeting
Arianne’s.

“Do you know, brother,” she says, turning to Zeus with a playful smile and a casual tone. “The
blood of a traitor tastes rather bitter.” She pours the blood onto the floor, giving the court a cold
look. “I wouldn’t have my people drink such a bitter vintage. Drain them almost to death, and
throw them to the wolves. Let it be known that I will not suffer traitors to live. When that’s done,”
she adds, turning to Zeus, “we’ll continue the celebrations, shall we?”

“Of course, sweet sister,” he agrees, bowing to her.

“Move the executions to the village square,” she commands the Duke. “I want the people to see
that those responsible for their suffering are punished. I will return in an hour.”

“Yes, your Majesty,” the Duke says, and snaps to the guards behind him.

Hera gives Arianne one last smile and leans in to whisper in her ear. “What a pity,” she murmurs,
breathing against her neck. “I’m told you were a darling of the court.”

The chalice in her hand disappears in a wisp of shadow, and without so much as another glance,
Hera walks out of the hall as Arianne begins to scream.
Chapter Summary

In a private moment, Hera confides in her brother.

“That was...difficult.”

Hera doesn’t move at the sound of her twin’s voice. “I do not want to talk about it,” she says in a flat voice. “She was family. He was one of us.”

“Very well,” he agrees, changing tactics quickly. “You’ve defeated Strahd’s castle of nightmares, destroyed him and his curse, and taken our father’s throne,” Zeus says with cheer. “The Drakul line is once again in power. Are you happy, O Queen of Darkness?”

Hera glances at her brother over her shoulder. “Maybe.”

“What’s wrong?” he asks, his cheer dissolving.

She turns from the lovely view her balcony provides of the forest and leans against the rail. “It’s an awful lot of work, this business of queening. I would rather have left it to you.”

“Missing Sigil and your brothel already? What a devoted madam you are,” he teases. When it doesn’t result in the intended smile, he comes closer and leans on the railing with her. “Come now, Ravenloft can’t be much more work than running a pleasure empire, can it?”

“That, and more,” she sighs, pushing her hair over her shoulder. “I just thought...I thought I would be fulfilled, being the adored queen of Ravenloft. I don’t mind the work, really, but…”

“You’re lonely, perhaps?” he suggests. “Hungry for better company? Take a different lover; it’s unlike you to be without someone amusing. Jamison is hardly worthy of you,” he says with a scowl.
Hera doesn’t answer for a moment, crossing her arms loosely. “I don’t know. Maybe it is time for a change. Jamison and his brother should be on their way as well, it isn’t safe for them here. It’s just...this place. Our connection to it. It makes me think about Anatoly, and how he betrayed us and I’m furious. And...” she pauses, looking up at her twin as her throat closes on the words. And I’m going to die. I had rather hoped it would be an enjoyable two years, she thinks.

“And you miss him, even after all this time. I understand. But that wasn’t love, Hera,” he insists softly, coming over to embrace her. “Not for him. That was lust, and lust you know well.”

Hera stays silent for a few moments, keeping the truth from him. I don’t miss Anatoly, I’m glad I sent his death to him. But I want...something else. “You know, brother,” she says after a while. “I think I was happier in Sigil as the Queen of Courtesans. It felt like freedom, then. There was adventure to be had in that city.”

“Perhaps our blessed mother should have named you Aphrodite.” He straightens and claps his hands. “Let’s get you into another gown and start celebrating. That wiry fool Jamison is waiting for you.”

“I wish you liked him better.”

“I wish he didn’t call you Bits. ” One day, sweet sister, you’ll find someone, he thinks, watching her ponder over a new gown. And they will be worthy of you in a way no one else ever could be.
Chapter Summary

Hera's stolen moment of solitude and reflection is interrupted by a Grey Warden tumbling into her world.

Alone for the first time in months, Hera trails her fingers along the trunks of trees as she wanders in the Queen’s Forest, taking an hour to herself before the day truly begins. The spirits that normally haunt this place have faded with the dawn, leaving her with only the silence and the knowledge that soon the royal guard will notice her absence and come searching. But for now, the forest is hers alone, and she intends to savor the peace.

Zeus has planned an enormous, decadent party to celebrate both their name day and the first anniversary of her reign. Fulfillment in that role came slowly, but arrived nonetheless. She loves her people, her place with them. Being queen has given her a feeling of accomplishment that nothing else ever has: not their adventures across the planes or the passion of her many lovers, not even running her pleasure-house in Sigil, City of Doors. That had been a life of indulgence and self-adulation, and though she misses it from time to time, knowing that she is improving the lives of her people and fulfilling the destiny her father planned for them gives her a deeper feeling.

But the court continues pressing her to marry, to join forces with a ruler on another plane and bring Ravenloft into a new era. Hera doesn’t see the point of it- in another year she’ll be dead and Zeus will be king. Better he should make alliances than her. She hasn’t even taken a formal lover since sending Jamison away, much to her brother’s concern. He had thought she would take one of the courtiers. It’s not like her to deny herself...well, anything, and she feels strange about her general celibacy. It’s not quite loneliness- not that she would truly recognize such an emotion- but there is an...emptiness there. Like missing someone she’s never met.

Shaking her head, she puts those thoughts aside; love is not in her future, and she should accept that getting attached to anyone would end only in disaster. She cannot afford the risk a lover could possibly bring.

The thick mist burns away slowly, making her feel like she’s in a fairy tale as trees and undergrowth pluck at her gown and cloak. Dressed in the deepest of red silk with a black velvet cloak to guard against the chill morning, her jewelry and crown sparkling, she knows exactly the picture she makes: a foolish young queen begging for trouble. But she also knows exactly what she is: a powerful sorceress who took her crown with her own bloodstained hands. Someone who is adored and feared in equal measures.
And if she were to be completely honest with herself, she finds it all a bit boring and predictable.

There’s no excitement anymore, no scandalous affairs with vulgar amounts of money behind them, in fact, she can hardly find time to attend the opera in Sigil with her brother. Ruling Ravenloft should have been her greatest achievement; she was a queen, but all she could think was how dreadfully dull it was to spend the day listening to what other people wanted and never having time for her own desires.

Humming softly to herself, she pauses when she sees a flash of light off to her left. “Curious,” she murmurs, turning. “No one is usually here this-” She breaks off when she foolishly steps through a tangle of wild autumn roses, her gown catching on the briars as they wrap themselves around her legs from the knee down, stopping her in her tracks. “A mirror? Out here?”

A beautiful mirror stands in the smallest of clearings, morning light flashing on the dull glass. Odd in itself, it doesn’t reveal a reflection at all; instead, the glass is a silver whirlwind of what can only be magic; she can feel it pulsing along her flesh, feel her own magic making her blood race in answer. It certainly isn’t anything she’s seen here before, but she can feel it’s age as surely as the wind in her hair. It’s only just out of her reach, but the pull of it is undeniable.

_Adventure_, it whispers to her, soft and alluring.

_What is it?_ she wonders, tilting her head. Has a new doorway spawned? If so, it should be secured and determined where it leads. We’ll also have to build a permanent structure, a mirror simply won’t allow for much to pass through should there be an interest in trade-

Suddenly, a body is thrown from _inside_ the mirror, a man rolling head over heels across the clearing, and her heart leaps in surprise. She gasps, still trapped amid the thorns, as he lies there breathing heavily. “Hello?” she says softly.

He doesn’t respond, so she takes a moment to study him. He is a mature man, at least forty years old, with an untidy beard sprouting and a little gray streaking through his walnut hair. His clothes are torn and bloody, but she can make out a blue and grey striped tabard beneath his chainmail. He is scarred, and injured badly, judging from the blood spreading across his middle.

“Hello?” she calls again. “If you’re alive, I can help you. Well, I could help you if you’re dead, too,” she amends quickly. “If you’re alive, please let me know.”
“I’m alive,” she hears, followed by a groan. “Maybe.” She sees him open his eyes and turn his head to look at her. It takes a moment for his eyes to focus before they widen in shock. “What is this, some Maker-damned fairy tale? A demon’s illusion?”

With a self-deprecating smile, Hera looks down at herself, wrapped in roses and thorns. “I do not know your Maker, but this does seem a bit ‘princess lost in the woods,’ doesn’t it? Perhaps you are here to save me from myself?”

“Who are you?” he demands, trying to sit up before groaning and falling back.

“Hera Drakul, Queen of Ravenloft. The Raven Queen is what my subjects call me.”

Adventure. It radiates off him like a heartbeat, and hers thuds in time with it.

“Am I dead?”

“Probably not,” she assures him. “Although in this world one cannot always be sure. Who are you?”

“My name is Tybalt. I’m a Grey Warden.”

“Well, I don’t know what that is,” she says pleasantly, “but it is a pleasure to meet you. Can you move, or shall I assist you?”

The man sits up slowly, groaning and gasping in pain. “How could you assist me?”

“I can heal your wounds.”

“You look to be in a bit of a bind yourself.”

Hera’s welcoming smile turns into a mischievous grin. “I could assist you from here, should you like. I know a spell or two.”
“Are you an apostate? A witch of the woods?” he asks, panicking. “Am I in the wilds?”

“Certainly not,” she answers, offended. “This is the Queen’s Forest, and while you might call me a witch, it’s not a term I generally allow. I am a sorceress,” she explains, tossing her head proudly. “And the queen of this realm.”

“How do I know you’re not lying?”

Hera raises a hand and points to her crown. “Do your witches in the woods generally wear crowns?”

Tybalt stares at her, blinking as if seeing her for the first time. “No, no I don’t suppose they do.”

“I thought not. Almost everyone here can perform some small magic. Shall I assist you, by healing your wounds, Master Tybalt?”

“I won’t be able to help you out of that briar patch if you don’t.”

“Lie back and relax, this will hurt a little.” With a whisper and a wave of her hand, the spell is cast and he cries out in pain, his back arching.

“A little?” he gasps, sitting back up after a moment. "You're a witch and a liar, I suppose.”

"It’s always different for humans, I suppose.” She shrugs and smiles. “Now a liar is different than a witch, and I'll not deny that.”

“Are you an elf?”

“What I am doesn’t matter,” she says, and waves her hand again, mending his armor and clothing. “There you are, that’s nicer.”

Tybalt stands slowly, amazed that his body is no longer in pain. All his injuries, from the broken
ribs to the smallest scratch are gone, and his gear looks almost new. “That’s...by the Maker…”

“Refreshing, isn’t it? Now, if you don’t mind…” she looks pointedly at the rose vines. "I could do it myself, but it might get...messy."

“Of course, your...Majesty.” Tybalt nods and strides over, squatting to examine her plight. “I don’t think we can get you out without ruining your dress.”

“It’s only a dress,” she says and shrugs again. “I have others.”

He rises and looks down at her with confusion. “You seem awfully calm to have just seen a warrior tumble into a forest out of a mirror.”

“From another world, covered in battle wounds,” she adds helpfully, raising an eyebrow. “None of this strikes me as unusual in the slightest. Would you believe me that this isn’t the first plane I’ve walked?”

“I don’t understand what you mean, but here we are,” he says, grasping her hands. “I’ll pull, you just try not to get cut to ribbons.”

“I’ve never minded a little blood,” she chuckles, tightening her grip on his hands. *Adventure. This man reeks of it.*

Tybalt jerks her arm, but she only gets pulled deeper into the patch. “Well blast it all,” he mutters. “I’m going to have to try and lift you out. May I?”

Hera gives him a slow, seductive smile. “Please do.”

He nods and wraps his arms around her waist, lifting her up and jerking back at the same time. With a curse, they stumble, and Tybalt trips over the edge of the mirror, and they fall. Hera’s head hits the frame as she falls into darkness.
Ferelden

“My lady?”

Hera ignores the unfamiliar voice and the concern laced through it, clenching her eyes tight and turning her head away. *Not now,* she thinks, *let someone else handle it. I’m just a queen, not a god.*

“My lady? If you’re alive, please let me know.”

*What?* Brows coming together in a frown, her lashes flutter before lifting to reveal the loveliest of violet eyes. “I’m not certain,” she rasps, her throat and mouth full of dust.

The Grey Warden Tybalt kneels before her, his face full of concern. “Let me assist you,” he says, helping her to a sitting position. “My lady, I’m so sorry,” he tells her. “We tripped, and now we’ve traveled back through the mirror.”

She puts a hand to her aching head, the clamor of pain so intense it takes a moment for his words to have meaning. When they do, surprise flashes across her face as she looks around her. “I can just go back...wait, where is it?” she cries in a panic, looking around them. “I must go back, where is the mirror?”

Tybalt looks away guiltily. “It had to be destroyed,” he tells her, nodding behind her. “Darkspawn were using it to enter your world, and the only way to stop them was to break the mirror.”

Hera turns to see the remains of a duplicate mirror, just like the one in her forest. The dark glass is shattered, magic no longer swirling within, and the frame is notched from multiple blades. That’s when she sees the bodies of nightmarish creatures all around her. The majority are small, their skin sickly green like rotting flesh, reminding her of a horde of goblins she, Zeus, and their friends had fought on their way through in Ravenloft’s dungeons. Hera and Jamison had stood together, shielded by their brothers, and used all the power they’d possessed to fill the dungeon with enough fire to destroy them. But these... *It’s too many to fight in the open,* she thinks, studying them closely. *They definitely aren’t goblins. They’re bigger, darker, almost like an orc.* She leans closer, looking down at the mismatched armor they all seem to wear. “What *are* these things?” she asks, horrified by the rictus grin stretching across its skull.

“These are the darkspawn,” Tybalt explains softly. “My men and I were attacked here, and the mirror appeared during the battle and I fell in. The battle was still going on when we fell back
through. My lady, the mirror *had* to be destroyed, as a Grey Warden I couldn’t allow the
darkspawn to enter your world and cause a Blight there as well.” He is again injured, but he is not
alone. Several yards away, three other men wait, bandages wrapped around arms and knees.

“No,” she whispers, reaching out for a shard. “No. I’d just settled into the crown. I haven’t
prepared Zeus for—there hasn’t been enough time. I have to go back. The door is here somewhere,
we must find it.”

Tybalt puts a hand on her shoulder. “I’m sorry, my lady, but we cannot stay here. I have to move
on, and you can’t stay alone. Can you walk? Let me help you up.”

She grabs Tybalt’s arm to stay him. “Wait,” she whispers. “Please. Don’t tell them who I am,” she
pleads. “Don’t tell anyone I’m a queen.”

“What should I tell them? I cannot lie to my brothers.”

“If you tell them I’m a famous courtesan, you won’t be lying,” she assures him. “I am. Before I was
crowned I was the most famous and adored courtesan across the planes—many other worlds,”
she explains. “Please, Tybalt. Don’t tell them.”

After a moment’s hesitation, he nods. “I won’t. But your crown…?”

She takes it from him and hides it beneath her cloak. “I’ll just have to sell it when I have the
chance. I’m only Hera, a courtesan, remember?”

“I understand,” he says and lifts her gently to her feet. “But you must not use your magic here,” he
warns under his breath, putting his arm around her to help her walk. “You could be killed for it,
and I can’t protect you from the templars.”

“Thank you,” she says softly as they approach the group. She winces with every step and looks
down to see her skirt is torn up to her hip and her leg is covered in blood-soaked bandages. “What
happened to me?”

Another man, dressed like Tybalt, reaches out a hand to steady her. “Forgive us, your leg has been
hurt, my lady,” he explains. “You were unconscious when you fell through the mirror, and one of
the darkspawn cut you before we could get to you. We have no horses, but we can help you walk,
or carry you. Ostagar is not too far, we will be there tomorrow.”

Hera smiles brilliantly at him, ignoring the pain in her leg. He’s about her height, with a mop of light brown hair falling into warm eyes as dark as newly plowed earth. Slender and pale, he looks like someone more accustomed to a library than a road, but the bow across his back and the long dagger sticking out of his boot gives the impression that he can take care of himself. “I appreciate your help, sir. My name is Hera.”

“I am Bertran,” he responds. “You’ve met Tybalt. This is Ivon and Geoffrey,” he adds, pointing to a giant of a man first, and then a weasel-like man who keeps his hands in his pockets.

Hera gives each of them a smile in turn. “I do wish this were a pleasure, gentlemen,” she says apologetically. “But might anyone know how to get me home?”

“If anyone can help you, it will be the Circle of Magi,” Tybalt explains, sweeping her into his arms and ignoring her painful wince. “Duncan will see that you’re sent home.”

"Tybalt, we need to teach you how to handle a woman," she says through clenched teeth. "You nearly gave me whiplash."

The Grey Warden chuckles and relaxes his arms a bit so that she may settle more comfortably. "My lady, I know more about handling a woman than any man here."

She grins, a bit of her humor returning in the midst of her sudden apprehension. "Funny, so do I."
Chapter Summary

On the way to Ostagar, Hera learns more about the Grey Wardens, but the wound she received earlier grows infected.

She learns that Ostagar is not a city as she expected, but the ruin of a once-great fortress. As they travel, the men tell her of how grand it once was, and the stronghold against what they call Wilder barbarians. They also tell her of the Grey Wardens, an ancient order of heroes vowed to defeat the darkspawn that plague this world. For Hera, an explorer of not a few worlds, it sounds like a grand adventure, but she keeps her mouth shut when she hears the fear and doubt creeping into their voices.

“Sir Tybalt, how is your order so elite?” she asks, staying still while Bertran stitches her skirt during a rest.

“We are specially trained,” he explains, handing her a water skin. “Only the best are tested and join the Grey Wardens.”

“Grey Wardens are the first and last line of defense against them,” Bertran adds, head down. “We have...abilities, my lady.”

“Surely your home has something similar?” Ivon asks incredulously.

“Ah...the army is quite small,” she improvises. “I’m afraid I can't really elaborate.”

“Well, how would you know, anyway?” Geoffrey chuckles. “You probably spend more time on your back than your feet, am I right?”

Before anyone can respond, Tybalt gets them moving again, softly apologizing for the recruit’s rude remark. She shrugs it off, directing the conversation back to the darkspawn and the Blight they face. On this, Bertran leads the conversation, talking excitedly about the different types and sizes, explaining how you can tell a difference just by the shape of their head or the color of their skin.
It isn’t long before they start asking about her own life. Hera allows them to believe her human, albeit an exceptionally beautiful one; she’s almost certain telling them that she’s half-vampire would result in a swift death. She tells the group that she was walking in the forest to clear her mind—again not lying—and came across the mirror. She’s not used to being vague about who and what she is, but without her twin—or any comrade really—she’s hesitant to be as brazen as usual.

Mostly, she sleeps, the hood of her cloak pulled down over her face as one of the men carries her. She expected to heal quickly, as usual, but something has infected it, and her pain increases instead of lessening. Tybalt mentions something of a taint or poison and increases their speed. Her leg swells and burns, and before nightfall, she shivers with fever. Were she not so unsettled by this unusual turn of events, she would have been worried about her body’s sluggish healing.

“Ivon, run ahead and see if there is a cart or horse on the road,” Tybalt orders as they make camp. “I would carry you the rest of the way, my lady, but it is still several miles before we reach Ostagar, and I’d rather get you to help quickly.”

Dizzy and feverish, she nods, shivering in Bertran’s arms. “I’ll be fine,” she assures them in a weak voice. “This is a minor injury. My family does not get ill.”

“I fear you’re the rare exception, then,” Tybalt chuckles, and applies a cool, soothing poultice. “Take this and sleep, my lady. We’ll be there soon,” he tells her, holding a small bottle to her lips.
Waking in the infirmary, Hera is greeted by yet another Grey Warden with whom she shares an instant and powerful connection. When he takes her to meet the Warden-Commander, the path she's been put on becomes clear, and Thedas will never be the same.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Her leg will be fine. I’ve healed it, and the fever is broken. All that remains is for her to wake.”

“Thank you, Wynne. Duncan would like to speak with her as soon as she does.”

“I’ll send someone for him.”

“Ah. Well. He told me to wait if that’s alright with you?”

More unfamiliar voices, and further proof that none of this is a dream. After a long pause, Hera opens her eyes slowly after the conversation ends to see the most beautiful human she’s ever laid eyes on. He shines with purity and beauty, a golden nimbus that blinds her. “Oh, you’re awake,” she hears, and he shifts, his head blocking the shaft of sunlight streaming into her eyes and blinding her.

“Hello, Hero,” she says softly. The word surprises her, but somehow hero fits this young man perfectly.

“Me?” he blushes. “I think you mean Tybalt, my lady. He’s your hero. He’s the one who brought you in.”

Hera gives him a shrewd look, still sun-blind. “That may be so, but I know a hero when I see one. Or almost see one,” she adds, holding up a hand to block the light.
“Oh. Umm. Sorry, I wanted to get a better look at you,” he explains, twitching the tent flap closed. “Bertran and Geoffrey went on and on about you.”

“Bertran is a dear boy,” she jokes and lies back, blinking away the sunspots. *What a lovely voice,* she thinks. *Like a delicious old whiskey. Zeus will be dreadfully jealous.* “And Geoffrey is vulgar. Don’t listen to him.”

“You...ah...you don’t mind the things he’s said?”

“Not really,” she says lightly. “It’s no worse than what’s been said before. Where am I, anyway?” she asks, squinting in the shadows.

“An infirmary tent, in Ostagar,” he says. “Do you remember being brought in? Tybalt said you were hurt pretty badly.”

His face finally comes into focus, and Hera’s eyes widen. He truly is beautiful, in a very human and real way- not like Hera and Zeus, who look more like gods than mortals. He sports a strong jaw dusted with gold stubble, a nose so perfect sculptors would weep, high cheekbones, and hazel eyes, mostly green warmed with flecks of gold. Right now, they’re staring right into her own, looking stunned. If her heart wasn’t pounding, the call of adventure echoing in her ears, she might wear the same expression. In all her years, she’s never seen a human quite so handsome.

*He’s just a boy; he can’t be much older than twenty.*

“Hello,” she says. “My name is Hera.”


*He’s...adorable.* Her lips curl into a lazy smile. “A pleasure, Alistair.”

“Likewise. Are you feeling well enough to walk, my lady? Duncan wants to speak with you.”

“I’m a bastard, not a lady. You can call me whatever you like,” she tells him, clutching the sheet to her chest, unsure of the customs of this place, and experiments with sitting up slowly. The boy
quickly offers his hand to steady her, but she is without pain or dizziness. As soon as their hands touch a thrill runs along her arm, making her eyes fly to his face to see if he felt it as well. *How curious. Is he to be a patron, then?* “It seems I’m well enough. Are your physicians so great they can heal an infected wound so quickly?”

“Magic,” he explains, his expression shrouded. Hera feels a slight tremble in his hand before he releases her and backs away. “I’ll give you a moment to dress,” he adds and steps out of the tent.

She watches him go, confused by her sudden attraction to him. It’s stronger than she’s ever felt, and in her business, she knows attraction better than most. *This isn’t just desire...* she thinks. A *patron or lover he might well become- but there’s something else as well. Something...different. Stronger. I feel... connected to him, somehow. Oh, what an adventure he and I shall have.*

She stands, wrapping the sheet around her. Her gown lay in a blood-red puddle, covered in thorns, mud, and in plush tatters, while her boots rest on the canvas floor. Folded neatly beside them is her cloak, with a bundle of rags on top of it. Investigating, she discovers that Tybalt kept her crown hidden. Pursing her lips, she looks around a moment, thinking of how she might improve her current situation without the use of magic or money. Her eyes light on a pair of shears lying beside a pile of bandages, and she smiles.

A few moments later, Hera emerges, her gown clipped to her knees and her inky black hair hanging loose. Around her waist is a length of braided cloth, red like her dress, and at the small of her back, it holds her crown conveniently out of sight with her cloak on. With no one looking, she’d whispered a spell to clean her things, so that she doesn’t look quite like a wandering camp whore. With her boots coming well past her knee, she looks rather fetching. *A lost princess, indeed,* she thinks, oddly cheerful in spite of her situation.

Alistair waits, leaning against a tree, eyes closed. She comes closer slowly, enjoying the simple pleasure of just looking at him before he senses her presence. His eyes spring open, then widen in surprise. “You clean up...rather quickly,” he says.

“I travel often,” she explains with a chuckle. “Part of the life, I suppose.”

“Of a wh-” he stops, looking a little sheepish.

“You’ve been listening to Geoffrey,” she teases, remembering the man’s great amusement in calling her a whore.
He squints at her a moment, tilting his head to one side and changing the subject. “You’re taller than I expected.”

Hera grins. He’s taller than she is, the top of her head comes only to his jaw, making her wonder if all the men here are so large. Stepping closer, she tilts her face up to look at him better. “Not the first time I’ve heard that,” she says. “My father was tall.”

“Oh. He was?”

She nods. “Was. He died long ago.”

“I’m sorry,” he says quickly.

Hera’s grin turns into a small smile. “Thank you, but I did not know him. Shall we find Duncan, good Warden?”

“How did you know I’m a Grey Warden?” he asks in surprise.

Hera laughs. “Well, you’re dressed like Tybalt, and you’ve both mentioned Duncan, so I’m assuming that you’re a Grey Warden and he is your leader.”

“That’s a good guess.” The tips of his ears turn pink, and he swings his arms awkwardly as they walk. “Can...Can I ask you a question?”

“You may,” she says, grinning. “But only if it’s going to make that flush in your cheeks more charming.”

“Um...” He clears his throat, glancing at her, then away just as quickly. “What’s a...courtesan...exactly?” he asks hesitantly. “I mean, I know, but...what’s the difference between a whore and a courtesan?”

She bites her lip to keep from laughing. *He doesn’t know what a courtesan is? Surely he didn’t grow up among monks?* “Well,” she starts, stopping in the shade of a broken down wall. “I suppose you could say I’m a rather expensive prostitute, but that’s a cheap way of putting it.”
“What do you mean?” he asks, stopping in front of her. “About it being cheap, I mean?”

Hera pushes her hair over her shoulder. “I’m elite. Educated in diplomacy and courtly manners; I can play music, dance, sing, and write poetry. There’s been a lot of money spent to ensure that I am a jewel highly sought after by nobility and royalty to adorn any court or bed.” She steps into his personal space, running a hand up the chest plate of his armor. “What I do is an art, and I’ve spent years honing my skills…” she adds softly, looking up at him.

The redness has traveled from the tips of his ears down his throat, and he swallows. “S-Skills?”

She nods. “Skills a man like yourself would find rather enjoyable.”

“Oh?”

“I could teach you things you didn’t know you needed,” she offers in a velvety voice, her fingers brushing the exposed skin of his neck. “You’d need only remember me to keep yourself warm at night.”

Alistair leaps away, clamping a hand to the spot she’d touched, his blush deepening even more. “I-uh-you-” he stammers, backing away.

Hera smiles sweetly, clasping her hands behind her back. *That blush really is charming.* “Yes?”

“You- um... You walk over there,” he demands, pointing with a shaking hand. “I’ll walk- um- over here.”

Her smile widens, and she gestures for him to proceed her. “Lead on, blushing Warden.”

“Maker’s breath,” he mutters, rubbing where she’d touched as he walks.

He leads her to a tent far away from the rest of the army. Alistair calls out, but when there’s no answer, he tells her to go in and have a seat while he finds his superior. Ducking inside, Hera
ignores the camp stool in the corner and turns slowly, learning what she could of the man before she meets him.

An unlit lamp hangs above a rickety folding table covered in paper and maps on one side and a narrow cot with a trunk at the foot runs along the other. Between them stands a lit brazier, embers glowing beneath a battered kettle of water. “Hmm, not much different than some of my own tents,” she murmurs to herself, picking up a wooden shield with a grey griffin painted on a blue field. “But this is a little sparse even for an officer at war.” In truth, beyond the larger pieces, there is nothing but a collection of weapons and a pack resting on the trunk.

“That would be because I am a Grey Warden, my lady. I require little.”

Hera turns, shield still in hand, to face him. Duncan looks a bit like Tybalt with his dark hair and rugged features, but there the resemblance ends. Duncan’s skin is dark as if he’d been born to spend his days in the sun, and if his face bears any scars they are covered by a full, lush beard. Handsome, but with a stern expression that tells her she’ll find no patron in him for the time being.

Zeus would love him, she decides as his dark eyes travel over her. Were the circumstances different, I believe we’d have to share him.

“Forgive me,” he says, breaking into her thoughts and offering her the stool as he sits in the leather and wood folding chair at his desk. “I was with Tybalt. My name is Duncan, I am Commander of the Grey Wardens in Ferelden.”

“I am Hera,” she says simply, remaining standing while she studies him.

Duncan strikes her instantly as someone to trust- as good as any other- so she sits and tells him the entire story- even her being queen and magical ability, using her crown, signet ring, and prestidigitation as proof. She keeps her parentage a secret, still certain that trying to explain what a dhampir is would only result in her death. It doesn’t take very long to tell the tale of her sudden appearance, but Duncan spends a long time thinking it through. She waits patiently while he brews her a strong cup of tea, flicking mud off the high leg of her boots.

“Well, Majesty,” he begins, handing her the wooden cup of tea. “I’m afraid the mirror route is lost. It sounds like an eluvian and was simply too dangerous to leave it open once the darkspawn discovered it. Also, the Circle is occupied with assisting us in stopping the Blight before it begins. Although now I’m afraid your people have to contend with what darkspawn made it through.”
“My brother can handle them,” she says with great certainty. “I’ve never heard of an eluvian, but I’m certain the doorway that brought me here was no different than any other portal I’ve passed through. Sometimes they need a permanent structure to...hold it open, so to speak. A mirror is unsuited to the task anyway. I need only time and my own power to find it.”

“And yet no one can be spared to protect you while you search.”

“So you’re saying that there is no hope of my finding help?” she asks, disheartened.

The dark-skinned man shrugged. She senses that he wasn’t always the stoic commander before her, and in the back of her mind, she imagines the kind of patron he would be. Thorough, she decides, glancing at his strong hands, a little rough when lost in passion. Not an unenjoyable man. In another time and place, he and I would be compatible.

His voice breaks through her thoughts, and she returns her gaze to his face. “Not until after this is finished, I’m afraid. Nor can I allow you to venture out on your own searching.”

Hera sips the bitter brew, thinking. “So, how may I be of help?”

“Queen Hera, you can’t. You’re far too important to your realm to get involved. As a visiting monarch, you really should-”

Hera waves a hand dismissively. “Nonsense. My uncle is more than capable, and my brother is my heir. My kingdom is in the best of hands, and they will await my return.”

“If you survive.”

Her smile is strange and sharp. “You will find I’m tougher than you think, Warden-Commander.”

Duncan stares for a moment, then shrugs. “Well, you have magic, you could be of use with the Circle. You would have to follow the chantry’s laws, however,” he explains.

“The chantry?”
“Our religious leaders,” he tells her. “They and the templars control the Circle and ensure that the general population is safe from mages.”

*Safe from mages? Preposterous! What kind of world needs protection from its greatest helpers and heroes?* Hera shakes her head quickly. “Whatever their rules, I will not bend to their dogma, nor will I allow it to control me or my power.”

Duncan takes a deep breath, looking for all the world as if an obstinate noble was the last thing he wanted to deal with today. “I’m sure in this instance King Cailan will make an exception, should you use it to heal and help the living,” he offers. “You’d still have to follow their rules of behavior and provide a phylactery, however.”

“A phylactery?” she asks, raising her eyebrows at the word. She’s heard of such things, but never by an organization like this chantry. “You mean a dowsing mechanism? I would be able to be found at any time, in any location?”

Duncan nods. “Every member of the Circle of Magi provides one. Our templars use them to find any apostate criminals.”

“Templars?”

“I suppose you could say they are the sword of the chantry,” he explains. “They guard and discipline the mages within the Circle.”

A chill passes through her at the thought of giving them her blood, and she shakes her head again. “Unacceptable. I refuse to be party to such a barbaric tradition- phylacteries haven’t been used in centuries by anyone with pure intentions. Besides, I have a great many skills that would be wasted in an infirmary.”

“I don’t think diplomacy and...arts of the bedroom...are going to be of much help elsewhere, Majesty.”

“First, let’s end the formalities,” she demands. “I am a queen, yes. But I don’t wish it to be known here. Let everyone believe my story: that I am a bastard courtesan of no little fame. It is true. Second, you should know that I can probably whip that young boy who brought me here, with any weapon you handed me. Possibly you,” she added with a predatory look, “if you’re willing to try.
Third, before you even suggest it, I refuse to waste my time hiding in a palace with the other pretty ladies and their fancy dresses.”

Duncan gives her silk and velvet a pointed look. “You happen to be a pretty lady in the remnants of a fancy dress.”

“I was also walking in a magical forest wearing a crown,” she says crisply. “I like to make a pretty picture.”

Duncan sighs and rubs his face briskly. “What do you want? I really don’t have time to chatter about this.”

Hera gives him the strange smile again. “I believe I want to be a Grey Warden.”

He shakes his head at the idea of this woman joining his warriors. “I already have my recruits.”

She raises an eyebrow skeptically. “How many? Three? Four? It doesn’t seem as if there is a line forming. I’ve seen your blue and grey tents, there aren’t so many.”

Pinching the bridge of his nose, he groans with frustration. “With all due respect, your Majesty, you have no idea what it means to be a Warden. Some of these men and women are criminals—murderers and traitors.”

“And you have no idea what it means to be Queen of Ravenloft,” she counters, smiling sweetly and shrugging. “You offer the lost redemption in an honorable fight against these darkspawn, I can appreciate that. So what’s one more soldier in your war?”

His hard gaze lingers for a long time before he makes some private decision. “Will you be able to use a sword and shield?”

A cold and dangerous shadow passes over her face, gone almost before he sees it, and she smiles up at him. “Commander, I’d be fine using cutlery.”

Chapter End Notes
Finally, we meet Alistair!
The Wilds

Chapter Summary

After arguing with Duncan, Alistair takes Hera and the other recruits head into the Korcari Wilds to test their mettle and gather darkspawn blood.

“Duncan, you are not serious.”

Duncan sighs and lifts his hand to silence Alistair. “I’m not going to argue this, Alistair. She’s a recruit. I tested her myself.”

Alistair paces before the large watchfire Duncan built, fisting his hands in his hair. When he’d been told the girl would be joining them, he hadn’t believed Duncan. But now he couldn’t even imagine her lifting a finger against darkspawn. “But Duncan- look at her! How is she going to fight darkspawn? Or even survive the Joining? She’s soft and wears fancy gowns and-”

“And I’m right here,” Hera says, coming up behind him. Given an hour, she sold her crown to some shady looking merchants on the edge of camp, purchasing several sets of clothes and gear, and Duncan was good enough to issue her some Grey Warden Recruit armor and variety of weapons- all of which she took, just in case one felt better than the other. The gear was used and looked like it had been pieced together from other kits, but she didn’t mind well-worn pieces; to her, it meant that it was well made and had withstood good use. With her hair braided and pinned around her head, the only thing marking her as wealthy would be the numerous rings she wears and the jeweled collar at her throat. “And quite a lot of people can hear you, Hero.”

Alistair’s sneering expression turns quickly to one of embarrassment. “I’m sorry, my lady-”

“Hera will do,” she interrupts, then looks to Duncan. “I’m ready.”

Duncan nods. “Good. You’re going to join Alistair and the others collecting some documents from an old fortress lost to the wilds. You each have to collect a vial of darkspawn blood, then you can participate in the joining.”

Hera nods. “Understood, sir.”
She and Alistair walk over to a group of men waiting nearby. Ivon and Geoffrey stand with a third man, younger than Alistair, it seems, looking pale and tired. “You know Ivon and Geoff,” Alistair says, pointing to them. “This is Daylen Amell, a Circle mage from Kinloch Hold.”

“A pleasure, Daylen,” she says, shaking his hand. “I’m Hera.”

Daylen is tall and thin, and nearly as pale as she is. His fine blonde hair drapes in front of his eyes, and she can tell he has to push it back often. “Pleasure,” he says bitterly. “Sure.”

Hera ignores his poor manners and turns to the others. “Shall we?”

Duncan bids them good luck, and the five of them make their way towards the tall wooden gates at the far end of the fortress.

“Lady Hera.”

Tybalt’s voice is so hard it stops Hera in her tracks, making her wince and hope it goes away. She looks hopefully at Alistair, who shakes his head and crosses his arms. She can feel the anger radiating off the Warden behind her, so she turns slowly, smiling placatingly. “Ser Tybalt,” she says sweetly.

He grabs her arm roughly and hauls her away from the group, gripping her so hard she’s certain he’ll leave bruises. “These aren’t usually the kind of love-marks I allow,” she jokes, pulling away once they’re out of earshot.

“What in the void are you doing?” he demands angrily.

“I would have thought it was obvious,” she says.

“I didn’t bring you here to join the Grey Wardens!” he nearly shouts, waving his arms.

“You brought me here because you didn’t have anywhere else to take me,” she reminds him softly,
trying to calm him. “And I thank you for that, but I’m not in your care any longer.”

“The void you aren’t! Hera, you’ll die in this Blight!”

Hera smiles at the concern in his voice and puts a hand on his chest. “Ser Tybalt, I’m going to be fine,” she promises. “I swear.”

“Hera, we don’t have time for this,” Alistair calls out, and the group snickers behind their hands.

“Coming!” she answers and turns back to Tybalt. “You’ve done all you can, dear knight, but this is my choice. Congratulate yourself on bringing in the prettiest recruit,” she adds and pats his chest plate before returning to the recruits.

“Everything all right?” Alistair asks as they head for the gates.

She glances behind her to see Tybalt watching her sadly. “Not really. But nothing to be done now.”

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It takes Hera a little time to get used to the noise of the Korcari Wilds, filtering out the typical sounds of birds and small animals and instead listening for the stomping feet of a horde of monsters trampling through the undergrowth. The forest reminds her of the depths of the one she first found herself in when she was transported to Ravenloft; full of shadows, fog creeping through the trees, cool gray fingers rising to wrap around their ankles. The distant howling of wolves adds to the eerie setting, making her feel almost at home, in spite of the boggy ground that sucks at her boots.

“Stop!” Hera whispers, grabbing Alistair by the belt and hauling him to a stop.

“What? Why?” he demands, frowning at her over his shoulder.

Slowly, Hera removes her bow and takes a few steps forward, squinting.

“What is it?” he asks again.
“There’s something...there,” she tells him, fitting an arrow to the string.

“It can’t be darkspawn,” he tells her. “I would sense them if it was. All Wardens can.”

“How far can your senses go, Hero?” she asks, drawing her bow and taking sight. “Because I can see something that looks like an awful lot like a darkspawn.” She releases the arrow, and a moment later a dark spot on the horizon disappears. “They’re coming,” she tells them, preparing another shot.

Alistair lets out a warcry as soon as he sees the darkspawn approach. Hera, remembering well her past experiences, draws away from the group and begins picking them off one by one. Daylen, his staff whirling, takes up a place not far away, shouting in another tongue as his spells fly forward.

“Behind you!” Daylen shouts.

Hera drops the bow and draws her sword, swinging an elbow into the face of the darkspawn behind her and following it with her blade. Daylen freezes it in place so she can slit its throat as the others come running. The battle is short but bloody. Ivon and Geoffrey both receive wounds, and the party is forced to pause while the injuries are dealt with. Hera wastes no time pilfering the darkspawn bodies, gathering anything of use. It’s bloody work, but it keeps her busy.

“Hera?”

She looks up at Alistair while yanking an arrow from a body. “Yes?”

Alistair rubs his neck, looking grim. “I wanted to apologize. You’re...” he laughs softly and shakes his head. “You’re fierce. I’ve never seen a woman fight like that.”

“Duncan did tell you he tested me.”

“Who won?” Ivon asks.
She grins, straightening up. “I did. Two of three rounds.”

Alistair laughs, shaking his head. “I’m sorry I doubted you. Your senses are incredible. How did you see it? It was past even my range.”

“I’m a dham-” she coughs to cover her slip. “Damn good shot is all.”

“Well, it’s appreciated. Let’s get these oafs on their feet and move on.”

She watches him walk away, wondering at the emotions swirling through her. *A beautiful boy. A world overrun by monsters. A dreadful secret and hidden magic. It sounds like a romance novel. Zeus would approve.*

“Hey, isn’t that one of the flowers the kennel master was looking for?” Ivon asks. “White, with a red center?”

Hera glances at the flower. “Did he say what it was for?”

“Yeah, this is it,” Ivon decides. “Said it had something to do with the mabari. Maybe we should take him some.”

“You men want to leave the flower-picking to little girls and old ladies?” Alistair asks. “We don’t have time for this, we need to find those documents.”

Defiantly, Hera plucks the flower, tucking it into her braid, and glares at Alistair. “Aren’t you helpful,” she mutters.

“Let’s move,” he says. “We need to find that tower and gather more blood for you.”

Hera and Daylen exchange a confused look. “Why do we need darkspawn blood, anyway?” he asks.

Alistair opens his mouth to speak, but closes it again. *He’s keeping secrets,* Hera thinks. *Personal*
ones or Grey Warden ones? Perhaps they're one and the same.

“You’ll see.”
Chapter Summary

The Grey Warden recruits head into the wilds in search of two things: the blood of darkspawn and the hidden documents Duncan requires. What they find leads Hera to more questions about the world she's trapped in.

“This is the place?” Ivon asks when they see a series of broken pillars marking the path leading to the broken walls of a circular tower.

Alistair nods, pausing and ducking behind some of the rubble. “Darkspawn ahead,” he whispers. “Hera, use your bow and stay back to cover Daylen. Ivon, Geoffrey, with me.”

She and the mage nod, preparing themselves for cover fire. On Alistair’s signal, she pops up, firing as fast as she can to distract and hinder the group of darkspawn ahead. Daylen stays beside her, hurtling spells as fast as his staff will allow, one hand almost casually reaching up to brush the hair out of his eyes.

“You must have been a formidable mage!” she says as they begin to narrow their attacks to other archers on the edges of the battle.

“Not really.” he grunts, hitting his knees and hiding behind the fallen pillar. “Wrong place, wrong time,” he adds, pulling the cork off a bottle of blue liquid and draining it. “I have shite taste in friends.”

The skirmish ahead dies down, and they walk over to join the others looting the bodies. “What was that you drank?” she asks.

“Lyrium,” he explains, holding out a bottle to her. “Mages use it to replenish our magic.”

*It’s a mana potion,* she realizes, turning the glowing glass over in her hands. *Sorcerers don’t need this sort of thing- our magic is innate and draws from the strength of our spirit- but I’ve seen wizards use something like this. “It’s...cold.”*
He nods. “But if you drink it, it’s like setting fire to your blood. It doesn’t replenish all our magic, but it’s like a burst of adrenaline.”

Handing it back, she stores her bow on her back, setting it in a clever hook placed on her quiver.

“Do we have enough vials?” she asks Alistair, watching thick black blood ooze from a slashed wrist into the vial he holds.

“Yes. This will do.”

“So we’re on to the next bit, yeah?” Geoffrey grunts, yanking on a pair of boots a hurlock wears.

“We don’t need everything.” Ivon’s nose wrinkles in disgust. “Especially not their boots.”

“You might not, but some of us got here flat-broke,” the weaselly man sneers.

Hera kicks at a clump of mud, tempted to join him. *His logic is sound, at least.*

“Well, we have more important things to see to,” Alistair reminds them, gesturing to the broken-down tower. “Like find those documents.”

Turning her attention to the tower ahead, she takes in the view. “It’s rather beautiful, isn’t it?” she asks. Large open windows, the glass long gone, take up much of the structure and suggest that the building was once lit every moment of the day. It shares the same graceful arches she noticed at Ostagar, making her guess that once the fortress was larger than the walls now suggest. “Even in ruins, it has some of the old grandeur about it.”

“Why am I not surprised that you’re a poet, too?” Alistair chuckles as they pass under the stone arches.

“Not a good one, I’m afraid. Zeus was always the wordsmith of the two of us.”

“Wordsmith. That’s a five-sovereign word for you. What else will you do for five sovereigns?” Geoffrey chuckles and pokes Ivon with his elbow.
Hera raises her chin loftily and fixes him with a cold stare. “Not much. My prices start much higher.”

Alistair looks around and sighs. “All right everyone, start digging around for a chest.”

“How could it still be here?” she asks.

“It would have been protected by magic,” Daylen explains. “Duncan told me there may be some seals I’d need to break.”

“We need to be back by nightfall. We don’t want to spend the night wandering around in the dark.”

Hera is too distracted watching the muscles in Alistair’s shoulders move beneath his armor to hear him, and pinches herself. “Sorry, what? That’s right, we were-”

“No need,” Daylen calls from a place near crumbling stairs. “I’ve found it. It’s broke, though.”

“Good! I wasn’t going to say it, but I was going to leave you all sitting right here.” Geoffrey gives Hera a long and lustful look. “Well, maybe not all of you.”

She inches away, putting Ivon and Daylen between them as they watch Alistair rummage through the pieces of the chest. “How lucky for-”

“Damn it!” Alistair growls, kicking the broken chest. “Where are they?”

Hera looks around the ruins, hoping for some clue as to the whereabouts of the documents they had been sent to find. “They must be here somewhere,” she adds hopefully.

“We need those!” he grumbled, kicking the chest again. “Those are treaties between the nations of Ferelden, they’re the only hope we stand against forming an alliance with the elves and dwarves to make an army to fight against the Blight.”
“We’ll find them,” she assures him, touching his arm lightly.

“Maybe there’s a spell I can use to locate them,” Daylen offers, holding a book he has chained to his belt.

“Your documents were removed from this place long ago,” a voice says. They turn to see a tall young woman with dark hair, scantily clad, walking out from the ruins. Hera feels an instant connection with this woman: she gives off an aura of seduction and power that Hera both understands and admires.

“Who are you?” Alistair demands. “What have you done with the treaties?”

“My, you’re a rude one,” the woman cooes. “My name is Morrigan, and my mother removed your treaties. She has them.”

“You’re a witch of the wilds!” Ivon accuses. “She’s dangerous!”

“She’s a mage,” Daylen says dryly. “An apostate mage, but just a mage.”

“He’s right, Hera,” Alistair warns. “They swoop down at night and turn people into frogs.”

The woman chuckles and looks to Hera. “A woman? With the Wardens? Interesting. But women’s hearts are not so frightened and small as a man’s. You aren’t afraid of me, are you?”

Hera grins in reply. “No. I have no fear of frogs and witches.”

“Don’t listen to her! She stole the treaties! She’s some sort of...sneaky witch thief!” Alistair insists.

“My name is Hera.” Hera ignores his fanatics and takes a step closer. “You said your mother has them,” she says instead. “Would you take me to her?”

“This is a pleasant and sensible request,” Morrigan says. “I like you.”
“I’d be careful. One minute it’s *I like you* then ZAP! Frog time,” Alistair says, his voice going alarmingly high when he mocks the witch.

“Hush, Alistair,” Hera scolds and begins to follow Morrigan. “Come along, boys.”

Morrigan’s mother is waiting for them, outside a shabby little hut in a clearing. Like Morrigan, Hera can feel power all around this woman, but there is something else as well...something that reminds her of her uncle the Duke. *Why live in such squalor? Surely two women so powerful could do better than this, even as- what did Daylen call them- apostates?* Silently, Hera follows Morrigan, studying the plain rags and deep wrinkles in the woman’s face. *Peculiar indeed.*

“Finally, girl,” she says to Morrigan in a gravelly voice. “It took you long enough.”

“These Wardens have come for their treaties, Mother,” Morrigan explains.

“You stole them, didn’t you?” Alistair claims, stepping in front of Hera.

Hera raises an eyebrow, clears her throat, and looks up at him pointedly, but he ignores her. *Well isn’t he the knight in shining armor?* She thinks in irritation. *I’m in no danger from these women. We are the same, they and I. Men are such cowards in the face of a woman with power.*

“I’ve kept them safe, boy,” the old woman corrects. “And I’m happy to return them to you. The seal wore off long ago.”

“You read them?!” he shouts.

“Don’t be foolish. I don’t care for your treaties and politics,” she snaps. “I care that the Blight is coming, and much more than that perhaps.”

Geoffrey nervously looks out over the landscape. “Um, Alistair, sir? It’s getting late. We have what we need, don’t we?”
Alistair sighs and pinches the bridge of his nose. “Yes. Fine. But,” he says, lifting his face to stare at the woman, “this isn’t over.”

Hera catches the old woman’s reply as they move away through the woods.

“No, boy, I know that…”
“The recruits outdid themselves, Duncan,” Alistair says, handing the treaties to Duncan. “A few injuries but nothing major.”

“And Hera?”

“The best of them, Duncan. I'll admit, I had my doubts, but not anymore.”

Standing out of earshot with Daylen, Ivon, and Geoffrey, Hera unbraids her hair and waits calmly as the men fidget and stir beside her. “How can you be so calm?” Ivon asks.

Hera shrugs, keeping her eyes on the two men by the fire and pretending her preternatural ears can't hear them discussing her. “I’ve been evaluated and examined my whole life,” she explains. "Sometimes naked. All they're doing is standing there talking about us; that doesn't bother me.”

Geoffrey chuckles. “You really are a whore, aren't you?”

She raises her eyebrow and shrugs. “If you want to be vulgar,” she says dismissively. "Clearly, you do.”

“So where did you learn to fight?” he asks, eyeing her with perverse interest.

“I’ve had a great many men try and teach me how to defend my honor,” she says highly, pushing her loose hair over her shoulder. “A great many men who paid for the opportunity.”

“Well, I’m glad you were there,” Daylen says. “We’d have been overrun otherwise.”
“You’re damn good, too,” Ivon added.

“Thank you,” she says appreciatively. “I look forward to working with you, gentlemen.”

“The four of you will perform the Joining at sunset,” Duncan informs them as he approaches. “I’d suggest you use this time to rest, patch yourselves up, and prepare.” With a nod, he walks away, but Hera runs to catch up.

“Ah, sir?” she calls. “I don’t really have anywhere to go.”

Duncan nods. “I’d forgotten, forgive me Hera. The Quartermaster will see you issued a tent and supplies. You may set up your camp over there, near the other blue and grey tents.”

She nods her thanks and follows his directions to the Quartermaster, who does indeed issue her the essentials, and tells her where she can erect her tent. With a cheerful bounce to her step, she heads over to set it up nearby the other recruits, then finds herself a bucket of water, retrieving a ball of soap and needle and thread from her new kit. She guesses at a couple hours to sunset, so she washes her hair and bathes quickly, then sits to trim and hem her ruined gown.

By the time she’s finished, the gown has been converted to a snug fitting tunic that falls mid-thigh, and she’s happy that this particular gown had a rather modest round neckline, the oval wide but not deep, so her decolletage isn’t exposed. Paired with leather leggings and her boots, it makes for a sumptuous, almost practical ensemble. It’s her heavy jeweled collar that ruins the effect, but with its rubies and onyx raven spreading its wings over her chest and nearly to her shoulders, she finds it difficult to sell her favorite piece of jewelry.

Then she grabs the flower and sets out to find the kennel master. “I heard you were looking for this flower,” she explains.

“Oh you found one!” he cries. “Good! We’ve a sick mabari, and this should help cure him.”

“What’s wrong with it?” she asks, eyeing the enormous dogs barking like mad.

“Darkspawn blood,” he explains. “Sometimes they take in too much, and it can kill them. I have some medicine that will help, but this flower will greatly improve his chances. Unfortunately, it also undoes their imprinting, so he’ll need to imprint on someone before battle.”
“Interesting,” she muses, watching him tear the flower into some liquid. “Who will be the beast’s new master?”

“You found the flower,” the kennel master says. “If you can muzzle and give him the medicine, I don’t see why you can’t have him. He’ll remember his training, but not his name, so you’ll need to rename him, too.”

“All right.” She takes the muzzle and lets herself into the fenced in area, where the poor rust colored hound lies. She approaches slowly, and he raises his head, sniffing the air. “That’s it, my boy,” she soothes, holding out a hand and moving slowly. Surely it isn’t too different than any other animal she’s encountered. “Take a long sniff.” She continues to whisper soothingly to him, and he relaxes enough to allow her to slip the muzzle on. “There you are, my dear thing.”

“I’ve never seen anyone do that before,” the man says in awe.

Hera shrugs. “I’m good with animals. Is the medicine ready?”

“Oh, yes,” he says, distracted, and hands it to her. “Just get him to drink it.”

Hera puts a little on her fingers and lets the mabari lick it off before setting the bowl on the ground. He laps it up eagerly, then staggers and lies down.

“That’s normal,” the kennel master says quickly. “Give him a minute and he’ll be good as new.”

Hera crouches beside him, stroking his short red hair. The hound sighs, rolls over, and starts sniffing her. Hera laughs and throws her arms around him. “I shall call you Ares,” she decides. “A fitting name for a war hound.”

Ares licks her face and barks happily, and the kennel master shakes his head. “The Maker brought the two of you together,” he says in disbelief. “Here’s a list of commands and attacks he knows,” he adds, handing her a scrap of foolscap. “He’ll eat a lot over the next day or two, so be prepared.”

“Thank you,” she says cheerfully. “Ares, to me.”
They return to her tent, and she gives him a blanket to lie on while they go through his commands. She laughs at his eagerness to please, and the way he just seems to fit with her, like a missing puzzle piece. Sitting on her bedroll, she pulls her cloak into her lap and sighs. *The cloak has to go,* she thinks sadly, stroking the heavy black velvet. *It’s just too fine for this sort of work. A sturdy wool one would serve me better. I’ll sell it tomorrow.*

“Hera?”

She lifts her head at the sound of Alistair’s voice. *Is it sunset already? “Yes?”*

“It’s time. Let’s get this done.”

She steps out, pushing her hair over her shoulder. “I’m ready. Ares, to me,” she commands, and he looks inside her tent to see the mabari trotting out to her.

“Is that a mabari war hound?” he asks in surprise.

She nods. “The kennel master said I could have him since I brought the flower to make his medicine. His name is Ares,” she adds, scratching behind his ear and giggling. “My brother is going to hate him.”

Alistair shakes his head, then looks hard at her clothing. “You sure you want to wear that? You look a little overdressed.”

“I’m sure.”

He nods and starts walking. "You know... it just occurred to me that there have never been many women in the Grey Wardens. I wonder why that is?”

Hera smiles and shrugs. “I can handle myself better than most.” His amused grin is lit by the golden sunset, making him look like some sun god, and making Hera feel like a girl again.
“I’m starting to get that impression,” he says warmly.

Hera, Daylen, Ivon, and Geoffrey follow him to a deserted part of the ruins, lit by torches. In the center of the stone floor is a pedestal with a silver chalice, Duncan beside it. “You all did very well today,” he tells them as they range around the pedestal. “And have earned your right to the Joining. Alistair, if you will.”

Hera watches silently as Alistair produces one of the blood-vials they’d collected from the darkspawn and pours it into the chalice. Geoffrey sucks in a breath when he sees the Warden pour herbs into it and stir. Then Duncan turns to them, his face grave.

“Join us, brothers and sisters,” he says, his voice carrying strangely through the night. “Join us in the shadows where we stand vigilant. Join us as we carry the duty that cannot be forsworn. And should you perish, know that your sacrifice will not be forgotten.”

Alistair joins him on the last line, their voices a pleasant harmony. “And that one day we shall join you.” Alistair then speaks alone, looking solemn. “In war, victory. In peace, vigilance. In death, sacrifice.”

The last words hang in the air as Duncan takes the silver chalice and approaches Ivon. “Ivon,” he says, offering it.

“What? No, there’s darkspawn blood in that!” Ivon argues.

“You must, if you are to become a Grey Warden,” Duncan informs him. “This tainted blood will give you the link to sense their movements and distance. This is the source of our power.”

"Those who survive the Joining become immune to the taint," Alistair adds. "We can sense it in the darkspawn and use it to slay the archdemon."

Looking sick, Ivon steps forward and takes the chalice. “This smells so bad,” he mutters before pinching his nose and downing it.

Hera makes a quick retreat when he falls to the floor, twisting and convulsing and screaming in pain. “What’s happening to him?” she demands.
“In order to become a Grey Warden and receive our abilities, you have to take in the corruption of the darkspawn,” Duncan repeats clearly, watching. “It seems young Ivon is not strong enough to withstand it.”

Hera kneels beside him as his body tenses and goes still. “Poor soul,” she whispers, closing his eyes. “Be at peace.”

“Geoffrey,” Duncan calls.

The man backs away, shaking his head. “No. No. I didn’t know it could kill us. I didn’t know we could die before we even became Wardens. I have a family. A wife. Wait- I’m lying, but I don’t want-”

“I am sorry, Geoffrey,” Duncan says sadly. “This is what it means to be a Grey Warden. You have no choice but to continue with the ritual.”

"The price is too high," he stammers, drawing a sword. "There's no glory here!"

Duncan draws his own weapon, a dagger so sharp the edge nearly glows in the dim light. "Do not waste yourself like this, Geoffrey," he warns.

“No, no!” Geoffrey shouts, swinging out wildly with his sword. Duncan parries, slipping into the warrior's guard, and plunges his dagger into the man's belly.

"I am sorry," Duncan whispers, and Hera's hear breaks at the sincerity in his voice.

“They aren’t kidding,” Daylen whispers, and Hera shakes her head, putting a hand on his arm in comfort.

“It will be fine,” she whispers back.

“I’m sorry you had to see that,” Duncan apologizes, returning. “But they knew they had no other
choice- we cannot allow anyone outside the Wardens to know what gives us our abilities. You become a Warden or die in the attempt. There is no other choice.”

Now I really believe he would kill me, she decides as a shiver runs down her back. Alistair drags Ivon’s body away and returns to stand beside Duncan and prepare the chalice for a third time.

In spite of what she's just seen, Hera’s blood races, her wild magic surging, clamoring in her spirit. Adventure! it calls excitedly.

What can it do? Kill me? The Dark Powers would never allow me to die before their time is up. This is only blood, corrupt though it may be.

With a steady hand, she lifts the chalice and toasts Daylen. “Cheers,” she says cheerfully, and drinks, forcing the sluggish potion down before she can gag on it. Heat and revulsion rush through her before blackness takes her.
The battle draws near, but in the short time before the horde closes in, Hera receives a royal summons and must say goodbye to her new friends.

“She’s dead, isn’t she?”

“No, Duncan.” The voice is surprised. “She’s alive.”

Hera opens her eyes and looks up into Alistair’s face. “Hello Hero,” she says softly, blinking. She can feel her pulse in her fingertips, accompanied by the tingle of magic. *Adventure*, it sings through her veins.

“Hello pretty lady,” he says, helping her sit up. “We were worried about you. You fainted and didn’t move for a long time. Your hound here wouldn’t let us near you for the longest time.”

“Good boy,” she says absently, blinking and looking around. It’s totally dark now, the sun long gone for the day. “How long?”

“Several hours,” Duncan said, offering her a hand to her feet. “I’ve never seen a Joining quite like that. I wasn’t sure you’d make it; even Daylen’s awake and recovered. How do you feel?”

*Adventure.*

“Alive,” she admits, putting a hand to her head. “Stronger. More...in tune with...something. Darkspawn? I don't know, but I'm *starving.*”

Alistair laughs. “That I can help with. Come on, I bet we can still find Daylen having supper.”

He leads her to the mess tent, both of them piling a plate high, and Hera taking a second. She would have preferred the chance to feed on someone, as it satisfies even human hunger faster than food,
but she’s hesitant to attempt it here, and though it has great benefits, she doesn’t enjoy it as much as she once did. Daylen is nowhere to be seen, so they find an empty spot and she tucks in, sending a running boy back for more.

“"You eat like a man," Alistair laughs, watching Hera take her fourth helping. "Where are you putting it all?"

“Tall boots,” she says between bites. “Hides a hollow leg.”

Alistair laughs and watches her eat. “Well, welcome to the Grey Wardens, such as they are.”

“Do you think I’ll look good in the uniform?”

“I think you’d look good in anything,” he says charmingly. “But you have to get rid of...that,” he says, gesturing to her collar. “It’s not appropriate for a warrior. Or practical for basically anybody.”

She reaches up to touch the cold stones. “I know. It’s just...it was a gift. But I won't wear it anymore.”

“That reminds me.” He reaches into his pocket and withdraws an amulet. “This is the Warden’s Oath. Duncan meant to give it to you when you woke, but he had to get back to King Cailan. You’ll meet him soon. It’s our amulet,” he explains, handing it to her. “It contains a trace of darkspawn blood so that you never forget our duty or the ones who have fallen before you.”

Hera takes it, studying it. After a moment, she reaches up and unclasps the heavy collar, gathering it up in her lap and putting the amulet over her head. “Now I'm a true Grey Warden?” she asks.

His humor shines through, and his eyes squint in a smile. “Close enough, with all that red,” he chuckles. “The Quartermaster will issue you a new uniform and take the recruit set you were given earlier. It’s probably in your tent now. Just watching you is making my mouth water.”

Mouth full, Hera raises her eyebrows. Swallowing, she reaches over and strokes the back of his hand. “I think we can sate your appetite...”
“For food!” he corrects, blushing deeply. “For food. The Joining takes a lot of energy, I was ravenous for days. Wardens have to eat a lot to keep up our strength. I’m going to get more,” he babbles. “More food. I’ll be back.”

Swallowing, she watches him leave and barely holds back her laughter. *This could be my favorite adventure yet.*

“Are you the new recruit?” a voice asks, and Hera’s thoughts scatter as she looks up at a boy standing beside her, nervously eyeing Ares.

“One of them,” she replies as Alistair returns.

“Alistair, sir,” the boy says, nodding, “Duncan wants you. He’s in the war council with the King. He said to bring her.”

Alistair looks with disappointment at his plate, but nods. Hera drains her cup of water and grabs his bread, ripping a hole into it and hollowing the loaf. “What are you doing?” he asks. “We have to go, you can’t eat anymore.”

Before walking away, she grabs a handful of meat with her bare hand and stuffs it into the bread, then plugs it up with the piece she’d ripped out. “Think of it as a meat pie,” she tells him, handing it to him and wiping her hand off on a handkerchief in her pocket. “Blast,” she mutters, realizing what she’s done. “This was silk. And embroidered. And my brother’s.” With a sigh, she tosses it into the next fire they pass. *Zeus will just have to forgive me.*

“Duncan, we’re here,” Alistair announces, swallowing his last mouthful. “You needed us?”

Duncan stands with a blonde man in golden armor, and they turn when she and Alistair approach. With them is what she thinks is a mage, and another, older man in plate armor. His nose is long and hooked at the end, and his gaze bores into her the moment he sees her. Fury burns in the depths of his dark eyes, making her feel as if he knows exactly who and what she is. All he does is look at her, but she can feel the bruises he would leave on a lover, the wild rage he would bring to bed. His desire would be born from what he cannot have instead of what he can.

"That's Teyrn Loghain," Alistair whispers as they get closer. "Be careful around him. He's...intense."
"So I see," she whispers back.

“Good. You’re feeling all right, Hera?” Duncan asks.

She nods, breaking her gaze from the man to look at who can only be King Cailan. “Yes, Duncan.” She makes a gesture, and Ares sits beside her, alert.

“You must be the pretty new recruit,” the King remarks, looking her up and down. “I’d heard you’d found yourself a mabari. The gossip doesn’t do you justice.”

“It never does,” she tells him honestly. When Alistair bows to the king, she gives him a slight nod, and he returns it with a look of interest. *Duncan must have told him,* she realizes and gives him the same elegant bow she would an equal.

Alistair snorts out a laugh before attempting to cover it with a cough. “Your Majesty. Duncan, you wanted us?”

“Yes,” Duncan says, turning to them. “We’ve decided that you two will light the beacon in the Tower of Ishal, and signal Teyrn Loghain to advance.”

“What?” Alistair blurts out, startled. “No, I’m needed on the front line, with the two of you!”

“Alistair, this isn’t a discussion,” Duncan says harshly. “It’s an order.”

“But I’m a Grey Warden, I should be with the others.”

“You will do as ordered. When you see the signal, light the beacon, and Loghain’s men will come in.”

A blind man could see the tension among the three of them, so Hera stays silent, only nodding when they walk away. “This isn’t fair! I belong with the other Grey Wardens!”

“They must have a good reason,” she offers as they head toward their tents.
“Oh, there’s always a good reason,” he mutters sourly. “Go get out of that ridiculous outfit and get ready for a fight. Or at least look like you’re ready for one.”

Deciding not to take his attitude personally, Hera nods and goes to change into her armor. It’s pure vanity, but she can’t help but notice how flattering it is. Snug black shirt and trousers are covered by a tunic striped alternately with steel scales and blue leather. Over that is a chest plate embossed with the Grey Warden griffin and jointed plates over her hips. Finally, a curious cropped blue canvas jacket that is quilted and studded, with a metal griffin on the shoulder to act as a small shield. With her dark hair, pale skin, and violet eyes, it makes a striking picture.

“Alright,” she says as she exits her tent, sliding her weapons into their harness on her back. “Here I...am.”

Outside her tent waits yet another nervous young man, pacing frantically. “You’re Hera?” he asks. When she nods, he jerks his head. “Come with me. Someone wants to see you.”

“I have to get ready for the battle.”

“This is about the battle, ma’am.” He leads her to the back of King Cailan’s tent and whistles. After a moment, another whistle answers, and the tent wall is lifted and she’s ushered in. Cailan stands alone, waiting for her. She waits until the tent wall is let down and footsteps hurry away.

“Majesty,” she says, giving him a careful bow, one sovereign to another. “You asked for me?”

He nods. “I wanted to apologize,” he tells her. “I would have preferred we meet as equals first, but war doesn’t care for the wants of man.” Cailan comes forward and takes her hand. “You are certain of this? Of staying? I can have you spirited away this very moment if you’ve a doubt.”

Hera lifts her chin, feeling dwarfed by such a tall and broad man. “Cailan, this is not my first war. I led an army of six through hell, destroyed the supernatural forces of the usurper who murdered my father, ripped out his heart, and took his crown while covered in his blood. I can handle this.” Her violet eyes grow cold, and she feels her sorcerer’s power surge, giving her a terrible beauty.

Cailan’s eyes grow wide. “By the Maker...I believe you,” he says, astonished. “Tybalt said you called yourself the Raven Queen.”
“It is a popular name given to me by the people. Officially, I am Hera Drakul of Ravenloft, Queen of Darkness.”

“Does Ravenloft have an army? I wouldn’t turn down assistance,” he explains. “We could crush the horde and have a celebration with new friends.”

Hera shakes her head. “If I could get a message to them, I would gladly. My army is small and vicious. But…” She lifts her hands in helplessness. “If there was a way to get word to them, I wouldn’t be here now.”

“Of course, you’re right. I didn’t think.” He lifts his head, pulling his shoulders back in a look of confidence. “I doubt we’ll need the reinforcements. Loghain is confident this will work, and so am I.”

Hera squeezes his hands, not sure if she agrees with him. “I pray it’s so. But Cailan, if I do make it home before this is over, I will return with help. My world is so very different from yours, and our magic is powerful, and would be strange to you. I could command an army of ancestral spirits that would sweep through the darkspawn like a knife through butter.”

He gives her a charming smile. “That’s very good to know, but I’m sure we will end the Blight before it begins. You and I will be dancing the Remigold at the celebrations soon: conquering heroes, new allies. You’ll like my wife, Anora,” he adds, seeming to almost believing it himself and making her wonder what secrets lay there.

“That sounds lovely,” she murmurs, wishing she could have met these people in an easier time.

Cailan nods. “Stay with Alistair,” he advises. “He is loyal as a warhound and will protect you with his life.”

“You haven’t told him who I am, have you?” she asks sharply. “I won't volunteer only to be coddled.”

“No,” he assures her. “That is simply how he is. You are a Grey Warden now- that means you’re family as far as he's concerned. To him, that’s more important than blood family.”
She nods, and they part, stepping back from one another. King and Queen study one another a moment before bowing their heads, Cailan bowing low and crisp while Hera sinks into a graceful curtsy.

“Maker keep you,” he says solemnly.

“And you,” she whispers before slipping out the back of the tent.

Hera uses precious minutes to seek out Tybalt in the Grey Warden camp. “My lady, what are you doing here?” he asks, pulling her away from the other men. “We have orders to make ready, and so do you. Go find Alistair, I’m told you and he will be in the tower.”

“I wanted to say thank you,” she says quickly. “For helping me, and keeping my secret.”

“It is nothing,” he says quickly, looking around to make sure no one is paying attention to them. “I only wish you had found some other way to be of use. But you’ve made your choice, and you must go now.”

Bertran approaches, smiling at her. “Ready for the fight, my lady? Shouldn’t you be heading out?”

“Just came to say good luck,” she says.

"Foolish woman," Tybalt sighs.

Bertran wiggles his eyebrows and grins. “A kiss for luck, my lady?”

A few nearby men make kissy noises and laugh uproariously when she gives him a chaste kiss on the cheek. “Good luck, Bertran,” she whispers.

He blushes all the way to the roots of his hair. “I’ll, um, give you two a moment,” he stammers, nodding at them and stumbling away.

“You really must go, my lady,” Tybalt tells her again. “Alistair will be looking for you.”
“Bless you, Tybalt,” she whispers, taking his hands. “May your Maker keep you safe.”

The battle-weary man gives her a roguish grin. “With luck, I’ll see you in the morning. Maker preserve you, Raven Queen. Save my kiss for the celebration.”

Hera grabs him by the shirt and pulls him close for a passionate kiss. A part of her fears this moment, as if it is an ending and not a sweet beginning. *If this must be goodbye, she thinks, I would have it be a good one.*

Around them, Wardens whistle in appreciation. "Do we get in line?" one shouts, laughing. "I want one too!" He sets off a flurry of excitement as others join in the chorus.

“I want one, too!”

“A kiss for luck, beautiful?”

“Marcin, I’ll kiss you!”

“Promise me I’ll see you again,” she says under the cheers and catcalls of nearby Wardens, “and there’s more than a kiss in store for you.”

Tybalt blinks rapidly before his face breaks into a surprised smile. “For you, my lady, I’ll make any promise.”

“Hera! What are you doing? Let’s go!” Alistair shouts angrily behind her. “Stop kissing Tybalt and come on!”

“Come back safe, Ser Tybalt.” She gives him one last smile before running off after Alistair.
Chapter Summary

The battle rages on while Hera and Alistair make their way to the beacon in the Tower of Ishal, just in time to see tragedy and treachery strike.

As soon as they cross the bridge, she and Alistair meet with a mage running from the Tower. “You!” he cries, seeing their uniforms. “You’re Grey Wardens! The Tower- it’s been taken!”

“What are you talking about?” Alistair demands.

“The darkspawn came up from the lower chambers- they’re everywhere. Most of our men are dead,” he adds, gasping for breath. "The bastards are ripping them apart with their teeth!"

“Then we have to get to the beacon and light it ourselves,” he decides. “Come with us.”

Together, they fight their way through waves of darkspawn in the tower, every second bringing them closer to the beacon. Ares proves his mettle, ripping out the throats of darkspawn right along with them. Hera’s glad of the hound’s company as he barrels through their enemy, reminding her of Vincent, a large, four-legged creature she traveled with many years before his sudden disappearance. *Vincent would have torn through them, jaws shattering bones,* she thinks.

Alistair and Hera make a good team- a better team than she’s made with anyone else in her life, save her twin. Not being able to use her magic openly hinders her, so she keeps to Alistair’s shield side, allowing him to bash creatures straight into her attack. They only met that morning, but it feels as if they’ve been partnered for years as they cut a swath through the invading darkspawn. *It shouldn’t be this easy- I’m not using my magic. I’m not at my best. But it’s almost like fighting with Zeus,* she thinks as they run through corridors and great open spaces. *Only...seven hells, it’s so different, too.*

*I wonder how different it would be if I could openly use my magic? Would we work together just as well, or better?*

At the top of the tower, they encounter a creature so large and hideous Hera stops in her tracks. "What is that?"
“Ogre!” Alistair shouts over the noise. “Watch the feet, they kick!”

“That’s an ogre?” she cries, watching him launch himself at it. “That’s insane!”

In her experience, ogres are largely humanoid, with slack jaws and round bellies, biddable and simple things. This creature is a dark purple, like an old bruise, with curving horns sprouting from its head. To her, it looks like a monster straight from the abyss, and she shudders when it opens its massive jaws—dripping with blood and saliva and revealing rows of pointed teeth—and roars at them.

“Are they different where you’re from?” he chats as she follows.

“Very!” she answers as they crash into the thing.

“Wait—really?” he asks, ducking a fist headed for him. “Is it that different? You have cheese, right?”

“Cheese?” she asks, swiping at the ogre’s middle. “Well, yes…but you probably wouldn’t like it.”

“Not like the cheese?” he asks in mock outrage. “You don’t know me, madam.”

The mage stays out of reach, adding healing and defensive magic to their attacks. Alistair takes a punch to the gut and goes flying across the room before sliding into a pile of broken crates just as Hera runs up its back and buries her sword in the back of the ogre’s neck. She jerks on her sword, ready to leap off before it falls back on top of her, but it's stuck fast. The ogre teeters and she's forced to ride it as it falls, hanging onto her hilt for dear life and rolling away when it crashes to the floor.

"That was impressive," the mage says, helping her up.

"Was it?" she asks, looking around for Ares. She spots him, sniffing at Alistair and whining. “Alistair!” she shouts, running over with the mage. “Are you all right?”
“We won?” he asks, sitting up and rubbing his head.

Hera laughs and offers him a hand up. “Yes, we won,” she tells him. “This time, anyway. Let’s get the beacon lit.”

Hands shaking with adrenaline, they get the beacon lit and run to the balcony to watch Loghain join the battle. As the beacon roars up through the roof in a great column of fire, it easily lights the battlefield below. Being a creature of darkness herself, Hera doesn’t need the added light to see the majority of their support quit the field. *Loghain just...left. There’s no hope for them now.* Heart sinking, she looks over the vast darkspawn horde and knows the cause is lost.

“What?” Alistair shouts, pointing. “Look! Loghain is leaving! That bastard! That traitor!”

Hera watches in growing horror as the darkspawn overrun the Ferelden army and turns in trepidation when the door to their own floor is broken open and multitudes of darkspawn spill into the room. Drawing her weapons, she looks into the face of her own death, snapping their teeth and coming for them.

*Adventure. Excitement. Desire.*

*What more could I have asked for?*

*Zeus, I’m sorry we aren't together.*
Chapter Summary

After waking to tragedy, Hera and Alistair must decide if they're going to continue fighting the Blight- or will Hera leave on her own adventure to find her way home?

“Well well, she awakens.”

Hera’s entire body aches, but she opens her eyes. “Where am I?” she asks, her throat dry and rasping.

Morrigan moves around the room efficiently, stoppering bottles and putting away baskets of herbs and bandages. “Mother saved you and your friend two days ago,” she informs her. “Your dog, too. No easy deed, that. She’s healed your wounds, and you are in the Wilds.”

Sitting up slowly, she rubs her forehead. “Was I badly wounded?”

“More so than the other. But you healed remarkably fast. Almost...inhuman.” The young woman raises her eyebrows expectantly as if waiting for an explanation. “You are human, are you not?”

“Don't be silly,” Hera stammers. Her head pounds and she feels a little sick. “I’m a Warden. We aren’t your typical humans, that’s all.”

“Is that so?” Morrigan’s tone changes from suspicious to casual as she shrugs. “Well, your friend is outside and-”

“Alistair? He’s alive?” she asks, relief flooding her. Why do I feel so connected to him? She asks herself. It’s...I’m not sure. There’s an attraction there, yes, but it’s also beyond mere desire. It confuses and unsettles her- never has she felt anything like this before, and yet Hera finds herself as glad at this news as if she were being told the door to Ravenloft was in the cupboard.

“That is what I said, isn’t it?” Morrigan snaps. “And he’s being quite pathetic, I might add. Dress, and come speak with Mother.”
“Wait,” Hera pleads. “Morrigan, what happened to everyone else? King Cailan? Duncan? Surely there are other Grey Wardens who survived.”

“You don’t remember?” Pity flashes across the girl’s face as Hera shakes her head. “No,” she says, her voice uncharacteristically gentle. “They are all dead.”

“Dead,” she whispers, feeling as if she’s been wounded once again. Duncan. Cailan. Bertran. Tybalt…

“Oh Tybalt,” she whispers, tears filling her eyes. “Not you, anyone but you…”

“For what it’s worth, I am sorry,” Morrigan says, clearly uncomfortable with Hera’s tears. “I will leave you to dress.”

Morrigan goes, and Hera gives herself a moment to grieve for Tybalt, who had brought her on this wild adventure, and died before seeing the end of it. He deserved so much more than death at the hands of a traitor, she thinks, drying her tears. Perhaps I could find his body. Ravenloft wouldn’t sneer at another of the living dead.

Slowly and stiffly, she climbs out of bed. Hera’s injuries are healed, leaving not even a scar under the bandages, but her body aches and hunger gnaws at her. I may have to feed, she thinks, putting a hand on her throat. I haven’t done that since…well, it’s been quite some time. I suppose it was the vial of Father’s blood, and before that, the imposter. But a true feeding? That has been years… She shakes her head, tossing bandages stiff with blood into the fire. I’m not even sure I could manage it here unless I enthralled someone, but Tybalt warned me that flaunting my magic would be dangerous.

Dressed, she steps outside and into a brilliant sunset. The sun, she thinks in a sudden panic and clenches her fists. Without needing to look down, she can feel the small gold band biting into her skin, enchanted to protect her from the light’s draining influence on her dhampir abilities.

Relaxing her hands, she takes a deep breath when she sees Alistair. He is sitting with his back to the hut, a blanket over his shoulders. If what Morrigan said is true, then the boy has watched everything and everyone in his life die in horror, all the while feeling the sluggish pull of the taint in his blood. Her heart aching for him, she silently comes up behind him and puts a hand on his shoulder. She isn’t surprised at all when his shoulders shake with quiet sobs.
Bless him, she thinks sadly. He’s too young to have lost so much; he must feel totally alone. Her chest tightens, seeing his despair, and she kneels in front of him. Ares whines and lifts his head for acknowledgment, and she pats him absently.

“You are not alone,” she tells Alistair softly, lifting his chin with a finger. The words resonate with power, easing some of the ache and emptiness inside him, and Hera is glad to have learned this trick from her brother. “Listen to me, Alistair: you are not alone, and I am here.”

“You’re alive,” he says, a little in awe, his voice catching. He wipes his face quickly with the blanket, scrubbing away his tears. “I thought you were dead for sure.”

Hera shakes her head and wraps him in her arms. “It takes more than a few darkspawn to kill me,” she says softly. He’s stiff in her embrace, so she pulls away slowly, giving him a chance to change his mind.

His jaw clenches and tears fill his bloodshot eyes, making them seem more green than hazel. “They’re gone, Hera. All the Grey Wardens, the army, King Cailan...Loghain is a traitor.”

“And he’s telling everyone that the Grey Wardens are the ones who killed the King,” the old woman interrupts, approaching. “You two are now traitors and king killers.”

Not the first time I’ve been called that, Hera thinks, tilting her head thoughtfully. Except this time it isn’t true.

“What?” Alistair demands. “That can’t be! How do you know?”

“Do you think I am simply an old hermit in the woods?” the woman snaps. “Men are fleeing the horde, anyone with a drop of water or half their wits can gather that much information.”

Hera nods, realizing that Morrigan’s mother is as shrewd as Morrigan herself. “And yet he was the one who left.”

“And left everyone to die,” Alistair says sadly. “There’s no one to support our claim against Loghain, and an entire army to support his against us. We’re all that’s left.”
“We can’t be! Aren’t there other Grey Wardens? Maybe somewhere else?”

“Sure, there are others, but I have no way to contact them, and no idea where to even start looking.” Alistair explains. “I...Duncan...” He shakes his head. “The main fortress is hundreds of miles from here, and even if we could make it...we would need an army.” He lifts his hands helplessly.

“What about the nobles?” Hera asks. “Can’t they be called upon?”

“Morrigan’s mother said that Loghain has made himself regent,” he says. “It’s going to be a civil war, I imagine.”

"So the lord turns his coat and makes a grab for the crown," Hera snorts. "How typical. Is there anything we can do?"

Alistair shakes his head. "Loghain will have soldiers out hunting for us."

“And yet you must do something,” the old woman says practically.

“Just who are you, anyway?” Alistair snaps. “Just some scary witch in the woods?”

“Names are pretty, but useless at my age. You may call me Flemeth,” she tells him. “Your witch hunters do.”

“Flemeth?” he asks, amazement filling his tone. “The Flemeth?”

_The Flemeth? There's a story there_, Hera realizes, turning back to the woman with a renewed gaze. _A powerful sorceress if there are witch hunters after her. That would explain the kinship I feel with her, and the power radiating off her. Could she be dhampir as well? No human could command such magic without a terrible price. Seven hells, she must be ancient._

“I suppose there are others who could have the name, but I am the only one I’ve known,” the old
woman chortles. Flemeth looks them up and down as if settling the fate of the world on two injured Grey Wardens gives her pause. “You have those treaties I gave you, don’t you?” she asks Alistair.

“Yes,” he says, curious.

“I thought we gave them to Duncan,” Hera interjects.

“He told me to keep them,” he explains. “He didn’t say why.”

“And they could be used to call upon the nations for help?” Flemeth leads. “Elves and dwarves and mages?”

“Yes…” Alistair replies. “Are you implying that we gather an army?”

“Well, that sounds like an army to me,” she says with a little sarcasm. “You must do something about the Blight. You’re Wardens, you cannot merely hide.”

“We could do it,” Hera encourages, putting a hand on his arm. “We could go to them, compel them to fight. I know how it’s done. When we approach the nobles with an army behind us, whatever petty nonsense they’re bickering about will take second place. We could do this, Alistair, that’s why he left the treaties with you. He must have meant to send you out for just this purpose!”

The strain around his eyes relaxes just a little, and he nods. "So can we do this? Go to Redcliffe and these other places and... build an army?"

“Isn’t that what Grey Wardens do?” Hera asks, somehow making the question sound encouraging. “That’s certainly the impression I was given.”

“So you are set then?” Flemeth asks. “Ready to become Grey Wardens?”

Hera looks up at Alistair. “As ready as we’ll ever be, I imagine.”

Flemeth gives her an approving look and claps her hands once in finality. “Good. My daughter
Morrigan will go with you.”

“What?” Morrigan and Alistair say at once.

“Brilliant idea, Flemeth,” Hera cheers. I like her, she thinks, laughing at the twin expressions of shock on their faces. She reminds me of that tall, angry elf Goddard and Aara keep around.

The old woman laughs as Morrigan sputters a protest. “You heard me, girl. Last time I looked you had ears!”

“But Mother, I’ve never been out of the Wilds,” Morrigan stammers. “I’m not ready.”

“You have been itching to get out of the Wilds for years. Here is your chance. As for you, Wardens, consider this repayment for your lives.”

“Absolutely not,” Alistair argues.

“We need the help,” Hera reminds him, wrapping her hand around his arm. “She’s a witch of the Wilds, and we’re only two Wardens. We need help, Alistair, even if it’s just to get out of the forest.”

“Wardens, do you understand?” Flemeth asks grimly. “I give you that which I value above all in this world. I do this because you must succeed.”

Hera bows her head, her expression as serious as when she met with the Ferelden king. “I understand, Flemeth. No harm will come to her.”

Morrigan sighs. “Very well, Mother, allow me to gather my things.”

Flemeth follows her daughter, whispering fervently in her ear. Hera tries to listen, but Alistair pulls her away. “Hera, are you mad? She’s a witch, an apostate. She could kill us in our sleep!”

Just like a man, she thinks with a huff. They never stop talking long enough for me to overhear anything. “If I’m not mistaken, I was asleep for two days, and yet I live,” she replies. “We need the
help, Alistair, or it’s just you, me, and a dog. Just...just put up with her for a while. Please.”

Alistair takes a deep breath and nods. “Fine.”

Morrigan approaches, looking just as dejected as Alistair. “Well, shall we? Goodbye, Mother, don’t forget the stew on the fire.”

“I lived a great many years without you, girl,” Flemeth reminds her. “I’ll live a great many yet. Do not forget what I have told you.”

“Oh motherly love,” Morrigan grumbles as they walk away. “So, where shall we go? I would advise Lothering; it isn’t too far from here. We could be there in the morning if we stop after dark.”

“Is it safe to camp out here in the Wilds?” Hera asks, remembering both the darkspawn and the things Bertran and Tybalt had told her about the Korcari Wilds.

“Safe enough,” she says with a careless shrug. “I have lived here my whole life. And I know wards to keep the darkspawn from finding us while we rest.”

“Very well. Lothering,” Hera says with a nod.
Bad Dreams

Chapter Summary

Hera experiences her first Grey Warden dream and Alistair tries to explain a little more about what it is to join the order.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After dark, they make camp, and Hera falls onto the ground in exhaustion, not even bothering to unpack her bedroll. Curling up in her cloak with her head on her backpack and Ares at her back, she falls asleep instantly. But she doesn’t sleep for long.

Visions of fire and unseen monsters haunt her, chasing her through the darkness, the snapping of bones and screams of other victims just behind her as she runs. Just before she’s caught, as burning claws wrap around her ankle, she jerks awake. Gasping and sitting up, she puts her head in her hands. I don’t dream, she thinks, trying to breathe slowly. Ares whines and pushes his head into her lap, sniffing and trying to comfort her. It’s not something dhampir do. I always thought that’s why we’re unable to forget anything. I don’t understand, I have no fear of the dark- I am the creature that hunts in the night...what horrors lie in store for me in this world? We do no more than hunt a demon. A simple enough task, given the right help.

So why am I suddenly dreaming? How many more surprises will Thedas bring me?

“Bad dreams, huh?”

She lifts her head to see Alistair sitting a few feet away, fiddling with an old buckle. “It seemed so real...” she passes her hand over her eyes, trying to clear the images. “I’m fine.”

“You don’t need to lie. We all have them,” he says idly, not looking at her. “It’s the taint in the blood you drank. It connects us to the...group mind. That’s how we can sense them. But they’re connected to us, too,” he adds. “The archdemon, it ‘talks’ to the horde, and we feel it just as they do. That’s why we know this is really a Blight.” His expression turns unreadable, and Hera feels a powerful urge to reach out to him. “And now it’s just us, in all of Ferelden,” he says softly. “And...and whether or not we even live through this.”

“We will, Alistair,” she assures him.
“Well, the nightmares get better,” he continues. “Usually, anyway. Some people can’t sleep a full night ever again.”

“Are there any other secrets you’ve all conveniently forgotten to tell the recruits?” she asks, running both hands through her hair and sighing heavily.

“It’s not that it’s a secret,” he’s quick to explain. “It’s just that...they don’t want to take away from the experience. You’ve suddenly survived a Joining, and you enter this brotherhood. It’s a cause for celebration.”

Hera arches an eyebrow. “I didn’t realize a mess tent and a war council would be a celebration.”

“That’s different. It should have been different for you and Daylen. When we get- if we get…” He trails off and his face goes hard. “Nevermind.”

Hera goes to sit beside him, careful not to be close enough to touch. They don’t truly know one another, and even though she feels a strong attraction to him, she won’t force familiarity for the sake of physical comfort. “I’m sorry, Alistair.”

“Me too.”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry, it's such a short chapter! Some will be longer than others, as I try to find a natural ending for them.
Lothering

Chapter Summary

The small group arrives in Lothering, full to bursting with refugees and its own problems.

Hera watches Alistair as they head toward Lothering. He’s quiet and withdrawn, no doubt grieving for his lost Wardens. Sometimes, he looks as if he’ll cry, but Hera doesn’t interfere, only placing a hand on his arm to comfort him. Having lost brothers in arms before, she understands his pain. Tybalt’s loss is a blow to her as well, and as he was the only one who knew the location of the mirror and the portal connected to it, she’s lost more than a friend and potential lover.

Thankfully, Morrigan is withdrawn and unwilling to begin mindless chatter, so the two Wardens are left to their private heartaches.

“Lothering is just there,” Morrigan says finally, pointing. “We enter across that stone bridge.”

Hera nods, and they walk on until they’re approached by a group of men. “What do we have here?” the apparent leader says, staring lewdly at Morrigan and Hera. “A group of weary travelers, seeking the refuge of Lothering.”

“Boss,” one of them says in a slow, stupid drawl. His eyes have a rather bovine look to them as if he once took a heavy blow to the head. “Look at them, I don’t think they’re just travelers.”

“All the same,” the leader says, “they have to pay the toll. Ten silvers, please.”

“You should listen to your friend,” Hera advises. “We aren’t refugees.”

“That’s wonderful!” the man says cheerfully. “But this is a toll for crossing the bridge, otherwise it would be called a *refugee* tax.”

“There isn’t a toll bridge here…” Alistair mumbles. "They've been taking advantage of refugees.”
“Boss, let’s just let ‘em pass,” the other man urges.

“You should listen to him,” Hera repeats.

“You’ll pay the toll, or I’ll take it from your dead bodies!”

Hera grins and pulls her sword. “You can certainly try.”

The battle is short and the bandits give up quickly, throwing their hands in the air and surrendering. After berating them for a few moments about running a shoddy operation, Hera demands they give her everything taken from people and sends them off running for their lives. Sifting through the boxes- full of personal items extorted from refugees- only makes her wish she’d just killed the lot.

"It's just a guess, but I'm thinking everyone in Lothering is aware of the approaching darkspawn horde,” Alistair comments wryly.

Morrigan snorts. “Ah, so you have finally decided to rejoin us, have you? Falling on your blade in grief seemed like too much trouble, I take it?"

“Is my being upset so hard to understand?” he demands, rounding on her. “Have you never lost someone important to you? Just what would you do if your mother died?"

“Before or after I stopped laughing?” she chuckles.

Alistair frowns. “Right. Very creepy. Forget I asked,” he ends sullenly. His shoulders droop and he shuffles his feet, watching them quietly.

Hera shakes her head and walks on. When he’s ready, he’ll talk, she thinks.

“Wait,” Alistair calls, and she turns back. “We need to discuss what to do now,” he says quickly. “We have these treaties, but we don’t know who’s on what side or anything yet.”

“What are our options?” Hera asks, setting her things down and resting her shoulders.
“We could go to any of the nations—elves, dwarves, the Circle—or to the Arl of Redcliffe. I know him,” he says and takes a deep breath, “he is an honorable man.”

“You think we can trust him?” she asks.

“Yes,” he assures her with more confidence than he’s shown since Ostagar. “Arl Eamon is a good man. He will help us decide where to go next.”

Hera nods and picks up her pack. “Then let’s resupply and go to Redcliffe,” she decides and starts walking again.

“I have a wonder, Alistair, if you will indulge me,” Morrigan says as they head through the refugee camp. Hera listens with only half an ear, focused on taking in as much of their surroundings as possible and wishing she and Alistair had changed into something other than the blue and silver uniforms they’ve been wearing.

Alistair groans in answer. “Do I have a choice?”

Morrigan chuckles. “Of the two of you that remain, are you not the senior Grey Warden here? I find it curious that you allow another to lead, while you follow.”

“You find that curious, do you?” he says, his voice taking a strange note.

Morrigan nods. “In fact, you defer to a new recruit. Is this a policy of the Grey Wardens? Or simply a personal one?”

Hera looks over at him, tuning in to the conversation again. “Alistair, if you wish to lead—”


“You sound so very defensive,” Morrigan teases.

“Couldn’t you crawl into a bush somewhere and die? That would be great, thanks,” he growls.

“Would you two stop snapping at one another for one bleeding moment?” Hera asks sharply and turns on them. “I can’t think with all this childish bickering!”
“Oh, I do apologize, Warden,” Morrigan says, her voice dripping with sweet sarcasm. “Shall I be your silent guide?”

“Just stop arguing,” she sighs. “Is there an inn or a tavern or somewhere I can get a drink?” she asks them.

“I believe there’s an establishment up ahead,” Morrigan informs her coolly. “The building on your right.”

“Thank your Maker,” Hera mumbles, and opens the door.

No sooner do they enter than they’re accosted by a group of soldiers, shouting drunkenly about how the Grey Wardens failed Ferelden at Ostagar and turned traitor, killing the king. Hera puts a hand out to stop Alistair from storming over, regarding the men coldly.

“Were you there?” she asks.

“Hey, you’re a Warden, aren’t you?” one of them slurs.

“I’ve seen that armor before,” another adds. “Captain, she matches the description we were given earlier. The one nobody had seen.”

“Were you there?” she repeats, damning herself for not changing clothes. “Did you actually see what happened there?”

“I saw Loghain save us from your treachery,” the leader cries. “He saw you lot for what you are, and now our king is dead!”

Hera raises a brow. “Do you understand what’s about to happen, should you continue?” The soldier draws his sword, so Hera draws her sword and a dagger as well. “I will kill you for such slander,” she informs him, pointing her sword at his chest.
“I thought you used a shield,” Alistair whispers. “Can you fight like that?”

“Oh I’m going to enjoy this,” the soldier says and raises his weapon.

In answer, Hera meets the soldier’s steel with her own, deflecting his blow. The brawl begins, drinks go flying when she puts her foot in his chest and sends him floundering onto a table, breaking it to pieces. Ares happily bites and snaps along with his mistress, his jaws breaking at least one arm. It’s almost fun, she realizes when she punches a man in the nose and feels a delightful crunch beneath her fist. *I haven't been in a brawl in ages!*

A strange shout fills the room, and a woman dressed in chantry robes jumps in to help. Hera feels a familiar sensation, very like her brother’s bardic inspiration spell, and redoubles her efforts to end the brawl quickly. Minutes later three men lay dead, and Hera is holding a blade to the leader’s throat.

“Take a message to Loghain,” she growls, kneeling and putting a knee on his chest.

“Yes, yes anything! Please don't kill me!” he pleads.

“Tell him he’s going to have to do better than this,” she says, leaning closer and making a slash across his cheek. “Now go.”

She sheaths her weapons and heads over to the bar. “I apologize for the trouble,” she says sweetly.

“Those boys got what they deserved,” the man says. “I don’t believe for a minute that the Grey Wardens would have betrayed good King Cailan.”

Hera thanks him warmly, passing him a gold coin to make up for the mess before turning to the woman. She’s small with short red hair and wide blue eyes. Alistair is talking animatedly to her, and Hera steps in to keep him from embarrassing himself.

“Thank you for your help,” she says, offering her hand. “My name is Hera.”

“I am Leliana,” the woman says, smiling. “I’m so glad you’re here. And you have a dog! Oh, he’s
adorable!"

Hera’s brows knit together in confusion. “You’re glad to see us?”

“Yes, the Maker sent me a vision,” the woman says, her enthusiasm bubbling over. “He told me that you’d be coming, and I should be here, now, to help. And here you are, just like in my vision!”

“Yes...here we are,” Hera says slowly, raising an eyebrow. “Well, thank you again, we should be going.”

“But I have to come along!” Leliana protests.

“What’s the harm?” Alistair asks, pulling Hera aside. “She was a big help, and she’s pretty handy with those knives.”

“Did you not hear her?” Hera demands. “She’s claiming a vision sent her here. That’s pretty crazy, and I fell through a mirror and come from another world.”

“Yes,” Alistair agrees, “but she's more like ‘Ooh! Pretty colors!’ than ‘Muahahaha! I am Princess Stabbity—’”

Hera crosses her arms, trying not to laugh as Alistair laughs manically.

”—Stab, kill, kill!” he continues.

Hera groans to cover her amusement. “Don't make me stab-kill you. She's not coming- it’s crazy!”

“Warden,” Morrigan interjects. “I believe she may be of help. After all, wasn’t your argument in bringing me along that you needed all the help you could get?”

Hera looks from one to the other. “Do you two really want her to come?” she asks incredulously.

Alistair raises his eyebrows and bobs his head a few times, and Morrigan nods calmly.
“Damn me to seven hells,” Hera mumbles. “I can’t believe this is the thing you two find to agree on.”

“It won’t last,” Alistair promises. “I’m sure of it.”

Hera turns back to Leliana, who simply stands there waiting patiently. “Welcome to the party,” she says with false cheer.

“Oh, wonderful! I just knew you would let me come!”

Hera nods, suddenly exhausted. “Let’s get something to drink,” she says tiredly. When they’re all seated, she emptied her purse on the table. “We have...one gold sovereign, thirty-odd silvers, and a handful of coppers. I don't know about your world, but in mine, this wouldn't go far.”

“Your world?” Leliana asks. “Are you not Ferelden?”

“No, but that’s a story in itself,” Hera explains. “Better explained in camp one night- like your vision, I imagine. Right now we need to focus on money for supplies.”

“There’s the chantry board,” Leliana says helpfully. “They pay for small jobs done around the town.”

“That’s a start,” Hera says, sipping her ale. “Let’s go there next. For now, I just want to enjoy what might be my last drink for a while.”

They all sit quietly, involved in their own thoughts. Hera had hoped that Alistair would put aside his grief and lead them, but it doesn't look like that will happen. I’d hoped to focus on finding my way home, but it seems I have to get through this war first. I have to get back to Ravenloft. Zeus must have his hands full with chaos; my disappearance will have ruffled all the Raven Court’s feathers.

And yet there was so much to do... Staring into her drink, she taps a fingertip against her lip, thinking about the harvest and if the new granary had been finished in time and if the winter rain would flood the mines again- the million little things that fell into her lap on a daily basis. I’m glad
Uncle made me name a regent in case of emergency. Oh, poor Zeus. I’m sorry to have left so much on your shoulders. Suddenly worried about her brother and realm, she gets to her feet and goes to stand in front of the fireplace. Powers help him.

“Hera?” Alistair’s voice breaks through her thoughts, and she looks up at him.

“Yes?”

“Are you all right?” he asks, concern written all over his face. “You look upset. Is it the money? Because we’ll figure that out.”

“No, it’s not the money,” she sighs. “Money is easily made. If I have to, I’ll just take my clothes off.” She looks back to the fire, missing the startled look on his face at her nonchalance. “I was thinking of my brother,” she says softly. “He’s been left in charge of my...business, and he doesn’t know the first thing.”

“If he’s anything like you he’ll be fine,” Alistair assures her.

She sighs. “I hope you’re right, Alistair. Otherwise, it will be hell when I get home. If I get home.”

“I wish I could help.”

She drops her arms to her side. “I understand. I just need to focus on what’s in front of me, not what I cannot control.”
Chapter Summary

Hera meets Sten and completes the chantry board jobs before leaving Lothering.

“Bandits, bears, and bodies oh my,” Hera mutters, reading over the posts on the board. “Well, I guess we’ll just do it all,” she decides, signing her name with a bit of charcoal.

“Oh goody!” Morrigan cheers sarcastically. “We’re going to save Lothering from the Blight by doing good deeds!”

“We’re going to eat because of doing good deeds,” Hera snaps.

“I can feed myself from the land, I have no need of your supplies.”

Hera stops herself from sneering at the arrogant witch and points the way North. “The posts all say it’s in the woods north of here. Let’s get started.”

It takes all day, but they manage to root out two bandit parties and find a boy’s missing mother. Unfortunately, the woman was dead, and Hera had to deliver a trinket she carried to the chantry to prove it. They make camp that night just outside of town, across from a caged person standing and muttering to himself. Hera gives her tent to Leliana and tries to outfit her as best they can, but Lothering is short on supplies of all kinds. The cheerful sister only smiles and thanks her for the tent, certain they’ll find plenty of gear for her along the way.

She’s a little strange, Hera thinks, watching her settle in while dinner is cooking. Peaceful. Sad. Dangerous. There’s much more to her than meets the eye, I think. I wonder if she’ll ever tell us.

The hours pass slowly once everyone goes to their bedrolls, so Hera approaches the caged man. Calling him large would be an understatement, she realizes as she gets closer. His shoulders are so broad he barely fits in the cage, brushing against the iron with every breath. No chance with this one. He looks like he’s never even thought of sex.

“Hello,” she says, biting her tongue against a giggle. “My name is Hera.”
“Either you mock me, or you are a rare human to show manners when so many others show
derision.” Close-up, she can see his severe, hooked nose and mouth as hard as stone, but
what surprises her is the sight of his lovely violet eyes. They don’t have the depth of blue as hers
do and his tight white braids make them look smaller and harsher than they probably are, but she
can’t deny their surprising beauty in a man bristling with aggression.

“Ah...manners?” she says, reaching for whatever answer he’s looking for. “My mother raised me to
be polite. Who are you?”

“My name is Sten, of the qunari.”

“Why are you in this cage?”

“I put myself here.”

“Why?”

“You are an annoying human to ask so many questions.”

“I know,” she tells him. “What did you do to be out here?”

“I killed people.”

“Why?”

“That’s not your business.”

“I find myself in need of help,” she says boldly. “Would you like me to see if I can have you
released?”

“Why?”
“Because the Blight must be stopped,” she explains. “You could fight with me as a way of atoning for your guilt.”

Sten is quiet a moment. “I will think on it tonight.”

She nods. “Can I talk to you some more?”

“No. Go away, tiny human.”

With a smile, Hera shrugs and wanders back to camp. “That was interesting,” she says with a light laugh.

“Was it?”

She nods, glancing over at cage just out of earshot. “He’s rather...abrupt.”

“Qunari are like that,” Alistair says. “Short sentences. Usually rude.”

Hera shrugs again and pets Ares. “I like it; he’s refreshing. It reminds me of someone I once knew.”

“A friend?”

“Something like that.” She smiles as the image of a barrel-chested, white-haired dwarf comes to mind. *I doubt Flint would ever think of me as a friend,* she thinks wryly. *The last time we saw him, he promised to break Zeus' cheating fingers.* “Why are you awake?” she asks, pushing the memory away.

“Oh, I wanted to see...to check if…”

“Yes?”
“Are you having dreams again?”

Hera frowns and sits near him. “It’s strange,” she says. “I lived my whole life in many different worlds and planes, and never dreamed once. Neither has Zeus. When we were in Ravenloft they began, fleeting things that didn’t matter. But here…” Her frown deepens, thinking of the visions she’s seen in her dreams. “I’m not sure it’s worth all the poetry and songs.”

“You don’t like having dreams in general, or having Grey Warden dreams?”

“In general.”

Alistair tilts his head in confusion. “Whyever not?”

Hera purses her lips in thought, trying to find a way to explain it. “It’s as if...it’s like always knowing yourself, exactly as you are, and then finding out that you don’t know yourself at all. That a part of yourself has been keeping secrets. Or someone has been watching you and you’ve found a record of your life.”

“What do you think changed in Ravenloft?”

She shrugs. “Maybe it was the calling in our blood- nothing felt like home until we were taken there. Zeus had never dreamed before either- but as I said, they weren’t dreams so much as...impressions.”

“You miss him, don’t you?”

Hera is quiet a moment before nodding. “Very much. Aside from my time training as a courtesan, we’ve never been apart for more than a day or two. I feel...strange without my twin. Like I’ve never seen the world before.”

“Is that what it’s like, having a sibling?” he laughs.
“It’s what it’s like having Zeus as a sibling,” she laughs. “I don’t know what it’s like for others, though I doubt very seriously they are like us. We are…” she pauses, searching for a word. “Close.”

“Close like brother and sister? Or close like twins who can read each other’s mind?”

“People have thought we were lovers before.”

Alistair’s eyes go wide and he stares in horror. “Are…are you?”

Hera laughs, tossing her head back. “Of course not! He’s my brother. But we are quite affectionate and know one another so well we can practically read each other's mind. There is a sort of intimacy in that.” She looks down and spins a ring on her hand- it’s exactly the same as one Zeus wears, and a habit they both have. “My mother called us two sides of the same coin. It must be true because I can feel…” She looks up, squinting slightly as she thinks. “That feeling when you can sense darkspawn near? I feel something like that from him, only time and distance don’t weaken it.”

“That does sound deeper than just family,” he says, looking nervous. “But I think I understand.”

She shrugs. “He’s my other half. The only person I am able to trust and love without reservation. If that makes us strange, I don’t care.”

“Oh, I see. I hope you trust me?” he asks. “Being the last Grey Wardens....”

Hera lifts her chin and gives him a friendly smile. “As much as one can, without being Zeus himself.”

“Well that sounds like a good thing!” he says. “Your watch is almost over, I’ll take over here.”

She nods, getting to her feet and stretching. “I appreciate that, thank you.” She pauses, turning back to him. “You said this Arl Eamon raised you?”

“Did I say that? I meant dogs. Giant slobbering dogs from the Anderfels. A whole pack of them, in fact.”
Hera grins slightly, eyeing him. “That would explain the smell,” she teases.

“Well it wasn’t until I was eight that I discovered you didn’t have to lick yourself clean,” he jokes. “Old habits die hard, you know.”

“That would explain the breath as well,” she says in an enlightened tone.

“And my table manners too. Though come to think of it, they weren’t that different from the other templars,” he muses. “Or did I dream all that? Funny the dreams you have when you sleep on the cold, hard ground, isn’t it? Are you having strange dreams, besides the taint? If you’ve never dreamed before, they must all be strange, but-”

“Only the ones where we’re making mad love in my tent,” she says breathlessly, fluttering her lashes at him.

“I...oh, I think I...completely lost my train of thought...” he stammers, blushing. “Oh look...there it is. Let’s see, I’m a bastard,” he blurs out. “And before you make any smart comments, I mean the fatherless kind, same as you. My mother was a serving girl in Redcliffe Castle who died when I was very young. Arl Eamon wasn’t my father, but he took me in anyhow and put a roof over my head. He was good to me, and he didn’t have to be. I respect the man, and I don’t blame him anymore for sending me off to the chantry once I was old enough.”

“He wasn’t your father? Do you know who is?”

“I know who I was told was my father,” he says with a shrug. “He died even before my mother did, anyhow, it isn’t important.”

*I used to think it wasn’t important, too, she thinks. A crown changes that.*

“Arl Eamon eventually married a young woman from Orlais, which caused all sorts of problems between him and the king because it was so soon after the war. But he loved her. Anyhow, the new arlessa resented the rumors which pegged me as his bastard. They weren’t true, but of course, they existed. The arl didn’t care, but she did. So off I was packed to the chantry at age ten. Just as well. The arlessa made sure the castle wasn’t a home to me by that point. She despised me.”
“What an awful thing to do to a child,” Hera says softly, crouching beside him. *I was at least loved by my mother and provided for by my father.*

“Maybe,” he concedes. “She felt threatened by my presence. I can see that now. I can’t say I blame her; she wondered if the rumors were true herself, I bet. I remember I had an amulet with Andraste’s holy symbol on it. They only thing I had of my mother’s. I was so furious at being sent away that I tore it off and threw it at the wall and it shattered,” he says sadly. “Stupid, stupid thing to do. The arl came by the monastery to see how I was, but I was stubborn. I hated it there and blamed him for everything...and eventually, he just stopped coming.”

“You were young,” she soothes, putting a hand on his arm.

“And raised by dogs,” he reminds her, “or may as well have been, the way I acted. But maybe all young bastards act like that. I don’t know.”

“Zeus is terribly stubborn,” she offers.

“All I know is that the arl is a good man, and well-loved by the people. He also was King Cailan’s uncle, so he has a personal motivation to see Loghain pay for what he did. Anyway, that’s all there really is to the story. You can’t be interested in all this; why don’t you go on to bed?”

She nods, and impulsively kisses his cheek. “Now I know why you and Ares get on so well,” she teases and stands.

Alistair lets out a surprised laugh, falling onto his back. “I suppose you do,” he laughs.

“Goodnight.”

“Hera,” he calls, catching her before she ducks into her tent. “Do you really mean to take the qunari with us?”

She nods. “He calls himself Sten, and...Yes. I see something worthy in him, Alistair.”

“He murdered people, is what the townspeople say. Could be that we end up his next victims.”
Hera shrugs. “I don’t believe so. Trust me, please.”

He nods, his face grave. “Goodnight, then.”

The next day they finish the jobs and return to the chantry to collect their earnings, then see the Revered Mother about Sten. The old woman puts up a bit of a fight, refusing Hera twice before Leliana speaks with her. The young woman seems to carry some weight with the Revered Mother, and Hera is granted the key to his cage, along with a blessing for protection against him.

“Well, Sten,” Hera says cheerfully, standing before him again. “Are you ready to atone for your deeds?”

“I don’t see how you can help me do so,” he says flatly.

“You’re coming with me, to fight the Blight,” she reminds him. “It’s either that or stay here and stay guilty.”

“You do not have the power to negate my guilt.”

“No, but I have the power to release you from this cage and give you a chance for redemption. You have the power of easing your guilt.”

Sten considers this a moment, then nods. “Very well. Release me, and I will join you in your mission.”

With hundreds of refugees in Lothering, there is little to no gear to be had, so they head out, hoping to find something later. As they’re leaving the village, they hear cries of help and come upon a dwarf being attacked by a handful of darkspawn. Between the six of them, it’s handled pretty quickly, and Hera turns to help the man clean up the mess they’d all made.

“You’re pretty handy to have around,” the dwarf says, strangely cheerful after such a fight.
“I tend to be,” she answers, handing him a box of broken glass.

“Name’s Bodahn Feddic,” he says, offering a hand. “That’s my boy Sandal- say hello to the nice lady, son.”

“Hello nice lady,” Sandal says, waving at her.

Hera smiles at them. “A pleasure, gentlemen. My name’s Hera. You wouldn’t happen to be a merchant, would you Master Feddic?”

“I am indeed, Mistress. Might I interest you in a lovely hat? It would keep that pearly skin nice and pale.”

“Actually, I’m looking for camping gear,” she explains. “And some armor? Weapons?”

Bodahn shakes his head. “I’m afraid not. Elfroot and broken glass by the score. Which way are you headed? I might find something on the way to Redcliffe.”

“That’s where we’re going,” she says brightly, then wilts. “But you probably don’t want to travel with any Grey Wardens,” she explains.

“Well, perhaps not,” he agrees. “But would it be all right if my boy and I traveled with you anyway? I’m prepared to offer you a discount for the protection of a couple Grey Wardens. The dwarves are familiar enough with you lot not to believe the gossip on the surface. And you’ll have the first pick of my stock as soon as I resupply.”

Hera raises her eyebrow, considering. “We could certainly use a steady supplier...How much of a discount, Bodahn?”

“A deep discount.”

With a smile, she shakes his hand. “We have a deal. Let’s get this cleaned up and on the road, shall we?”
So it was that Hera and her merry band of misfits added two dwarves to their party. She realizes that Bodahn would likely come and go as they moved through Ferelden, moving ahead or staying behind as he saw fit, but she couldn’t see his presence as anything but a good thing. And since he was polite, didn’t have food or spittle hung in his beard, and had yet to ask if she were “one of those blasted Underdark bastards,” she quite liked him.

Later that night, Hera splits the last of her gear, assuring Leliana she can keep the cozy little tent, and handing a warm wool blanket to Sten, resolving to sleep under the stars and wrapped in her cloak.

She’s so tired, and so preoccupied with what lays before her, that she doesn’t bother to eat much of the dinner- a series of gray lumps Alistair threw into the pot with some wild onions- but praises it all the same before heading off to speak with Bodahn about the type of supplies she can anticipate needing. Mentally and physically drained, Hera lays her head on her pack as Ares curls up beside her, getting as comfortable as possible in the grass.
Leader

Chapter Summary

Alistair takes a moment to evaluate the strange and surprising woman he's following through the Blight.

Alistair watches Hera when they make camp that night. She eats little but praises him for the stew. Just thinking about it makes him proud of something as simple as lamb and leek stew- a common Ferelden staple, but always uniformly gray and visually unappealing whenever he makes it. After she sets off across the clearing to speak with Bodahn, the dwarf trader who has decided to travel along with them. When she returns, she passes by Morrigan’s solitary tent for a word, then spends no less than ten minutes with Leliana, Sten, and himself in idle chatter before passing out her own gear to them.

She’s held back nothing, giving Leliana her tent and bedroll and Sten her spare blanket, promising them proper gear once they’d reached Redcliffe or Bodhan was able to resupply, whichever came first. Now, she is wrapped in her cloak and using her backpack as a pillow, and he watches her thrash about in her sleep, no doubt having the Grey Warden’s dreams again. The mabari whines and rests his head on her hip, trying to comfort her.

She’s such a capable leader… he thinks. She has to be younger than me, a junior Warden, and a...a courtesan. Of all things, she has sex for money. She’s soft and genteel, but can wield a blade like a demon and commands the affection and loyalty of a mabari war hound. I’ve never seen anything like it. Where did she learn to use weapons the way she does? Why would a courtesan know that, anyway? Somehow I don't think I'm the first to not understand her at all.

He goes into his tent and gets his spare blanket, spreading it out over her. It had been winter when he’d left the chantry with Duncan, and traveling through the gray, snow-covered Ferelden countryside had taught him the importance of an extra blanket.

“What are you doing?” Sten asks. “If she had wished for a blanket, she would not have given it away.”

“Keep your voice down,” Alistair says in a hushed voice. “It’s cold tonight, we don’t want her getting sick.”

“Ah,” Sten says, nodding. “Pragmatic. She cannot defeat the Blight while ill.”
Alistair sighs. “Yeah, Sten. That’s right.”

“Very well. Carry on.”

He shakes his head and sits a small distance away from her. *She’s trying so hard to take care of everyone, he thinks, watching her. She just took on the responsibility of all of us without question, with no thought to herself or how she’ll get home if we live through this. Well, I should at least be able to take care of her. I can do that much.*
Connections

Chapter Summary

Leliana confesses a growing attraction to Hera.

Of everyone, Hera likes to share her watch with Leliana best. The young woman knows a hundred stories and will answer every question Hera has about Ferelden and Thedas. In return, Hera shares tales from her adventures.

One such evening, after describing Zeus’ bold persuasion and how it nearly got them sold to a devil merchant in Sigil and ended up selling the devil instead, Leliana laughs until she's in tears.

“Hera, you can spin a tale as well as any bard I’ve ever known,” she laughs. “Did you miss your calling?”

“Oh no, Zeus is the storyteller,” she insists. “The libertine life was his calling, and he is quite good at it. My own skills are...different,” she says vaguely. “Sex. Intrigue. Politics.” Magic.

“So you’re a bard after all,” Leliana says softly. “The bards in Orlais are all those things- and are also minstrels.”

“Probably the second oldest profession,” Hera laughs.

“The first being yours,” she giggles, boldly reaching out to move a stray hair from Hera's face. “Hera...would you be offended if I told you how much I enjoy spending time with you?”

Leliana’s eyes are bright, and the faint blush that paints her cheeks is quite lovely. Oh no, here we go again, Hera thinks. “No,” she says slowly. “But Leliana…”

“Oh Maker,” she says, her face contorting into an expression of embarrassment. “Oh, I’ve made a fool of myself!”
“No,” Hera says, grabbing her hand. “I just want to make it clear that...any ties I make here can’t last,” she explains. “Hopefully, I’ll be going home soon, and I have much to do there. Any connection I have has to be…” She shrugs and decides to speak plainly. “Casual. I don’t want you to think that I can afford anything more.”

“What if I were fine with that?” Leliana asks carefully.

“Then maybe we can come to an agreement,” Hera tells her. She’s heard this a hundred times before, and at this point, can always predict who is actually fine with it and who isn’t.

Leliana, she feels, is not.

“What kind of agreement?”

Hera shrugs one shoulder. “What do you want? Are you just curious to know what it would be like with me?”

“Yes, but…”

“I’m not making a business proposition,” Hera tells her. “But after one night, or several, it will come to an end, probably faster than either of us wish. Think about it,” she adds. “I don’t want you hurt at the end, Leliana.”

“Doesn’t emotion ever play into it?” Leliana asks, raising her eyebrows. “Don’t you ever feel anything for your patrons, or is it all just sex to you?”

“Yes,” she says simply, her voice growing gentle. “Of course I feel for my patrons. But I’ve learned to keep a very tight rein in my feelings. Falling in love is not something I’m interested in.”

Leliana laughs at her. “Do you have any idea how cold that sounds? You truly are a seasoned courtesan.”

Hera looks away, her expression blank, and pokes at the fire. “Sometimes you have to be cold to protect yourself.”
The silence stretches between them until Leliana finally speaks again. "Hera, what if you fell in love?"

"That would truly be a miracle," she snorts, looking up at the stars. "Love only brings pain, Leliana. Don't let anyone tell you differently."
Worthwhile

Chapter Summary

As Hera learns more about being a Grey Warden, she begins to doubt whether or not she'll be able to make her time left worthwhile.

Chapter Notes

I was super sick last week, so I missed an update! I'll have chapters 20 and 21 up this week, though, as I'm feeling much better.

“What changes after you become a Warden?” Hera asks as they move ahead of the group the next morning. The Ferelden summer morning makes the trip pleasurable and gives Hera the chance to admire the countryside; for all the rain and mud she’s heard about, the road to Redcliffe is full of trees and blooming flowers, creating a picturesque scene that she’s certain won’t last. Darkspawn or clouds on the horizon will eventually come and put an end to it.

She, Ares, and Alistair had left Morrigan, Leliana, and Sten to break camp while they walk to the next village, hoping for merchants with more wares than they can sell. Alistair is certain that Loghain will have eyes out for them, and they do their best to avoid the main roads- good for cover, but it makes it harder to get supplies regularly.

“I asked Duncan that, too,” he says, throwing a stick for Ares to chase. “Right after my Joining. All I got was ‘you’ll see,’” he says cryptically, and wiggles his eyebrows at her playfully. “As the senior Grey Warden, I would be well within my rights to say the same.”

“Just try that line on me,” Hera teases, putting up her fists.

“I have other lines for you,” Alistair says in a lazy drawl. “Trust me.”

“Oh please try one,” she flirts, walking her fingers up his chest. “You’ve got me all a-shiver with anticipation.”

He swallows audibly, a flush creeping up his neck. “Would...Would any of them work?” he asks in
a hoarse voice.

Her gaze travels from his eyes to his mouth and back again, and she has to stop herself from leaning forward and taking his bottom lip between her teeth. “Some of them do,” she murmurs.

Alistair leaps out of reach when Ares forces himself between them, stick in mouth. “Well! Um. Good to know,” he laughs nervously.

“So…Changes?” she reminds him.

“Let’s see…” He wrestles the stick back from the mabari, grunting with the effort. “Ares, I can’t throw if you don’t let go! The first change I noticed was an increase in appetite,” he laughs, holding up the stick triumphantly before throwing it again. “I used to get up in the middle of the night and raid the castle larder. I thought I was starving. I’d slurp down every dinner like it was my last, my face all covered in gravy. When I’d look up, the other Grey Wardens would stare…then laugh themselves to tears.”

“I haven’t noticed anything like that.”

“Really?” he asks, interested and amused. “Because I was watching you wolf down food the other day and I thought ‘Ooh it’s a good thing she gets a lot of exercise.’”

Hera laughs and smacks him playfully. “What can I say, I’m a growing girl.”

“I’ll say!” he jokes. “Uh, I didn’t mean it like that. Heh. Don’t hit me! I bruise easily!” he cries pitifully, throwing his arms up to shield himself. “Oh, and then there were the nightmares.” The playfulness leaves him, remembering the way the darkspawn invade his sleeping hours, taking away the privacy of his own dreams. “We talked a little about them already. Duncan said it was part of how we sense the darkspawn- you remember how I said we tap into the group mind? When we sleep, it’s even worse. You learn to block it out after a while, but at first, it’s hard. It’s supposed to be worse for those who join during a Blight. Have yours gotten any better?”

“Not really,” she says vaguely. “It’s too strange to even comprehend.”

“Some people never have much trouble,” he tells her, voice growing serious. “But that’s rare. Others have trouble sleeping their entire life. They’re just more sensitive, I suppose.”
“Yes, you mentioned that before,” she says.

“I did? I did. Right. Well, everyone ends up the same, though. Once you reach a certain age, the real nightmares come. That’s how a Grey Warden knows his time has come.”

“His time has come?” she asks, throwing the stick for Ares this time. "That sounds ominous."

“Oh, that’s right.” Without something to do with his hands, Alistair fidgets, gesturing widely as he talks. “We never had time to tell you that part, did we? Well, in addition to all the wonderful things about being a Grey Warden, you don’t need to worry about dying from old age. You’ve got thirty years to live. Give or take.”

“What? Thirty years?” Hera stops walking and stares at him, unable to take another step. "I’m nearly a hundred years old, and I traded centuries ahead of me for Ravenloft. Thanks to the Dark Powers, I won’t even have the thirty.

But Alistair…he’s so young and new. He’ll have barely started living before he dies.

“The taint…” He grimaces at the reminder of his Joining. “It’s a death sentence. Ultimately your body won’t be able to take it. When the time comes, most Grey Wardens go to Orzammar and die in battle rather than…waiting. It’s tradition, and easier than just letting the taint to overcome you.”

“So the taint can kill you…” Hera says to herself, slowly following Ares once more. How…peculiar. Of all the blood I’ve drunk in my lifetime…this would have been what kills me. I suppose I should be grateful, knowing I’ll be spared the slow decay of darkspawn blood.

“We’re all going to die,” he says gently. “When Duncan told me, I was angry. He put his hand on my shoulder and said this: It’s not how you die that’s important. It’s how you live.” He tries to grin at her, but there’s none of his sparkle and charm in it. “And you wondered why we kept the Joining a secret from the new recruits! There you have it.”

“It seems like such a high price to pay, is all,” she says sadly. “Thirty years…it’s so short.”

“You know, Duncan…he started having the nightmares again. He told me that in private. He said it
wouldn’t be long before he’d go to Orzammar himself. I guess he got what he wanted,” he says, his voice thick. Hera politely looks away while he takes a deep breath and rubs his eyes. “I just wish it had been something worthy of him.”

Hera stops and grabs his arm, turning him to face her. “He will be remembered, Alistair,” she says gently. “As will the others.”

He looks at her a moment, the pain he’s been carrying around showing openly on his face. Alistair rarely allows himself moments of mourning; she finds that it makes her want to hold him and let him cry until the tears are gone. “I know,” he whispers. “Ending the Blight...that should make this all worthwhile, right?”

“Right,” she murmurs, letting him pull away and start walking. “Worthwhile.”

*Can we stop the Blight? There’s so much about this world I don’t understand- Ravenloft at least spoke to me. I understood its dark horrors the moment I set foot on the soil. Will anything I find here give me something to fight for?*
Redcliffe

Chapter Summary

Redcliffe’s problems are even more immediate than the Blight, but Hera finds Bann Teagan to be a delight even among the disaster.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Several days later they find themselves approaching Redcliffe. Hera finds herself glad of her sturdy boots after days of walking and fighting off bandits who think now is the perfect time to terrorize the common man. It’s nothing she hasn’t seen before, but her disgust grows, seeing common criminals feeding off of people running for their lives, as though they were carrion on the battlefield. Each encounter is a battle to keep her power in check and not allow her dark magic to punish the criminals.

They get to the top of the hill and pause to look over the village, cut in half by a swift river leading to a lake. It’s set into the side of a large hill, dirt paths leading from the road down into the village itself with stone bridges crossing the river periodically. Redcliffe Village looks as though it would normally be a busy little village, but the heart of the village is full of barricades and one great fire streaming oily black smoke into the sky.

Where’s the smoke from the forge? Is this a funeral?

“What is...Maker’s breath!” Leliana cries, covering her mouth. “Are they having a mass funeral? Is there a plague in the town?”

Hera arches an eyebrow at her. “Leliana, I thought you were a chantry sister, not a clairvoyant. I was just wondering the same.”

Alistair looks down at the village for a moment before turning to Hera. “Look, can we talk for a moment?” he asks. “I need to tell you something. I, um, probably should have told you earlier. In camp, with Sten around to hear it too.” Not quite sure about Sten and his attitude, she had left him and Ares to guard the camp this morning.

“Alistair, do we have to do this now?” she asks, gesturing to the village below. “There’s a funeral going on.”
“This will only take a minute. Please, I need to tell you,” he says, wringing his hands.

Hera studies him a moment. Alistair looks as if he’ll burst if he doesn’t say whatever it is, so she nods. “What’s on your mind?”

“I told you before how Arl Eamon raised me, right? That my mother was a serving girl at the castle and he took me in?” he begins, stumbling on the words in his rush to get them out. “The reason he did that was because...well, because my father was King Maric, which makes Cailan my...half-brother, I suppose.”

Hera takes this in slowly. A bastard prince, she thinks, tilting her head. This really is a fairy tale in the making. I should keep a journal; Zeus will never believe it. “So...you’re not just a bastard, but a royal bastard?” she asks slowly, teasing him.

“Ha! Yes, I guess it does at that. I should use that line more often.” He takes a deep breath and plunges on. “I would have told you, but...it never meant anything to me. I was inconvenient.” The bitterness in his voice surprises her, and Hera wonders how many times that exact word had been used to describe him as a child. “A possible threat to Cailan’s rule, and so they kept me secret. I’ve never talked about it to anyone. Everyone who knew either resented me for it or coddled me...even Duncan kept me out of the fighting because of it. I didn’t want you to know as long as possible. I’m sorry.”

I can’t hold it against him, she thinks wryly, I have my own royal secret too. But that explains why Duncan was adamant about the two of us lighting the beacon and staying out of the fight. I wasn’t the only royal in danger of being lost. “I understand,” she tells him.

His relieved sigh makes his whole body relax. “Good. I’m glad. It’s not like I got special treatment for it, anyhow. At any rate, that’s it, that’s what I had to tell you. I thought you should know about it.”

She raises an eyebrow at him. “Is that it?” she asks. “You aren’t holding out anything else?”

He gives her a smirk, winking at her. “Besides my unholy love of fine cheeses and a minor obsession with my hair, no, that’s it. Just the prince thing.”

To be so lucky. “All right then,” she laughs. “So you’re a prince. I find that very...thrilling,” she
“Oh? Really? Well, I’ll have to remember that,” he says charmingly as Morrigan makes gagging noises at Leliana behind them. “I think I might have found the one damn thing that’s good about my birthright.”

Hera ignores her and gives him a saucy grin in return. “Perhaps you have.”

“So there we have it,” he says, letting his arms drop to his sides as his anxiety drains away. “Now can we move on, and I’ll just pretend you think I’m some...nobody who was too lucky to die with the rest of the Grey Wardens.”

“As you command...my prince. A question,” she adds, eyes sparkling with mischief. “Would you prefer a formal curtsy,” she asks, sinking gracefully to the dirt and miming the sweep of skirts, “or will short-and-sweet work for now?”

His face goes flat and he glares at her. “Oh, lovely,” he deadpans. “I’m going to regret this. I just know it.”

Giggling, Hera catches up with him, wrapping her arms around his bicep. “Oh Prince Alistair,” she coos, fluttering her lashes comically. “What big arms you have!”

Leliana attaches herself to the other arm, mimicking Hera. “Oh Prince Alistair, what strong hands you have!”

Alistair shakes them off and points to Morrigan. “Not a word,” he demands.

“For a bastard prince reeking of wet dog? Not likely,” Morrigan sniffs, turning her nose up at him.

As they cross the bridge to enter the village, the wind brings the oily smoke closer, carrying the scent of burning meat and hair. “Leliana, you’re right,” Hera says, covering her mouth. “This is a mass funeral.”

A young man runs up, looking at them as if they’ve come down from the heavens to rescue him
personally. The terror stamped into his face makes him seem older than he is, settling lines around
his nose and mouth like an old man, and not the youthful roundness of sixteen. “I thought I saw
travelers coming down the road, though I scarcely believed it. Have you come to help us?”

“What’s going on?” Hera asks, noting the bow slung across his back and the large knife in his belt.
“Why are you armed in the middle of the day?”

“So you...you don’t know? Has nobody out there heard?” His voice jumps an octave, making his
voice break.

Hera shakes her head. “We’ve been on the road. What is it?”

“We’re under attack,” he says, his voice shaking with fatigue and fear. “Monsters come out of the
castle every night and attack us until dawn. Everyone’s been fighting. And dying. We’ve no army
to defend us, no Arl, and no king to send us help. So many are dead! And those left are terrified
they’re next. We need help,” he begs, grabbing her hand.

“Hold on,” Alistair interrupts. “What is this evil that’s attacking you?”

“Darkspawn?” she asks Alistair.

“I-I don’t rightly know,” he says. “I’m sorry, nobody does. I should take you to Bann Teagan, he’s
all that’s holding us together. He’ll want to see you.”

“Bann Teagan, Arl Eamon’s brother? He’s here?” Alistair asks excitedly.

“Yes. It’s not far,” he says, taking Alistair’s bag off his shoulders. The idea of fresh eyes on the
village’s problem breathes new life into him; the boy is bubbling over with energy and something
Hera thinks might be a wary hope. “I’ll carry this, ser,” he offers and then takes Hera’s, too. "Yours
as well, my lady. If you’ll come with me.”

"What of mine?" Morrigan demands. "Are Leliana and I to be reconciled to the shadows of
heroism?"
"Oh Morrigan, I quite like that," Leliana says. "The shadows of heroism? You're quite poetic when you want to be."

Trying not to laugh at the venomous look Morrigan gives Leliana, Hera takes both their packs. "There, better?" she asks, throwing them over her shoulder.

The young man leads them down the path, and Hera can see the villagers preparing for battle, but lifts her nose in confusion. *The blacksmith’s forge has been out for a long time. There’s no scent of worked metal. Has he been killed already?*

They’re taken to the chantry, which is full of women and children, and Hera spots Bann Teagan instantly. A fit man of middle years, he has red hair with a touch of gold, dressed sensibly for a war council, and rather handsome. Indeed, in another time and place, she would have been happy to count a man such as him as a patron. Now, he’s talking with a small group of men and women, giving orders with the easy confidence of a man raised to be noble.

“‘It’s...Thomas, yes? And who are these people with you? They are obviously not simple travelers.” His gaze wanders over them curiously, resting on Hera last and longest.

“No my lord,” Thomas replies, “they just arrived and I thought you would want to see them.”

“Well done, Thomas. Greetings, friends,” he says, inclining his head. “My name is Teagan, Bann of Rainesfere, and brother to the Arl.”

“I remember you, Bann Teagan,” Alistair says. “Though the last time we met, I was a lot younger and covered in mud.”

“Covered in mud...? Alistair? It is you, isn’t it! You’re alive! This is wonderful news!” Teagan claps him on the shoulder, smiling brightly before embracing him.

“Still alive, yes. Though not for long if Teyrn Loghain has anything to say about it.”

“Indeed, Loghain would have us all believe that all Grey Wardens died, along with my nephew, amongst other things,” he says derisively.
“You don’t believe him?” Hera asks.

“What, that he pulled his men to save them? That Cailan risked everything in the name of glory?” He snorts. “Hardly. The king might have been young and inexperienced in war, but he wasn’t stupid, my lady. If Cailan placed his trust in the Wardens, he had to have had a good reason.” He shakes his head, clasping his hands behind his back and rocking on his heels. “Loghain calls the Grey Wardens traitors, murderers of the king, but I don’t believe it. It is the act of a desperate man. So you are a Grey Warden as well?” he asks her. “A pleasure to meet you. I wish it were under better circumstances.”

“A pleasure,” she says quickly. “My name is Hera. We’ve come hoping to see Arl Eamon.”

“You’ve come to see my brother? Unfortunately, that might be a problem. Eamon is gravely ill; no one has heard from the castle in days. No guards patrol the walls, and no one has responded to my shouts. The attacks started a few nights ago; evil... things... surged from the castle. We drove them back, but many perished during the assault.”

“Then we have to help,” Hera decides.

“Hera, are you certain?” Morrigan asks. “This is not our battle, and has nothing to do with the Blight.”

Hera faces her with a cold look. “It blocks our way to the Arl, and we need the Arl’s help against the Blight. So it is, in fact, our battle and to do with the Blight.” She turns back to Bann Teagan. “What shall we do?”

“Thank you, thank you. This means more to me than you can guess. Thomas,” he says, turning back to the boy, “please tell Murdoch what has transpired, then return to your post.”

“Yes, my lord,” Thomas says, retreating.

“Now then,” Teagan continues, turning back to Hera. “There is much to do before night falls. I put two men in charge of the defense outside. You’ll need to speak with Murdoch, he’s the village mayor, and Ser Perth, up by the millhouse. I can’t thank you enough,” he goes on. “Just knowing there are a couple Grey Wardens on our side changes everything.”
Hera nods. “Fine. We’ll go see them. Ah...Bann Teagan?” she asks as the others head toward the door.

“Yes, my lady?”

“I wanted to talk with you,” she says, drawing closer.

“Is there a problem, my lady? We have quite a lot to do.”

“No, no problem,” she flirts, looking up at him through her lashes. “I was only wondering why you’re here, and not on your own estate, protecting your wife and family.”

Teagan laughs a little and smiles. “Oh, no...no, I’ve never had the pleasure. If I did I’d be lucky to find a woman as lovely as yourself. If I may be so bold, what of you, my lady? Are you married?”

“No, I’m not,” she replies.

“I find that hard to believe,” he tells her, giving her a smile that warms her blood. “Surely that is a crime somewhere.”

“Perhaps,” she laughs. “But as a courtesan, I have made a lifetime habit of being not married.”

“A courtesan and a Grey Warden?” he asks, shocked. “A lady as beautiful and skilled as you must have suitors by the score,” he chuckles, charm returning.

“None special enough to tempt me,” she quips. “But Ferelden is a new, wide world for me. Perhaps that will change.”

He takes her hand and raises it to his lips. “If I may say so, I do indeed hope.”

Hera blooms under his attention, too used to the flirtation of the court and would-be lovers to go without it for long. Alistair’s awkward flirtation has been sweet, and he’s made her laugh, but Teagan is poised under pressure and strikes her as a man who knows his worth. She could do
worse than enjoy a night or two in his arms.

“Hera?”

Her thoughts scatter at the sound of Alistair’s voice. “Yes, Alistair?”

“We have work to do,” he reminds her with a huff.

Teagan chuckles, patting Alistair on the shoulder. “He is correct, my lady. And I am too bold, this is hardly the time for such banter. Please, accept my apology.”

“A handsome man never has to apologize for taking up my time.” Hera smiles up at them and bats her lashes. “I suppose I’ll leave you then, Bann Teagan,” she purrs.

“It’s a good thing,” he charms, “I was afraid you’d have me spill all my secrets.”

With a mischievous look, she shrugs. “Not in front of everyone.”

Alistair makes an impatient sound, grabs her by the elbow, and all but drags her outside. What’s got into him? she wonders, biting back a giggle. He’s laid no claim or made an offer; is he so easily jealous of a little flirtation? He has so much to learn.

They speak with the mayor, a disgruntled man with a heavy mustache watching archers practice and barking advice. He tells them that the village blacksmith refuses to do any work or repairs for them, citing a concern for his daughter. There’s a dwarf in the village who refuses to help fight as well, and must be persuaded to join the militia. Hera sends Morrigan and Leliana to the dwarf, hoping either Leliana’s charm or Morrigan’s frustrating logic will get through to him, and she and Alistair see to the smith.

“Hello?” she calls, knocking on the door to the forge.

“Who are you? Go away!”
“I’m a Grey Warden, here to help,” she persuades.

“A Grey Warden? Are you sure?”

Hera and Alistair exchange an amused look, each glancing at the other’s tattered blue uniform. “Last time I checked, I was sure.”

“Well...ok,” she hears, and the door unlocks, releasing a stench that makes her eyes water.

Shrugging at Alistair, they go inside. “Goodness, it smells like a brewery in here,” she coughs, waving a hand in front of her face.

“Somebody’s been drinking,” Alistair sings under his breath.

“Shut up you,” the smith, a grizzled man with an unkempt gray beard, says. Like any blacksmith he’s enormous, but his size is a hindrance today, making him sway unsteadily. “My girl’s in that castle, and no one will go look for her!”

“Is that why you won’t do repairs for the militia?” she asks gently, putting a hand on his arm to steady him.

“Murdoch said he’d look if they made it to the castle, but they haven’t,” he sneers. Almost as soon as the words fade, his bitterness crumbles into grief, and he covers his face with his hands. “They haven’t looked, and he promised! Why should I help a bunch of oath-breakers when my daughter is lost?”

“I’d be happy to look for her,” Hera says, “except I have an obligation to the militia. But if someone were to take care of the repairs, I could find my way to the castle sooner...”

“No you- you will?” he asks, eyes wide. “You’ll find my girl?”

“When we get to the castle, I’ll look for her,” she repeats firmly, not interested in negotiating. “That is what you want, isn’t it? You do the repairs for the militia, and I’ll find your daughter.”
“You will? Really? Oh, I’ll get the forge lit now- oh my girl!” he cheers.

“But,” Hera says, raising a hand. “What if she’s dead?”

“It’ll be better than sitting around not knowing at all,” he says softly, looking at her with misty eyes.

Hera’s heart softens. *My own father had the privilege of thinking I was always safe before he died.* She nods, pushing away the unexpected rush of emotion. “Very well. Do your part here, and I’ll do what I can.”

He nods and pushes them out of the smith, his drunken feet finding purchase in the hope of his daughter being found. Standing outside the door, Alistair laughs. “Wow. You know how to get a man moving, don’t you?”

Hera grins slyly and looks up at him. “In so many ways,” she murmurs, putting a hand on his arm.

Alistair blushes under her gaze and looks off, clearing his throat. “Right, well. Oh look, a puddle,” he says with too much enthusiasm, and trots off to stare at it, jabbing the mud with the toe of his boot.

Hera enjoys a laugh at his amusement as Morrigan and Leliana approach. “That was disgusting,” Leliana complains with a shudder. “Ugh, I’m *never* letting you negotiate ever again.”

“What happened?” Hera asks as they approach. “Did you get the dwarf out of hiding?”

Leliana shudders and gags again. “Yes,” Morrigan answers with a smile. “Our friend Leliana had to...persuade him,” she adds with a devious chuckle. “And we found some curious barrels of oil in the shop. The whole place looks abandoned, maybe Ser Perth can use them.”

“Good for you, Leliana!” Hera cheers. “You’ve got him in the militia!”
Leliana gags some more and heads for the tavern, with Morrigan chuckling behind her.

“Don’t get too drunk,” Hera warns, “we have a fight, remember?” The two girls wave in acknowledgment, and Hera goes over to Alistair. “I suppose we should go talk with this knight.”

“Yes,” he agrees, looking up from his puddle, the blush having finally faded from his cheeks. “The mill is up there,” he adds, nodding at the enormous windmill at the top of the hill. “That’s where Murdoch said the knights would be.”

“Lead on, local boy,” she says with a gesture for him to proceed her.

“You know, it’s a bit like coming home,” he says as they climb the path. “It hasn’t changed much.”

“You were just a child when you left, right?”

“I was ten,” he says, nodding. “The arlessa...well, she made life miserable. It almost made the chantry bearable.”

“That’s awful, Alistair.”

“Maybe so. But I trained to become a templar, and that’s what lead me to the Grey Wardens.”

They reach the top and see the knight giving orders to his men. “Let’s finish this later,” he suggests, and they approach.

“Ser Perth?” Hera asks.

“Yes, that’s me,” the knight says, turning to them. “Ah, so you’re the Grey Wardens. Bann Teagan sent someone to tell me you were here.”

“Yes,” she says, nodding. “Hera. Pleased to meet you.”

They talk a while, discussing strategy and the best use of the oil Leliana and Morrigan found. Ser Perth explains how the undead come every night, and how each night they fight them back. Hera assures him of success this time, and meet the others at the tavern to await nightfall.
It’s quiet, with only a handful of the militia’s men sitting in a corner whispering to one another. The tavern-keeper is chatty, but Hera would rather order dinner—paying an extortionist’s rate—and join her friends at their table.

“So...how did you persuade the dwarf, Leliana?” Alistair asks. “What was his name? Dwyn?”

With another shudder of disgust, she tells them about how she had to offer him personal attention to convince him to come out. “Morrigan trapped me into it,” she says, glaring at the witch. “She said she was going to do it, and then when it came down to who was letting him kiss them, he picked me.”

Morrigan shrugs. “It isn’t as if I knew he would like you better, Leliana. It just happened that way.”

Hera laughs. “Leliana, I commend you. I’ve had my share of dwarves, and they’re….”


“And more,” she agrees. “Thankfully they’re fast, though.”

“Thank the Maker it was only a kiss, then. How did you become a courtesan?” Leliana asks.

“I admit I am curious to know as well,” Morrigan adds. “You seem so...capable with a blade.”

Hera shrugs. “My mother had us trained in the arts when we were young. My twin and I are bastard-born, but Zeus was born to be a bard, and I was suited to pleasure.”

“Are you without musical talent, then?” Leliana asks. “I spent many years as a minstrel before going to the chantry.”

“Oh no, I can play the lute and harp passably well, and sing sweetly. But Zeus showed more talent than I. So, once I was old enough to make the choice, it was the pleasure-chambers for me.”
“That sounds unfair,” Leliana says.

“That sounds unfair,” Leliana says.

“Not at all,” Hera explains. “I wanted it very much. Courtesans in my world are well-educated, poised and elegant. They can wield as much political power and social sway as royalty if they play the game well. These men and women are given many lovely gifts in the form of jewels and gowns and are well paid for their time. It was the best way to ensure my own wealth and freedom, and I enjoy it.”

“That sounds like the Grand Game in Orlais,” Leliana tells her. “Perhaps you and I can exchange stories later.”

Hera smiles. “I would like that very much. And you can teach me some of your songs; my brother is always adding to his collection.”

“And how did you learn to fight the way you do?” Alistair asks.

“And how did you learn to fight the way you do?” Alistair asks.

“How did you learn to fight the way you do?” she explains, telling half the truth. “Enough patrons, you become quite good.”

They talk a while longer of unimportant things until the sun begins to set. As one, they go to the millhouse, standing out of the way of the oil barrels once they’re set aflame. The dwarf Dwyn and his two human servants stand ready, testing the edges of their weapons on dirty thumbs and giving the knights suspicious looks.

Too few, she thinks, counting the knights and adding it to her estimation of the militia numbers. Too few, and against too many. Hera draws her weapons, waiting as it grows darker. Damn me to seven hells, I should have sent for Sten and Ares.

Will they be as powerful as Ravenloft’s undead? She wonders, remembering how Strahd had called up ancient warriors in an attempt to stop them from reaching the center of the castle. She shudders, recalling the powerful, dark flame of necromantic power- a power she herself can now command- wrapping around dusty bones still strapped in armor; a mockery of the life they once possessed. Had it not been for Jami and his control of fire, she wasn’t sure they would have made it out alive.
“Morrigan, don’t hesitate to use fire on them,” she suggests.

“I had no intention of hesitating at all, Warden,” Morrigan chuckles.

First comes a dull roar, and a strange green fog creeps down the hill. “Necromancy,” Hera murmurs as the first shambling undead emerges from the fog. The closer the fog gets to them, the faster it moves, carrying the stench of rotting bodies. Morrigan casts flame at the barrels, burning away much of it and forcing the gray shamblers into a narrow path for easier disposal.

Swollen limbs split from strain before weapons even touch the flesh. Older undead shatter into dry-rotted tangles of bone and leathery skin. Everywhere is flame and the sound of steel on steel, pushing back the first wave even as a runner comes from the village.

“They’re coming from the lake!” he cries. “There’s too many!”

Damn. “Ser Perth, can you hold the line?” she asks.

***

It is a long battle through the night, and Leliana takes a grave injury before it is all over. As the sun creeps over the horizon, Hera looks out over the village, tired to her core and stinking of rot. Behind her, a mass pyre already roars, devouring the bodies of the cursed dead while the knights and militia of Redcliffe are carried into the village square to be wrapped and cremated with ceremony. Ser Perth had been nervous about leaving so many pieces of the attacking force lying around, so she and Alistair had helped with the cleanup near the millhouse while Leliana was taken back to the chantry for treatment.

“Well we’ve done it,” she sighs, stretching her back and throwing a mangled, gray foot onto the pyre. “Redcliffe is safe.”

Alistair nods. “Let’s go check on Leliana. Morrigan should be with her in the chantry by now.”

Hera makes her slow way down the path and into the village. Thankfully, she didn't take any serious injuries of her own, but her limbs feel heavy and unwieldy and she wishes Sten was there to carry her. He wouldn’t, of course, and would lecture her on her weakness and his rank in the qunari, explaining that it would be shameful for him to carry her about like a child. As they walk,
she unpins her hair, unbraiding it to let the waves tumble down her back.

“Is it heavy?” Alistair asks, glancing at her. “Your hair.”

Hera shakes it out and scratches her scalp, sighing in pleasure. “Yes.”

“It’s pretty,” he says, embarrassed. “Like a raven’s wing. Not just black, there are other colors in the light.”

Hera smiles at him, a little surprised at the compliment. “Thank you.”

His answering smile seems to sneak up on him. “You’re welcome.”

“Alistair,” she says as they walk. “If you were raised in the chantry, have you never…?”

“Never…?” he mimics. “Never what? Had a good pair of shoes?”

“You know what I mean,” she says suggestively, eyeing him hungrily. *Nothing makes me want a man more than a good fight.*

“I’m not sure I do,” he says hoarsely, the tips of his ears going bright red. “Have I never seen a basilisk? Ate jellied ham? Have I never licked a lamppost in winter?”

*Well, I’ve never heard it referred to as eating jellied ham, but I suppose the lamppost works.* “Now you’re making fun of me,” she pouts playfully.

“Make fun of you, dear lady?” he crows. “Perish the thought. Surely you’ve licked a lamppost in winter?”

“More than my fair share,” she quips, laughing. “Given my profession, do you really have to ask?”
“Oh, selfish. I myself have never had the pleasure,” he drawls. “Not that I haven’t thought about it, of course, but...you know.”

“Oh that’s cute!” she teases as if she hadn’t known from their first meeting. “You’re a virgin.”

“Cute? Well, hearing that from a beautiful woman does make me feel luckier, I’ll say that.”

“You think I’m beautiful?” she fishes. The accomplished flirting of Teagan and Tybalt had been gratifying, but somehow hearing it from Alistair means more. Why should his opinion carry more weight? Is it because of this strange connection I feel with him?

“Of course you are, and you know it,” he accuses. “You’re ravishing, resourceful, and all those other things you’d probably hurt me for not saying.”

“You flatter me,” she coos, looking up at him through her lashes.

“That’s what I’m here for. It’s a tough job, but somebody has to do it.”

Hera’s jaw drops and she lets out a shocked laugh. “I can’t believe you said that,” she laughs, smacking his chest.

He lets out his breath in a dramatic whoosh. “Oh my lady! I’m injured! You’ve broken my ribs! Ah! I can feel them stabbing me now!” he cries, falling to the ground. “Tell...Tell...I don’t have anything to tell anyone,” he says before groaning loudly and letting his head loll with his tongue out.

“That won’t be all that stabs you,” she teases, jabbing him with her toe. “On your feet, Warden.”

“Let’s get to the chantry then,” he chuckles, “lest your risque talk makes my ears blush.”

“Before we do…” She catches his arm, the other hand sliding up his chest plate. “I want you to know...you could have the pleasure,” she offers, the playfulness replaced by raw desire. “With me. In my tent. Today. We could go right now if you wanted. All you have to do is say the word.”
Alistair makes a series of sounds that could almost be words before his tongue starts working again. “Your tent. Ah.” He grimaces, and Hera raises her eyebrows at him until he chuckles and his expression turns playful. “You temptress,” he teases. “You won’t get to me so easily!”

He just- he scowled! Turned me down- and scowled at the offer. At me! That’s never happened! Hera sniffs indignantly and turns her nose up at him. “If that’s what you want, have it your way,” she says haughtily. That...that stings a little. I’ve never had an outright offered rejected...I certainly don’t enjoy the feeling.

“I didn’t mean it like that!” he explains, following. “I- uh-” He sighs as they approach the chantry. “Handled with my typical brilliance, I suppose. Fantastic.”

I can’t really blame him, she admits to herself, it isn’t as if he has any experience. Still, he’ could have spared my ego. Smothering her pride in a feat of will power, Hera gives him a teasing wink but doesn’t say anything else as they climb the steps. Bann Teagan is waiting before a crowd of people, Leliana and Morrigan with him, and gives a moving speech about the bravery of the villagers. Hera withstands the attention, ready for her bedroll and some peace.

But she knows how important it is that the people celebrate their victory and pulls Teagan aside. “Let them have their celebration,” she counsels, “but we need rest. Send someone to the camp in a few hours.”

He nods. “Meet me by the millhouse at noon,” he decides. “We should discuss how to get into the castle next.”

Hera nods, and the four wearily make their way to their camp just outside of Redcliffe. Ares barks and circles her excitedly, and Hera laughs, laying over his back and letting the enormous dog drag her to her tent.

Chapter End Notes

A nice long chapter to make up for last week! Enjoy!
A panicking woman interrupts a meeting with Teagan, bringing both information and lies.

Hera leaves Leliana at the camp with Sten, knowing she needs rest and that Sten will protect her if necessary, but otherwise leave her alone. With Morrigan, Alistair, and Ares, she makes her way to the millhouse. She slept a while and cleaned up, which brought her a little closer to something like normalcy, but the thought of a true bath— not a frigid scrub in a river or creek— and a bed could tempt her into unmentionable acts.

As they approach, Teagan has his back to them; looking up at the castle. The view from the mill is impressive: the village hugs the edge of the lake below, and before them is the great hulk of the castle, a sprawling fortress of mixed stone and styles that’s seen several additions over the years. It is nothing like her palace in Ravenloft with its gargoyles, sharp spires, and shadowy eaves.

“Odd how quiet the castle is from here,” he says. “You would think there was nobody inside at all. But I shouldn’t delay things further. I had a plan to enter the castle once the village was secure,” he adds, turning to them. “There is a secret passage, here, in the mill, accessible only to my family.”

“So why didn’t you go there first?” Hera asks, frowning.

“I had no idea what lurked in the castle, and I couldn’t abandon the people of the village. What if—” he freezes, looking over her shoulder. “Maker’s breath.”

Hera turns to see a young, well-dressed blonde woman racing down the hill, calling Teagan’s name. She reaches them quickly, gasping her words out. “Teagan,” she gasps. “Thank the Maker you yet live!”

“Isolde, you’re alive,” he says with relief. “How did you- what has happened?”
“I do not have much time to explain,” she tells him, ignoring the presence of everyone but Teagan. “I slipped away from the castle as soon as I could once the battle was over, and I must return quickly. And I…” Hera’s eyes become suspicious slits as the woman looks behind her and rubs her hands over her tear-stained cheeks. “I need you to return with me, Teagan. Alone.”

“We’re going to need more of an explanation before that can happen,” Hera pipes up. The woman turns, as if seeing her for the first time. *I don’t like this, you can almost smell the lies she’s got ready.*

“What? I- who *is* this woman, Teagan?” she shrieks.

Hera winces at the high pitched, nasal voice of someone who believes to her core that she is above everyone around her. *That’s the arl’s wife,* Hera remembers. *The jealous woman Alistair mentioned yesterday. Probably married above her station and would rather everyone just forget about that pesky little detail.*

Alistair sighs and steps forward. “You remember me, Lady Isolde,” he says with resignation, “don’t you?”

“Alistair,” she sneers. “Of all the- why are you here?”

Hera opens her mouth to snap at her, but Teagan speaks first. “They are Grey Wardens, Isolde,” Teagan explains. “I owe them my life.”

“And, as I’m sure you’ll be glad to hear, many others in the village.” Hera’s voice drips with acid as she glares at the arlissa. *It’s been years since she’s seen Alistair- can she really still be holding such a grudge? If this is how she greets him now, how petty and cruel was she before?*

Chastised by Hera’s words, Isolde flushes and bows her head. “Pardon me,” she murmurs. “I would exchange pleasantries but- considering the circumstances…”

“Please, Lady Isolde,” Alistair implores, lifting his hands in helplessness. “We had no idea anyone was even alive inside the castle. We *must* have some answers.”

She bows her head, and Hera’s dislike of the woman grows. “I know you need more of an explanation, but I- I don’t know what is safe to tell. Teagan, there is a terrible evil within the castle,
the dead wake and hunt the living. The mage responsible was caught, but still, it continues. And I
think Connor is going mad. We have survived but he won’t flee the castle...he has seen so much
death. You must help him, Teagan. You are his uncle, you could reason with him! I do not know
what else to do!”

“What about Arl Eamon?” Hera asks. “Does he yet live?”

“He is,” Isolde says, turning to look at her. “He’s being kept alive so far, thank the Maker.”

“Kept alive?” Teagan asks. “Kept alive by what?”

“Something the mage unleashed,” she answers ominously. “So far it allows Eamon, Connor, and
myself to live. The others were not so fortunate. It’s killed so many and turned their bodies into
walking nightmares! Once it was done with the castle, it struck the village. It wants us to live, but I
do not know why! It allowed me to come for you, Teagan, because I begged, because I said
Connor needed help!”

“Could this evil be some kind of demon?” Hera asks.

“I...I do not know,” Isolde tells her. “Oh, Maker’s mercy...Could it truly be a demon? I can’t let it
hurt my Connor! You must come back with me Teagan! Please!”

“Tell me about the mage you mentioned,” Hera demands, the words ringing with such command
that Isolde obeys without hesitation.

“He is an...infiltrator, I think. One of the castle staff. We discovered he was poisoning my husband,
that is why Eamon fell ill.”

“Eamon was poisoned?” Teagan gasps. “Isolde, how could this have happened?”

“He claims an agent of Teyrn Loghain’s hired him. He may be lying, however, I cannot say.”

Hera’s patience with the arlessa wears thin. “Why do I get the feeling you aren’t telling us
everything?” she asks, crossing her arms over her chest.
Lady Isolde turns on her in shocked outrage. “I- I beg your pardon! That’s a rather impertinent accusation!”

“No if it’s true,” Hera says in a withering tone.

“A evil I cannot fathom holds my son and husband hostage,” Isolde says in a pitiable voice. “I came for help! What more do you want from me? Teagan, I do not have much time! What if it thinks I’m betraying it! It could kill Connor! Please come back with me! Must I beg?” she asks tearfully.

Her tears do not move Hera, who has been known to use them to have her own way. “Why must Teagan go alone?”

“For Connor’s sake. I promised I would return quickly and only with Teagan.” She wraps her hands around the bann’s arm, giving him a wide-eyed, teary look of innocence. “Teagan, I know you could order your men to follow me when I return to the castle, but I beg you not to. For Connor’s sake. You must come with me,” she begs, her voice breaking.

“Enough,” Hera snorts, waving Isolde’s emotional pleas aside. “We need to decide what to do.”

“The king is dead,” Teagan says flatly. “And we need my brother now more than ever. I will return to the castle with you, Isolde.”

“Thank the Maker,” Isolde cries. “Bless you, Teagan!”

“Teagan,” Hera warns.

He turns to her. “I have no illusions of dealing with this alone,” he says. “You, on the other hand, have proven quite formidable. Isolde, can you excuse us for a moment? We must confer in private before I return to the castle with you.”

She nods. “Please do not take too long. I will be by the bridge.”

As soon as she’s out of earshot, Teagan turns to Hera. “Here’s what I propose: I go in with Isolde,
and you enter the castle using the secret passage. My signet ring unlocks the door. Perhaps I will
distract whatever evil is inside and increase your chances of getting in unnoticed. What do you
say?”

Hera glances over her shoulder at Alistair, who looks distraught at the thought of Eamon being so
close to death. “What exactly am I supposed to do in there?”

“I wish I knew,” he sighs. “I don’t know any more about this evil force than Isolde seems to. Ser
Perth and his men can watch for danger at the castle entrance if you can open the gates from within
they can move in and help you. I don’t think there’s anyone else,” he adds. “If you choose not to
go, then it’s up to me to do what I can. Here is my signet ring.” He twists it off and hands it to her.
“It will open the lock on the door in the mill. Whatever you do, Eamon is the priority here. If you
have to, just get him out of there. Isolde, me, and anyone else- we’re expendable.”

“I don’t believe that,” Hera tells him softly, looking down at his hand holding her own. “I will
rescue you all, I promise.”

Teagan smiles warmly at her. “You are a good woman, my lady. The Maker smiled on me indeed
when he sent you to Redcliffe. I can delay no longer, allow me to bid you farewell. And good
luck,” he adds, pressing his lips to her hand in farewell.

Hera watches him walk away, his ring warm in her hand. I do hope he doesn’t die. “Right then,”
she says, turning to her companions. “Let’s see what fun we can have.”

“I don’t know if our definitions of ‘fun’ are the same,” Alistair grumbles as he follows her into the
millhouse.

Hera finds the door quickly and lifts the latch. Thank goodness for darkvision, she thinks, leaping
into the dark tunnel below. Being dhampir definitely has its advantages. The air inside is stale and
so dark that a human wouldn’t be able to see past their nose. Morrigan jumps in behind her, losing
her footing and colliding into Hera.

“Forgive me. It’s far too dark in here to see,” Morrigan mutters, steadying herself.

“Are you hurt?” Hera asks. “Alistair, we need a torch.”
“No need, Warden.” Morrigan taps her staff on the dirt floor. A soft white glow fills the tunnel, revealing stone smoothed by time but overtaken with dust and spider webs.

“Handy trick, I knew we brought you for a reason,” Hera says, nodding to the staff. “Do you have to keep contact with it for it to work?”

Morrigan nods, leaping out of the way when Alistair jumps down. Above them, Ares lays on his belly, poking his head into the hole. “Come on, you big brave boy,” Hera calls, opening her arms. With a cheerful yelp, the dog launches himself at her. She grunts and staggers back from the impact, but catches him all the same.

“How can- you- you can carry him?” he stutters. “How? He’s huge!”

Hera cuddles the mabari and shrugs. “I just can. Can’t you?”

“Yes, but he’s still heavy! And I’d never let him jump down on top of me!”

“A dog is smarter, and a woman stronger,” Morrigan drawls, amused. “Alistair, why are you here?”

“Why are you?” he snaps at her.

“I’m here because my mother ordered me to come,” she answers. “I did not refuse to lead and then not question our leader’s every move, nor do I badger her with endless questions.”

“Stop,” Hera orders. “Both of you. Next time, you can jump in by yourself if it’s going to cause trouble,” she tells Ares as she sets him down. “Let’s go.”

Chapter End Notes

Bonus chapter! Since I was sick last week, I wanted to publish 3 chapters this week to make up for it.
Blood Mage

Chapter Summary

A blood mage lingers in the dungeon while Hera sees a horror that could only come from Ravenloft.

“If my guess is right,” Alistair murmurs as they pause at the end of the tunnel. “This tunnel connects to the dungeon. That door should open right into it.”

Hera catches an unusual sound and puts her ear to the door, listening. For all the benefits the Joining gives a human, her already superhuman vision and hearing didn’t change, so she’s almost certain Alistair has the same capabilities as any other human and cannot hear the familiar rattle of bone. “There’s something in there,” she whispers. “Alive and moving. Probably more undead.” She draws her weapons and steps back, gathering her strength and kicking the door open.

Three undead corpses rush them, only to be frozen in place by Morrigan. “Well that was fun,” Alistair quips, slamming his shield into one and shattering it.

“See, our definitions of fun aren’t so different!” Hera tells him, standing back and letting Morrigan freeze the remaining two again so that the bones shatter like a tree in winter. She pokes around in the first few cells, looking for anything useful, but it’s not the sprawling, treasure-filled dungeons she and her brother had crawled through with their companions in earlier times, but neither is it the shadowed, ghost-filled labyrinth of Ravenloft’s castle. It is, like much of Ferelden, simple and sturdy, with few surprises.

“H-Hello?” They pause at the sound of a man’s frightened voice. “Is someone out there? Who is it?”

Weapons raised, Hera approaches a cell where a man in tattered, stained robes stands. He reeks of fear and blood, and not all of the blood is his, she notices. They tortured him. He must have fought back a little.

“My name is Jowan. I know it looks suspicious,” he says quickly, raising his hands. “But I’m not responsible for the creatures and the killings in the castle. I’m…” He sighs and hangs his head in defeat. “I’m a blood mage,” he says, the words clearly causing him personal pain to say aloud. “But I was already imprisoned when all that began. At first, Lady Isolde came here with her men,
demanding that I reverse what I’d done. I thought she meant my poisoning of the Arl. That’s the first I’d heard about the walking corpses. She’d thought I’d summoned a demon to torment her family and destroy Redcliffe. She...she had me tortured. There was nothing I could do or say that would appease her. So they left me to rot,” he finishes.

“And they should,” Alistair hisses. “Blood magic is forbidden, and you know it.”

“And will Templar Alistair punish him, then?” Morrigan snaps.

Hera shoots them a look that silences the argument before it can begin. “Why did you poison Arl Eamon?” she asks, turning her attention back to Jowan.

“I was instructed to by Teyrn Loghain. I was told that Arl Eamon was a threat to Ferelden. That if I dealt with him, Loghain would settle some matters with the Circle. He’s abandoned me here, hasn’t he? Everything’s fallen apart. I never thought it would end like this. Maker, I’ve made so many mistakes! I disappointed so many people! I wish I could go back and fix it, I just want to make everything right again!”

“That’s an admirable thought,” she says wryly. *Admirable, but can he be believed?* She shoots a glance at Morrigan and Alistair, but neither of their faces give away their thoughts.

“Well, it’s a start,” he says. “I don’t know if anything I could do would ever make it right.”

“None of this explains why you’re here, though,” Hera points out. “You came to poison the arl, but what was your story? Why would they let a blood mage into their home?”

“Connor had started to show magical ability,” the mage explains. “Lady Isolde brought me here to tutor him; she was terrified the Circle of Magi would take him away for training.”


“She sought an apostate,” Jowan says, his voice heavy with guilt, “a mage outside the Circle, to teach her son so he could learn to hide his talent. Her husband had no idea.”

“The Arl didn’t know?” she questions. “Could Connor be responsible for all this?”
“I thought that too,” he exclaims. “Connor knows very little magic, but he may have done something to tear open the Veil. With the Veil to the Fade torn, spirits and demons could infiltrate the castle. Powerful ones could kill and create those walking corpses.”

“I see. How much magic did you teach Connor?” This Fade seems to make everything far more complicated than it has to be. I should ask Morrigan to explain more, and how it connects to their magic. Alistair said dreams come from the Fade, and spirits and demons roam. Could they not just tear down this Veil and be done with all the trouble?

“Some. But he’s still very young- he can barely cast a minor spell, nevermind something more powerful. At least not intentionally. He may have torn the Veil accidentally.”

“I think I understand,” she says thoughtfully.

“The Arl is a decent man,” the mage insists. “I wondered how he could be the threat Loghain said he was, but I did it anyway. I’m such a fool.”

“Yes, you are,” she agrees. Hera can hear the cruelty in her voice and remembers the night she sentenced the traitors of Ravenloft. They were fools as well; he is lucky, I would have simply executed him. “What do you intend to do about it?”

“I’m just sick of running away and hiding. I’m going to try and fix it, any way I can. Help me fix this,” he pleads.

Hera quietly looks at him for a long time. He’s remorseful, and if he’s telling the truth, he’s done less harm than Sten. And yet his crimes are heavier for being a mage. He’d be safer where he is. “I will, but not yet,” she says finally. “For now, you will stay here.”

“I can accept that,” he says quickly. “But if I can be of help…”

“I’ll come back for you,” she finishes. “Till then, behave yourself.”

“You are full of surprises,” Morrigan murmurs as they move on. “I half expected you to let Alistair kill him then and there.”

“And you would what? Free him and let him run away?” Alistair snarls. “Morrigan, the Circle has
rules in place for a reason—"

“Oh yes, the cattle usually stay in their fence,” Morrigan argues. “But what about—”

“He wants to atone for his crimes,” Hera says flatly. “If there’s a chance, I’ll allow it. After that, he will answer to the Arl, and not any of us.”

They move through the dungeon as a unit, taking out undead as they go. Hera feels only the slightest bit of guilt, being partially undead herself, but knowing that these are not sentient beings, they are slaves to whatever is controlling them. As they go up, they pass through the cellar, and Hera pauses when she catches the faint sound of crying.

“Who would be here?” she asks and follows the sound to a small door. Beside her, Ares whimpers and paws at the door. “It sounds like a woman. Morrigan, be ready.”

Morrigan lifts her staff, a small flame coming to life and engulfing the stone at its tip. Hera crouches to one side, gesturing for Alistair to open the door. He swings it open, and Hera looks in, ready for an ambush. Instead, she finds a human woman hiding behind some boxes, sobbing and begging for her life.

“Nevermind, Morrigan,” she sighs, straightening and approaching the woman slowly. She has the same eyes as the blacksmith, red-rimmed and swollen with tears as they are. “Are you Valena?” she asks.

“Y-Yes,” the woman sniffs, not moving from her spot behind the boxes. “Who are you?”

“Your father sent me to find you,” Hera explains quickly, holding her hand out to her. “There’s a tunnel leading out of the dungeon, you can get out if you run.”

“What about the creatures!?” she shrieks. “I can’t go alone!”

“We’ve taken care of them,” she assures her, coaxing her out of the closet. “Valena, go to the village. Run.”
Alistair hands her a small knife. “Here, in case we missed anything. You’ll come out at the millhouse. Ser Perth will have left a knight or two there, they’ll make sure nothing got in behind us.”

“That was well done,” Hera tells him, surprised at his gentleness.

“Yes, well,” he says, grinning. “Not everything can be accomplished by flirtation.”

“What do-gooding!” Morrigan cheers sarcastically. “My heart feels warmer for it.”

“You have one?” Alistair asks, raising his eyebrows at her.

“Shut up, Morrigan,” Hera snaps.

“Oh, yes ma’am,” Morrigan pouts, sticking out her bottom lip. “I shall be as silent as the grave.”

“Maker be praised,” Alistair mutters.

Alistair leads them through kitchens cramped with tables and sacks of goods and then the narrow barracks, destroying small groups of undead stumbling over bodies gone soft with rot. Like the night before, it’s messy work, and Hera’s boots are black with blood and offal when they arrive in the courtyard.

They had expected a cool drink of water and a small respite from the undead, sure that the creatures would stay out of the sunlight, but what they find instead makes Hera’s blood run cold. Corpses litter the green summer grass, baking in the sun and beginning to swell and turn purple. On the stairs to their right is a small army of undead, some of them falling apart as they stand. At the gate stands Ser Perth and his knights, shouting taunts and lobbing arrows over the walls in steady waves. In the center of it all stands a massive armored creature, the pure evil emanating from it casting a shadow longer than humanly possible.
“Good gods,” she whispers, the words easing out of her as all her breath leaks out of her lungs. It’s huge, easily taller than Alistair and twice as wide, with pitted, spiked armor clinging to a body wrapped in dark rags. Arrows stick into the ground all around it, but it ignores them, brushing off a strike with a frighteningly casual movement. “What is that?”

*It looks like...that’s not possible*, she thinks, shaking her head. *There’s no way one of the gatekeepers could have followed me here. The gates are far from where I was in the forest.* In Ravenloft, spirits take similar, nightmarish forms to haunt the gates- the four main paths in and out of the realm- and once terrorized and devoured any who attempted to escape Strahd’s reach. In her own reign, she had transformed them into guardians, reminding all who pass of the power Ravenloft holds and the punishment that awaits criminals.

But here, in Ferelden, the thought of such a spirit turning all that cold fury on her makes Hera’s chest tight. Even at her best, a gatekeeper would be a difficult battle she might not win. It had taken six hardened, powerful warriors to take down two during her takeover of the realm. All she had here was a dog and two young companions; compared to Zeus and the others, her new friends suddenly seemed sadly inexperienced.

“That is a Revenant,” Alistair says in a low voice. “It’s a powerful demon that’s possessed a corpse. It looks like it’s taken one of the Arl’s knights.”

Hera swallows against a rush of gratitude. *Not one of mine, then,* she thinks gladly. *Just some...other horrible nightmare that’s as natural to Thedas as darkspawn. All right. That we can handle.*

“Morrigan,” she says, not turning her head in hopes that the creatures surrounding the Revenant don’t notice them yet. “Fire off something spectacular to get their attention on us, then get to the gate, get it open so Ser Perth’s men can come in. After that, stay out of range of the Revenant if you can. Alistair, I’m going to be on your left, and Ares,” she glances down at the dog, and he’s listening attentively. “Alistair’s right.”

Ares growls low in his throat in acknowledgment, his eyes never leaving the Revenant.

With a deep breath, she twitches her hands, unable to convince her racing heart that this Revenant isn’t in fact, one of her gatekeepers. “Let’s go. Morrigan, start us off.”

Morrigan gathers her power into a glowing fireball; stray strands of hair lift off her face as the heat grows before releasing it. The moment her magic is loose, she runs for the gate, leaving Hera and Alistair rushing the Revenant.
It’s glowing eyes lock on Hera, and it reaches a hand out to her in invitation. A pull starts in her gut, and when he jerks his hand back swiftly she flies through the air toward it. Her scream is cut short when she slams into its body, the spiked armor stabbing her in the side. Gasping, she struggles to get away, unable to see where her weapons landed.

“*For the Grey Wardens!*”

Alistair’s battle cry is as welcome a sound as the clatter of his armor behind her. With a burst of strength, she shoves the Revenant away, grimacing as the long spike in her side does more damage on the way out. She scrambles out of the way of a dark, rust-spotted sword, finding her sword in the grass. Behind her, Ares snaps his powerful jaws and keeps more undead at bay while Alistair engages the Revenant.

A second cry is heard over the sound of battle as the gate is lifted and the Arl’s knights join the fray. Hera wraps both hands around the hilt of her sword, grinning when flames dance along the razor edge, courtesy of Morrigan. Ignoring the tearing in her side, Hera attacks the Revenant from Alistair’s left, keeping it between her sword and his shield while Morrigan pelts it with magic.

The Revenant emits a burst of dark magic, regaining strength and stabbing its sword clean through Alistair’s stomach, lifting him off his feet. Hera can only watch in horror as throws him across the courtyard with a deep, rustling laugh.

“Morrigan! Help him!” she shouts, ducking behind it to avoid being impaled herself.

It turns to face Hera, raising its sword to finish her and looking more like a gatekeeper than ever. *Not one of mine,* she reminds herself, taking a deep breath. Foolishly, Hera leaps into the creature’s reach, plunging her sword through the middle as the blood-covered blade sinks into her shoulder. At the same moment, a thick layer of ice bursts out of the shadowy armor, freezing both blades into place.

Breathing heavily, Hera puts a hand to her shoulder, gasping as she pulls away from the sword. She can sense the necromancy gone from the Revenant’s remains, so she puts a foot on the body and yanks her sword out. She tumbles to the ground as the body explodes into black shards of ice.

Pain tears through her, radiating in blinding waves from her wounds as the adrenaline of the fight wears off. Putting a hand weakly on her side, she closes her eyes and lays there while the sounds of battle begin to fade.
“Hera, are you all right?”

She opens her eyes to see Alistair, covered in blood but alive and breathing. “Sure,” she croaks, lifting a hand sticky with blood.

“Morrigan?” he asks hopefully.

Morrigan looks exhausted as well, shadows under her eyes making her look pale. “Put pressure on her wounds,” she instructs. “I must find some lyrium to replenish myself.”

The ice encasing the pieces of the Revenant begins to melt, revealing a stench strong enough to make Alistair gag. Lying in the middle of it, Hera silently reminds herself that having enhanced dhampir senses comes at a price. “Maker’s breath,” he mutters, slipping his arms underneath her. “Let’s get you out of this.”

“Can I be of assistance?” Ser Perth asks, approaching slowly.

Alistair lifts her easily and moves Hera to lie on some square hay bales nearby. “You don’t want to smell that,” he explains as the knight joins them. “We cleared the dungeons and cellar as we came up,” he adds. “You might want to send someone to be sure, though.”

“And you opened the gates,” he says cheerfully as Morrigan approaches. “My men and I are eager to see the Arl again. Shall we enter the main hall together? It must be held if we are to gain hold of the castle.”

“No, stay out here,” Hera instructs, gasping at the heat radiating from Morrigan’s healing magic. Does everyone’s magic feel different? She wonders as Alistair helps her sit up, rotating her shoulder with a grimace. Or does she just like hurting people? “Hold the gates in case anything comes out. I don’t want to lose the yard if something goes wrong inside.”

The knight nods. “Understood. We’ll await your word.”

She nods, inspecting the new holes in her armor. “That’s fine,” she says absently, getting to her feet slowly. “Ares, to me,” she calls. “By the Powers, drop that bone! That’s somebody’s leg, you
“Goose!” Ares trots over, and she brushes some of the bone and muck off him. “You’re filthy, you know that?” she tells him, cupping his face in her hands. “You need a bath as badly as I do.”

“If we can get control of the castle, you can have one,” Alistair reminds her. “Let’s go see what’s waiting for us in there.”

“I have a wonder, Hera,” Morrigan says as they climb the stairs leading to the main hall, “if you will indulge me.”

“What is it?” she asks, rolling her shoulder and sighing in relief when something pops.

“How is it you are so...in command? You order knights and lords about almost as if you’ve done this before.”

“I have,” Hera says too quickly. *Damn.* “I mean, I’ve been adventuring before,” she amends. “My brother and I chased the wind for a long time before we found our home. When we did, we had quite the battle on our hands.”

“And why didn’t the denizens of Ravenloft defend their home before you got there?”

Hera stops at the door and turns to the witch. She has no intention of telling anyone the whole truth of Ravenloft and the events that transpired there- there is nothing to be gained by it. “Another time, perhaps,” she lies. “It’s a long story.”

“Oh, I *do* love a good tale,” Morrigan agrees.

“I admit I’d be happy to hear that as well,” Alistair says gloomily. “And I hate to agree with Morrigan on anything.”

“And yet that’s a second thing we agree on,” Morrigan says venomously.

“Alright, you two,” Hera warns and pushes open the doors.
Hera is expecting a hall full of undead, torturing Teagan and Isolde, Connor lying dead on the floor, and a whole host of nightmarish things, but none of that is what they walk into: Teagan dancing and japing like a court jester, laughed at and encouraged by a half-feral child, and Isolde cowering behind them. The boy is thin and bruised, with a mad gleam in his eyes and jerky movements, as if his body is too small to contain him. Were he not under the strain of whatever afflicted him, he would look like every other boy in Redcliffe.

“What the…” she murmurs. *What’s happened to this boy?*

Teagan starts rolling on the floor, doing somersaults, when Connor notices them and stops clapping. His face takes on a strange expression, flitting between anger and excitement, one Hera has seen before in creatures like herself. It is the expression of something dangerous and hungry, too knowledgeable of the darkness to be a child.

“So these are our visitors,” he says scathingly, his voice contorted and rough. “The ones you told me about, Mother.”

“Y-yes, Connor,” she whimpers.

“And this is the one who defeated my soldiers?” he asks, pointing at Hera. “The ones I sent to reclaim my village.”

“Yes.”

“And now it’s staring at me! What is it, Mother? I can’t see it well enough.”

*Will he know I’m not human?* She wonders, taking a careful step toward him. *Can the evil inside him see me for what I am?*
“This...this is just a woman, Connor.” Isolde’s voice is tearful and halting, and Hera finds a small amount of pity in her for the woman. “Just as I am.”

“You lie!” he shrieks, turning on her. “This woman is nothing like you! Half your age, and prettier.” He tilts his head, turning slowly back to Hera. His eyes focus on her as a smile too wide for amusement stretches across his face. “And something else, too. Something more. I’m surprised you don’t have her executed in a fit of jealousy.”

Hera meets his gaze confidently, lifting her chin. *It knows I’m different. Good.*


The boy’s expression changes to one of confusion and pain, and he rubs his eyes. “M-Mother? What’s happening? Where am I?” he asks in a scared voice. He sways on his feet, reaching for his mother, his movements twitching with pain and exhaustion.

“Oh thank the Maker. Conner! Conner can you hear me?” she gasps, kneeling in front of her son.

The moment is lost, and Hera can see the demon taking him over again. The light in his is overtaken by a shadow passing over him, the desperate need for comfort twisting into a snarl of disgust. “Get away from me fool woman!” he shouts, flailing his arms at her. “You are beginning to bore me.”

“Grey Warden…” Isolde whimpers, “please don’t hurt my son. He’s not responsible for what he’s done!”

“So he is the evil you spoke of,” Hera says flatly.

“No!” she cries. “Don’t say that!”

“So the boy has become an abomination and sundered the Veil?” Morrigan drawls.
“Connor didn’t mean to do this! It was that mage, the one who poisoned Eamon! He started all this! He summoned the demon! Connor was just trying to help his father!”

“And made a deal with a demon to do so?” Morrigan retorts. “Foolish child.”

“It was a fair deal!” Connor shouts, his voice mutated by the demon within to sound like a chorus of voices. “Father is alive, just as I wanted. Now it’s my turn to sit on the throne and send out armies to conquer the world! Nobody tells me what to do anymore!”

“Nooooobody tells him what to do!” Teagan giggles in a mad fit, wrapping his arms around himself and rocking. “Nobody!”

“Quiet uncle!” Connor snaps. “I warned you what would happen if you kept shouting, didn’t I? Yes, I did. But let’s keep things civil,” he says, his voice turning sweet. “This woman will have the audience she seeks. Tell us, woman...what have you come here for?”

“I came to help,” Hera says simply, watching it swing wildly from one emotion to the other. It doesn’t seem able to control its emotions, or it’s trying to experience everything at once. Either way, it could be a weakness I can exploit.


“I came to help Arl Eamon.”

“But Father is so very ill,” he says, “we shouldn’t disturb him. Isn’t that right, Mother?”

“I...I don’t think-”

“Of course you don’t. Ever since you sent the knights away, you’ve done nothing but ruin my fun. Frankly, it’s getting dull. I crave excitement! And action! This woman spoiled my sport by saving that stupid village, but now she’ll repay me!”

He runs out of the hall, and before Hera can chase him, Teagan lets out a deafening warcry. All the Redcliffe guards in the hall attack, and Teagan heads straight for her, sword in hand.
“Damn it all,” she mutters, readying her own weapons. “Don’t kill them!” she orders.

“They’re trying to kill us!” Alistair shouts, bashing a guard with his shield.

Ares growls and bites the hand of a swordsman coming near Hera, tearing the weapon out of his hand. Teagan is a capable swordsman, she learns as they duel, and it isn’t easy to wear him down and knock him unconscious. But they manage to get all the guards incapacitated, and Hera nudges the bann with her boot, catching her breath.

“He may still be under the influence of the demon,” she says as he comes around. “Keep an eye on the rest.”

Ares turns and stares at the other guards, growling, while Isolde helps Teagan to his feet. “Teagan! Oh Teagan,” she says tearfully. “Are you all right?”

“I am...better now,” he says slowly, shaking his head. “My mind is my own again.”

“Blessed Andraste, I would never have forgiven myself if you had died, not after I brought you here. What a fool I am! Please!” she says, turning to Hera. “Connor is not responsible for this. There must be some way to save him.”

“I’m not about to kill a child,” Hera assures her. “What of the mage in the dungeon? The blood mage? Maybe he can help.”


“My lord, he’s a blood mage,” Alistair reminds him. “The templars should be called for him.”

“Not if he can be of use,” Hera argues. “He started all this, after all.”

Teagan sighs, running his hand over his face. Hera puts a hand on his shoulder, smiling gently when he looks up at her. “This is a lot to carry, I know. But if Jowan can help Connor, you have to
let him try.”

Alistair shoots her a hard look, his lips turning into a thin line. “It doesn’t change what he is,” he mutters.

Hera doesn’t want to argue with him, so she doesn’t answer. They wait in silence while Jowan is brought from the dungeon. Hera can’t stay still, her adrenaline forcing her to action, so she wanders down the hall and finds a study. This must be Eamon’s study, she realizes, her gaze moving over shelf after shelf of books. A learned man. Good. That’s one thing in his favor.

She wanders another moment, glancing down at the desk. A chain hangs out of a slightly open drawer, and she opens it to return it to its place, but her hand stops when she sees what the chain is. She remembers seeing an amulet of Andraste among Leliana’s things, and this looks just like it, only cracked, as if it’s been broken and repaired.

This must be the amulet Alistair spoke of, she thinks, drawing it out for a closer look. The one that he threw against the wall. The arl repaired it…that doesn’t sound like the man I’ve heard about. She hears her name called, and slips the amulet into her pocket, hurrying to rejoin the others.

Jowan stands before Isolde, cringing under Lady Isolde’s hysterical tirade. “You! You did this to Connor!”

“I didn’t!” he cries. “I didn’t summon any demon, I told you! If you’ll let me help…”

“Help?” she shrieks, and Hera winces at the pitch her voice takes on. “You betrayed me! I brought you here to help my son, and in return you poisoned my husband!”

Finally, Teagan puts a hand on her shoulder to silence her. “Your secrecy made his actions possible, Isolde.”

“But I…”

“I know what you think of me, my lady,” Jowan says slowly. “I took advantage of your fear. I am sorry. I...I never knew it would come to this.”
“Well, I shan’t turn away his help,” Teagan decides. “Not yet. And if Connor is truly an abomination-”

“He’s not always the demon you saw,” Isolde says softly. “Connor is still inside him, and sometimes he breaks through. Please, I just want to protect him.”

“Isn’t that what started this?” Teagan demands. “You hired the mage to teach Connor in secret...to protect him.”

“If they discovered Connor had magic, they’d take him away! I thought if he learned just enough to hide it, then…”

“I sought to keep the boy from the hands of the Chantry,” Jowan says softly, hanging his head. “The Circle is no place for children.”

“What Jowan has done is admirable,” Morrigan adds. “The Circle is simply a prison.”

What luck, Hera thinks, taking a deep breath. I can’t wait to see Morrigan’s reaction when we go to them over the treaty. “What are our options?” Hera asks, hands on her hips.

“I wouldn’t normally suggest slaying a child,” Alistair says in an apologetic voice, “but...he is an abomination. I’m not sure there is any choice.”

“Connor is my nephew, but...he is also possessed by a demon,” Teagan admits. “Death would be...merciful.”

“There is another option,” Jowan adds. “Though I loathe offering it. A mage could confront the demon in the Fade, without hurting Connor.”

“What do you mean?” Teagan asks. “Is the demon not within Connor?”

“Not physically. The demon approached Connor in the Fade while he dreamt, and controls him from there. We can use the connection between them to find the demon.”
“You can enter the Fade?” Isolde stammers. “And kill the demon without hurting my boy?”

“No, but I can enable another mage to do so,” Jowan explains. “Normally it requires lyrium and several mages, but I have… blood magic.”

“I don’t understand,” Isolde says. “I know nothing of blood magic. How is it possible?”

“Lyrium provides the power for the ritual,” he says. “But I can take that power from someone’s life energy. This ritual requires a lot, however. All of it, in fact.”

“So… someone must die?” Teagan asks. “Someone must be sacrificed?”

“Yes, and then we send another mage into the Fade. I can’t enter because I’m doing the ritual. Maybe I shouldn’t have said anything. It’s… not much of an option…”

“Is there no other method?” Hera asks.

“The power has to come from somewhere, and that means either lyrium or blood.”

“Then let it be my blood,” Isolde offers. “I will be the sacrifice.”

“What? Isolde, are you mad? Eamon would never allow it!” Teagan cries.

She turns a horrified expression on her brother in law. “Either someone kills my son to destroy that thing inside him, or I give my life so my son can live. To me, the choice is clear.”

“Blood magic,” Alistair spits. “How can more evil be of any more help here? Two wrongs don’t make a right.”

“It does seem like a sensible choice,” Morrigan argues, “with a willing participant.”
“Connor is blameless in this,” Isolde adds. “He should not have to pay the price.”

Teagan looks to Hera, his face lined with worry. “The decision is yours, my lady.”

Hera shakes her head. “There has to be another way,” she says, pinching the bridge of her nose.

“You could find lyrium and more mages at the Circle of Magi,” Alistair suggests. “If they would even do it.”

“Is it far?” she asks him.

“No- which is an excellent point,” he says. “One of the treaties is also for the Circle of Magi, after all.”

“The tower is about a day’s journey across the lake,” Teagan says hopefully. “You could try to get the mages’ help.”

“But what will happen here?” Isolde asks. “Connor will not remain passive forever.”

“I will take that chance,” Hera tells her.

“Very well,” Teagan says. “I will keep Jowan here as a precaution. He says he wants to help, so he will keep an eye on Connor with us.” Teagan steps forward and takes her hand. “Go to the tower quickly then,” he says, meeting her gaze. “The longer you’re away, the greater the chances of disaster.”

Hera nods and pulls her hand away, ignoring Alistair's snort behind her. “We will set out immediately.”
Hera's growing feelings for Alistair leaves her frustrated and confused, and when she gives him his mother's amulet, the struggle to ignore them becomes more difficult than she could imagine.

“Alistair, can I talk to you a moment?” Hera asks, fingering the amulet in her pocket.

“Can I bring my food?” he asks, spooning stew into his mouth.

“Yes,” Hera laughs, and they walk over to a bench outside the Spoiled Princess Inn. Nestled on the bank of Lake Calenhad, the inn has an impressive view of the lake. A light breeze sends ripples across the surface, reflecting the moonlight, but their sparkle marred by the shadow cast by the Circle of Magi tower. The Inn is the closest building to the tower, a single way-station between the mundane and the magic. The Tower was built on an island, accessible only by boat, and, to Hera, looks lonely and cold. It saddens her to think of a tower full of mages with nowhere to go.

“What's on your mind?” he asks, settling himself and going back to his food. “Are you ready to tell me you’ve been dreaming about me?”

“You know that already,” she teases. “Mad lovemaking. My tent. You ran off to investigate a puddle if I remember correctly.”

He chokes a little, turning red in the face. “Oh yeah. I remember that puddle was pretty deep. It had waves and tides and everything.”

“I am far more interesting than a puddle,” she purrs, brushing her hair off her neck slowly.

He coughs, struggling to swallow a mouthful of stew. “I’m sure you are,” he says, catching his breath. “Is this what you wanted to do?” he asks, raising his eyebrow and smirking. “Have you drawn me out to try and seduce me?”

“That would be easier, I think,” she laughs, slipping a hand into her pocket and fingering the
amulet. “But...no. Something you should know about me is that I’m a bit of a snoop. I guess it comes from living at court and rooting out gossip. It’s not my best quality.”

“What have you heard?” he asks tensely. “Is Morrigan going to turn me into a toad?”

“Uh, no?” she asks, caught off guard. “Has she threatened it lately?”

“No, but you never know.” He relaxes and goes back to his food. “All right then. So what did you find while snooping?”

“This,” she says, handing him the amulet.

Alistair sets the bowl aside, staring down at the amulet in shock. “This...this is my mother’s amulet. It has to be,” he breathes, blinking quickly. “But why isn’t it broken? Where did you find it?”

Hera twists her fingers together. “I found it in Redcliffe castle,” she says slowly. “In the arl’s study.”

“Oh, the arl’s study?” He tries to sound casual, but his eyes have started to turn red, and he blinks away tears. “Then he must have...found the amulet after I threw it at the wall. And he repaired and kept it? I don’t understand, why would he do that?” he asks, his voice brittle and raw, looking up at her for an answer. Hera already thought him young, but she can see the hurt little boy looking out of his eyes.

“Maybe you mean more to him that you think,” she offers gently.

Alistair’s face is a mix of emotion, making him unreadable, his eyes locked on the amulet. “I...I guess you could be right. We never really talked that much, and then the way I left...” He shakes his head, and Hera wonders for a moment if she made the right choice giving it to him.

*He looks devastated. Should I have left it where it was?*

“Thank you,” he says softly and scrubs his hand over his face. “I mean it. I thought I’d lost this to
my own stupidity. I’ll need to talk to him about this. If he recovers from his... when he recovers. I wish I’d had this a long time ago,” he sighs. He finally looks up at her, his expression still stunned and surprised. “Did you remember me mentioning it? Wow,” he chortles, trying to hide the way his voice cracks and the tips of his ears turn pink. “I’m more used to people not really listening when I go on about things.”

“Of course I remembered,” she says with a smile. “You’re…” Wanted. Desired. Truly good. A better person than I could ever be, and deserve more than anything I could give you. “Special to me,” she settles, inwardly cringing at how pathetic it sounds. Oh Hera, get yourself together. What do you think this is, some big romantic gesture? Zeus would laugh at you.

“Is this the part where the music starts playing and we begin dancing?” he asks eagerly, jumping to his feet and twirling her around. “Because I’m game. Where are the minstrels?” he cheers. Hera laughs, letting him dance her around in the dark. “How can I thank you, Hera?” he asks seriously, coming to a stop.

Just look at me like this, she thinks, surprising herself. The words nearly roll off her tongue, but she swallows them back, chiding herself for such romantic nonsense. “Oh. Um, you don’t have to thank me,” she titters, stepping back and putting her hands behind her back. “I told you, I’m a snoop. I shouldn’t have been looking through the arl’s study anyway.”

“I’m certainly glad you did.”

Hera is appalled when she realizes she’s blushing, and grateful that the only light is from the moon over Lake Calenhad and a few torches several yards away. Gods, Celeste would be ashamed to see me blushing! I’m a seasoned courtesan and no new maid. Blushing is a device for flirtation, not...whatever this nonsense is. Get a hold of yourself! “Don’t think anything of it,” she says, struggling to keep her voice level. “Just don’t be surprised when you catch me snooping in your things.”

He laughs, looking back down at the amulet. “I won’t care a whit. Thank you.”

She watches him go inside, forgetting his bowl on the bench. Hera frowns, crossing her arms and turning to look at the water. This is stupid. You should just charm him into your bed tonight and get it out of your system. All it would take is a little effort- he rejected my earlier offer, but if I actually seduced him...

She shakes her head, frustrated with herself. It hasn’t been that long, Hera, and you’re not one to be a slave to your desire. There’s just something about him, some...connection I’ve never felt with
any of my patrons. I wish there was someone else here...almost anyone else would do, though I doubt that templar on the dock would be much help. She looks around, hoping some handsome young man would come riding up at that moment and give her an outlet for the strange way she’s feeling, but all that’s around is an old man nattering about his boat and the templar further below. Someone who wouldn’t want more than I can give.

“Damn me,” she mutters and picks up his bowl to go inside.
The Circle of Magi

Chapter Summary

Hera gets a clear picture of life for Circle mages, leaving her determined to save them from what- or who- is unleashing demons through the Tower.

Hera leads the way down to the dock, opting to leave Sten and Leliana at the inn with Ares. Leliana still hasn’t fully recovered from the battle for Redcliffe, and Sten expressed no interest in the Tower, requesting to stay where he was for some odd reason. Hera had let it slide for the moment, though she liked him, the qunari had a tendency to get on her nerves with his blatant disregard for the others. As they near the templar standing at the end of the dock, Alistair groans. “Oh right, we’re here to see the mages. They just love me.”

“How fitting that they would build a prison for mages in the middle of a lake and make it look like a giant phallus,” Morrigan sneers. “Hera, you said you own a brothel, yes? What do you make of it?”

Hera tilts her head, looking up at the tower in the early morning light. “It’s not rounded enough at the tip,” she decides. “And it’s too tall, you’d have to walk a mile of stairs before you even made it to bed. It would make a terrible brothel.”

Morrigan laughs, drowning out whatever Alistair hides in a cough. Hera delights in her friend’s laughter, a sound that seems so unusual for one as severe as Morrigan, yet when it happens it’s as wild as the woman herself. Hera much prefers her surprising laugh to her arrogant chuckle.

“You,” the templar calls as they come nearer. “You’re not looking to get across to the Tower, are you? Because I have strict orders not to let anyone pass.”

“I am a Grey Warden,” Hera informs him stiffly. “I come seeking the help of the mages.”

The young man shifts position and looks arrogantly at her. He has the distinct look of a man whose important doesn’t match his ego- something Hera has seen many times. “Oh you’re a Grey Warden, are you?” he asks snidely. “Prove it.”

“Well, I have these documents,” she offers, showing him the treaty for the mages. He reaches for
it, and she moves them out of reach, handing them to Alistair. “They’re very old, you see,” she says in a sickly sweet tone. “I’d hate for them to be ruined.”

“Well,” he sniffs indignantly. “I have some documents too. They say I’m the queen of Antiva. What do you think of that?”

“Aren’t queens female?” she quips.

“And usually not so ugly,” Alistair whispers.

“Don’t question royalty!” the templar cries. “Anyway, it was nice chatting with you. Now on your way. Right now. Go.”

Hera sighs. “Can’t we work something out?” she asks, turning her shoulder and smiling up at him. *Maybe a templar will do, after all.*

“Hmm, I don’t know,” he says, crossing his arms over his chest. “I am feeling a little peckish, though.”

*Seriously?* She thinks, trying not to scoff. *Doesn’t anyone have sex in this world except other whores?* “There must be food at the tower,” she wheedles. “We can go there together!”

Morrigan curses and reaches into her pocket. “Here, munch on these if you like,” she grumbles.

"Where did you get those?" Alistair asks, trying not to laugh.

"If you must know, my Sten gave them to me," she snapped, brows drawing together in annoyance as she hands the templar her cookies.

“Oh! Cookies!” He shoves them into his mouth, making appreciative noises. “Oh, yummy. You scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours. We can go across now if you really want.”

“Let’s go,” Hera says, her brows furrowing in irritation. *I do hate these people sometimes.*
He rows them across the lake, dazzling in the morning mist, chattering the whole way across. Hera and the others disembark carefully and walk into the Tower.

“This is strange,” Alistair says slowly. “There’s something going on.”

They approach yet another templar, this one an older man, nearing his fifties she guesses, giving directions to a soldier. “Do not open the doors without my express consent, is that clear?” he orders, and the soldier agrees and runs off.

Hera looks around, expecting this Circle to be like the Colleges of Magic she’s visited: wizards and sorcerers milling about, books or supplies in hand. The Colleges were always welcome places where anyone with the desire or skill could learn something of magic- she herself had studied under an old master of necromancy in Sigil. But the Circle is far less welcoming. There are no magic-users in sight, the air is filled with the cries of wounded men still in armor, and she can almost taste the fear in the air.

“The doors are barred,” Alistair notes frowning, “are they keeping people out, or in?”

“This is the Circle?” Hera whispers in shock, looking to him. “This is where mages live?”

“Where they are kept,” Morrigan corrects. “Like rats in a cage, Hera.”

Dread settles in her stomach. *Cailan and Duncan made the Circle seem...different. Useful. Necessary. But this feels like a prison. There are no windows!*

The man in charge turns to them, his expression stern. “Now we wait, and pray.”

“You must be Gregor,” Hera says, recalling the gossip she’d heard from the innkeeper last night. “My name is Hera- I’m a Grey Warden.”

“I am, and we’re dealing with business that doesn’t concern you, Grey Warden,” he says flatly.
“And yet here I am,” she says brightly. “Looking for help.”

“I shall speak plainly,” he begins and starts pacing. “The Tower is no longer under our control. Abominations and demons stalk the halls; we’ve been too complacent.”

“How did this happen?” Alistair asks, his frown deepening.

“We...don’t know,” he confesses. “We saw only demons, hunting templars and mages alike. I realized we could not defeat them, and told my men to flee.”

“What about the mages?” Hera’s hands curl into fists without thought, her eyes cold and voice sharp as a dagger. “Have you left them in there to die?”

“The doors remain shut,” he says firmly. “They will protect us for now.”


“Not just mages,” he says defensively, “but my templars also. I had no choice. The abominations must be contained at all costs. We do not mean for the doors to stay closed forever,” he adds. “But everything in the tower must be eliminated. I’ve sent word to Denerim, calling for reinforcements and the Rite of Annulment.”

“The Rite of Annulment?” she asks, almost afraid to hear the answer.

“The Rite gives templars the authority to neutralize the mage circle,” he explains. “Completely.”

“The mages are probably already dead,” Alistair tells her, his tone weary and apologetic. “Any abominations in there must be dealt with. No matter what.”

“That’s barbaric!” Hera protests. “You can’t possibly mean to kill them all! Alistair, we can’t—”

“This situation is dire,” Gregor interrupts. He looks tired, but determined; a man who has clearly held his position for many years and does not relish the thought of what must be done, but will do
it all the same. “There is no alternative. Everything in the tower must be destroyed so it can be made safe again.”

Hera shakes her head in disbelief. *Over and over, this world shows me that I could never be truly accepted as I am. I cannot allow this to happen.* “The mages are not defenseless, surely,” she argues. “Some may still live.”

“If any are still alive, the Maker himself has shielded them. No one could have survived those monstrous creatures. It is too painful to hope for survivors and find...Nothing.”

“I will look for survivors,” she volunteers. *They are mages, sorcerers like me, she thinks, I cannot abandon them, even if I refuse to show myself to them.*

“I assure you, an abomination is a force to be reckoned with,” the templar says condescendingly. “And you will face more than one.”

“There has been little that could stand against me,” she says self-assuredly.

Gregor considers her offer for a moment, his eyes moving to each of the five companions before settling on Ares. He and the warhound study one another for a moment before he nods. “If you succeed, I would owe you much,” he says with a deep breath. “Enough that I would pledge my templars to your cause. Without word from Denerim, I must determine our course. Surely destroying darkspawn is a worthy goal.”

“We have an agreement then,” she says, offering her hand.

“A word of caution,” he says as they shake. “Once you cross that threshold, there is no turning back. The great doors must remain barred. I will open them for no one until I have proof that it is safe. I will only believe it is over if First Enchanter Irving stands before me and tells me it is so. If Irving has fallen, then the Circle is lost and must be destroyed. May Andraste lend you her courage, whatever you decide.”

Hera nods and turns to Morrigan and Alistair. “We have to help,” she says simply. “We need the mages, and this is the only way.”

Morrigan wisely stays silent, but her look of disapproval is deafening. Alistair nods. “So be it.”
Let’s go.”

They approach the great doors, one templar taking a defensive stance, weapon drawn, while the other opens the doors. They pass through without ceremony, and Hera instantly notices how silent it is once the doors slam shut behind them. Bodies litter the hallway, blood making the stone floor slick as they walk. They search every room on the first floor, encountering nothing until they come sliding into a room full of children, two women attacking a giant abomination that looks a lot like lava to Hera.

The creature grows, filling the cavernous room with air like a forge, and roars at the women. Hera is just about to join the fray when the older mage casts a powerful spell, freezing the beast in place until it shrivels down to nothing. Impressed, Hera takes her hand off her sword and looks around, only then noticing the blue barrier at the doorway and the children huddled in the shadows. Survivors, good.

“Who are you?” the woman asks, turning. “Why did the templars let you through?”

“Wynne?” Alistair asks, stunned. “Wynne, you’re here? I didn’t know you even survived Ostagar!”

The woman frowns, searching his face before recognizing him. “Alistair, yes, I remember you. You weren’t with the other Grey Wardens, then? Is this the recruit Duncan had brought?” she asks, looking to Hera. She has a kind, grandmotherly look to her, balanced by a tight knot of hair at the nape of her neck and a steely look in her eye.

“My name is Hera; I’ve come to help,” she explains, “and hopefully get some help in return.”

“Unfortunately the Circle is in grave danger,” Wynne says. “And is in no place to offer assistance of any kind.”

Hera nods. This one is not to be trifled with. Good, she won’t mince words. “Hence the reason I’m here to help first. Don’t worry,” she adds, “that barbaric Rite of Annulment hasn’t arrived yet.”

Wynne sighs, deflating a little at the mention of the Rite. “They sent for it then. I feared they might have- what else could they do?” Seemingly talking to herself, Wynne puts her hands on her hips and paces. “So Gregor thinks the Circle is beyond hope; he probably assumes we are all dead. They abandoned us to our fate, but even trapped as we are, we have survived. If they invoke the Rite, however, we will not be able to stand against them.” She turns to Hera, giving her a
questioning look. “You’ve come against his wishes?”

“He would send no more of his own men,” Hera answers. “We volunteered to find survivors.”

“You volunteered to find survivors.” The acid in Morrigan’s voice would eat through steel, and Hera stares in wide-eyed surprise. “I have no desire to save this prison.”

“Morrigan!” Alistair chides. “Just because you’re an apostate-”

“Changes nothing-”

Hera sighs and turns away from them as they begin to bicker. “Ignore them. Has the First Enchanter survived as well?”

Wynne shrugs. “If anyone could survive this, it would be First Enchanter Irving,” she explains. “It was he who told me to look after the children. It’s... a long story. I erected a barrier over the door leading to the rest of the tower, so nothing from inside could attack the children. You will not be able to enter the tower as long as the barrier holds, but I will dispel it if you join with me to save the Circle,” she offers, her voice filled with hope.

“ We came to help, Wynne,” she agrees, sending Morrigan a sharp look over her shoulder.

“Once Gregor sees that we have made the tower safe, I trust that he will tell his men to back down. He is not unreasonable.”

“Then we should set off immediately,” Hera decides.

“Petra, Kenan,” Wynne says to the two mages behind her. One is the young woman who had assisted Wynne with the demon, but Hera notices the boy Kenan for the first time. “Look after the others; I will be back soon.”

“Wynne, are you sure you’re all right?” Petra asks. “You were so badly hurt earlier. Maybe I should come along.”
“The others need your protection more,” Wynne advises. “I will be all right. Stay here with them. Keep them safe and calm.”

“Have faith,” Hera tells her, “we will not fail. Let’s go, Wynne.”

“A moment, please.” Hera watches Wynne walk slowly to a figure lying in the corner and kneel. Moving closer, she sees it’s a pretty elf girl, with blonde hair streaked with red and the pallor of death.

“Who is that?” she asks Petra softly, nodding to Wynne bowing her head over the girl.

“That was Neria,” Petra answers, her voice shaking. “She had just passed her Harrowing and become a full mage.”

“What happened to her?”

Tears fill Petra’s eyes, spilling down her cheeks. “Wynne had been injured- she fell and we thought she was dead- and Neria jumped in front of the demon so I could get to Wynne… It would have gotten me, but she distracted it.”

Hera nods and pats her arm. Knowing that more death is coming will be no comfort to her, she decides and says nothing as Wynne returns with a determined look on her face.

“If you are ready, let us go end this,” the elder woman agrees and walks over to the barrier.

“Wait,” Morrigan snaps. “You want to actually help this preachy schoolmistress? These people allow themselves to be penned in like cattle!”

“No argument, Morrigan,” Hera tells her. “We need their help. You are free to stay here with the children if you like.”

“I certainly will not,” the witch argues. “You, woman, do not speak to me,” she adds, pointing at
“You, harpy, learn some manners,” Hera retorts, following Wynne.

“Here we are,” the mage says softly, looking at the barrier. “I’m somewhat amazed with myself for having kept it in place this long.”

“It must have been exhausting,” Hera answers carefully. She knows exactly how draining a barrier such as this can be. This barrier, in particular, is a testament to Wynne’s prowess. Magic ripples across it in shades of blue, wisps of it reaching for Wynne and sliding over her hands and arms. If Hera had cast such a spell, it would have one of two effects: perfectly clear, but able to throw one across the room when touched, or a solid wall of roiling shadows, lit with purple lightning. Is she a healer? Slowly, she reaches out to touch it, and the magic answers, swirling around her fingers in a cool caress. There’s no hint of necromancy in this spell. “This is quite powerful.”

“It made me very weary at times, but I had to stay strong to keep us safe. Be prepared for anything-I do not know what manner of beasts lay beyond this barrier. Are you ready?”

Hera nods. “Destroy the barrier.”

“All right, be on your guard.” Wynne lifts her hand, and blue magic encompasses it before shooting into the barrier, dissolving it completely.

With a breath of trepidation, Hera and the others step through the doorway.
Broken Circle

Chapter Summary

Hera, Alistair, and Morrigan follow Wynne through the Circle Tower, fighting abominations and opening Hera’s eyes to the horror of being a Circle Mage.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Once the barrier is down, the silence ends. Screams and monstrous roars echo through the corridors, and Hera feels a shiver of recognition as they creep through the first floor. This reminds me of Castle Ravenloft, she thinks, edging her way around a corner to scout the next passageway. I hope this goes better than that did. What are the odds we’ll find ourselves face-to-face with a dracolich, anyway? She wonders, her nose suddenly filled with the dusty-hot scent of an ancient, reanimated dragon skeleton.

They make it to the library before encountering the abominations mentioned by Greagoir and Wynne, who describes them as foul, twisted creatures that were once men. Hera is just about to look back at her and ask for more information when four appear. Wynne and Morrigan stay back, the first performing healing spells and the second assisting with assault as Hera and Alistair are surrounded. Hera lashes out blindly, dodging claws and gaping maws of sharp teeth. She and Alistair take down three on their own before Morrigan’s magic takes the fourth.

Hera gazes around her, surrounded by the bodies of the monsters and the stench of death. Suddenly there is a deafening explosion, and Alistair throws her to the floor, tucking her beneath him as the world bursts into flame. Three more explosions happen, the floor shuddering beneath them, making bookshelves lurch forward, slinging their contents across the floor.

Heat and flame wash over them, threatening to set them alight, but Morrigan’s quick thinking keeps them from being harmed as she shields them within a tight sphere of thick ice. When the fire dissipates, Alistair lifts his head, allowing her to look up at him.

“Are you hurt?” he gasps, eyes wide with fright.

Their armor keeps their bodies from fitting together, but the small distance between them doesn’t stop desire pooling in her belly or the realization on his face that turns him bright red. Hera shakes her head, stunned beyond words as lust and magic race through her, pounding in her head like a pulse, and she has to fight to keep her magic from bursting out in a fit of wild magic. We should have died just now, and yet here I am, full of desire with magic surging all the way to my
finger tips. Gods help me, he shouldn’t affect me this way, no one has ever affected me this way. Wild magic is dangerous, she thinks. In the depths of Castle Ravenloft, her own power had spiraled out of control, forcing itself out of her hands in splinters of magic that had nearly killed both her and the wizard beside her. She learned later that Ravenloft increased her magical abilities; similar to throwing liquor into a fire. It’s too easy to lose control. It had taken some time before she could remaster her gifts.

They hear Wynne’s muffled voice, filled with concern, and he puts a hand over her ear before shouting his response. “We’re fine,” he calls through the ice. “This could be a moment,” he says apologetically.

“I don’t think I mind,” she jokes, remembering Tybalt’s warning about not telling anyone she’s a sorceress. Seeing the Circle, she understands why he sought to protect her. “I mean, I’ll take this over being burned to a crisp.”

He chuckles, raising himself on his arms and trying to break through the ice. The shield is so small he can only lift himself an inch or two above her. “It’s no good,” he sighs, holding himself over her. “Morrigan’s going to have to melt it.”

“Don’t waste your strength,” Hera advises. “You aren’t that heavy, and there isn’t much room.” He hesitates before nodding and lowers himself carefully back on top of her. “Thank you,” she says in his ear. “For saving me.”

“What kind of hero would I be if I let the damsel die so early in the story?” he chuckles. The ice above them starts to dissolve, and he climbs to his feet and helps her up. “All right?” he asks again.

Hera pats herself over before nodding. “Yes. Thank you, Morrigan,” she adds, turning to her.

Morrigan gives her a surprised look. “You’re...you’re welcome.”

“Let’s move on,” Alistair says quickly, picking up his shield.

Hera nods, retrieving her own weapons, and goes to search the body of a templar soldier in the corner. “What on earth are you doing, child?” Wynne exclaims.

“Health poultice,” she explains, showing her. “We don’t know what we’re going to find, others
could be hurt, we need to search all of them for anything useful.”

“How...resourceful,” Wynne says, obviously disgusted.

“But necessary,” Hera says, moving on to the next.

“I understand the need, but it is still...unsavory.”

They get back to work, soon coming upon another of the fire creatures- rage abominations, Wynne calls them- and more of the swiftly-rotting undead. This time Hera is ready for the explosion that follows the death of such a thing and dives well away before it has time to set her aflame. Their careful inspection of the floor leads them to more monsters, and very little in the way of survivors. Within an hour, they’re climbing the stairs to the second level.

“The higher we go, the more survivors we may find hidden away,” Wynne hopes. “The tower is full of small spaces one may hide in, perhaps some of the others were able to take cover. The stockroom is on this floor; we may find something of use there.”

Hera nods and takes direction from Wynne, heading for the stockroom. Their progress is halted by the sight of a mage standing in the entryway, looking incredibly calm for the situation. His robes are plain but wrinkled, and his head is has been fastidiously shaved, revealing a sunburst mark on his forehead.

What is most unsettling about him, however, is that he wears no expression at all.

Morrigan hisses the moment she sees him, grabbing Hera’s arm and pulling her to a stop. The witch snarls, fire in her eyes as she glares at the man. “Morrigan, what’s wrong?” she asks, putting her hands on her arms.

“He’s Tranquil,” she whispers furiously.

“What does that mean?” Hera asks, looking at him over her shoulder. “He is rather calm, I suppose.”
“No, you fool! That mark on his brow is a brand of Tranquility,” Morrigan explains. “His connection to the Fade has been cut off. He can do no magic and feels nothing; all of his emotions have been burned away.”

Hera glances at Alistair for an explanation, who sighs and rubs the back of his head. “Sometimes mages can’t control their power or are afraid of becoming an abomination, making them a danger to themselves and others. The Chantry found a way to cut them off from the Fade so that demons can’t get to them.”

“So they can be slaves to the Chantry, you mean,” Morrigan snaps.

“Owain chose to become Tranquil,” Wynne says in a firm voice. “He feared his Harrowing and asked for it.”

“I...don’t understand,” Hera says, shaking her head. “What’s a Harrowing?”

“A test mage apprentices perform to prove they can resist the temptation of a demon,” Alistair says gravely. “It is...not something you go through twice.”

Hera’s eyes widen with understanding and horror. “I believe I see. Still, he is alive and may know more. We really should see if he’s hurt.”

*This Chantry sounds more and more like a deadly cult by the second, she thinks as they get closer. I hope Tybalt’s afterlife is filled with fantasies of me so that my illusion can thank him for his consideration for all eternity.*

“Please refrain from going into the stockroom,” the man- Owain, Wynne had called him- says in a level voice as they approach. “It is a mess, and I’ve not been able to get it into a state fit to be seen.”

“Owain, you’re alive.” The relief in Wynne’s voice is palpable.

“Yes, it is I. I was trying to tidy up, but there was little I could do.”
“What are you doing here?” Hera demands.

“The stockroom is my responsibility,” he explains. “I must keep it clean. I tried to leave when things got quiet, that was when I encountered the barrier. When I could think of no other way out, I returned to work.”

“Owain, you should have said something,” Wynne scolds gently. “I would have opened the door for you.”

“The stockroom is familiar; I prefer to be here.”

“Have you come across any abominations?” Hera asks.

“No,” he says, turning his odd, peaceful expression on her. “I suppose I should count myself lucky. I would prefer not to die, I would prefer it if the tower was to return to the way it was. Perhaps Niall will succeed and save us all.”

“Who is Niall?”

“Niall the mage,” Owain says helpfully. “He came here with several others and took the Litany of Adralla.”

“But that protects from mind domination,” Wynne says. “Is blood magic at work here?”

“I do not know.”

“Niall was in the meeting,” Wynne explains to them. “He would know. Blood magic...I was afraid of this.”

“And this makes things worse than abominations and demons?” Hera asks.

“Blood magic could control us, too,” Wynne tells her. “Who knows what could happen then? We should find Niall. The Litany should give us a fighting chance against any blood mages we
encounter.”

“I wish you luck,” Owain says. “Perhaps this will be over soon and things will return to the way they were. Goodbye.”

Without another word, he turns around and goes deeper into the stockroom, closing a door behind him. Hera raises her eyebrows at the strange man and looks to Wynne. “All right then,” she says with false cheer. “Shall we?”

They continue on in a seemingly unending pattern of searching for survivors, fighting abominations, and looting those already dead. And always, moving higher through the tower. If this is how magic is here, it is a good thing Tybalt bade me keep mine a secret, Hera thinks. This tower is just as Morrigan said- a prison for those born differently. I can’t imagine anyone ever being happy here...Which makes me wonder how Wynne has endured so long. She was at Ostagar, I remember seeing her now. Perhaps she was able to travel and adventure as I have. But to stay...and never leave? How cruel.

Higher they climb, finding only a handful of survivors, and sending them running for the safety of the first floor. When they come across several maleficarum- blood mages, she guesses by the coppery scent and bloodstains on their robes- Alistair is adamant about not allowing them to live. Even Wynne doesn’t speak for them, but Hera can’t bring herself to make that decision final; she isn’t certain that she wouldn’t have rebelled as well. So she tells them to run, and if they can get past the templars, they deserve to live but knows their promises to live without blood magic are empty. She watches the pair run for the doors, knowing that the templars will catch them and that she’s only granting them a few more precious moments. But they deserve the chance, and it’s not my place to pass judgment on them. Heart heavy, she ignores the strange look Alistair gives her and orders them to move on.

The rest of the tower is more of the same: monsters, possessed corpses, and rare mages hiding and fearing for their lives. The worst are the possessed templars; the desire demons seem to know exactly what a young man raised in the chantry dreams of. Some are of a simple married life, others of riches and fame, and some are just filled with desire for something they can’t even name. It bears a striking resemblance to her own profession and her ability to see what her patrons want most. These demons are, in fact, doing exactly what they’ve been asked to do; but at the cost of another’s life, it goes far deeper than a simple exchange of desire for payment.

But they are well armed, and battling them isn’t a simple task. Part of Hera wonders what Alistair is feeling, putting men he might have known, now possessed, to death. But there’s no time to talk about it- the abominations get stronger the higher they go through the tower, and Hera feels as if they’re crawling as they reach the fourth floor.
She opens the last door on that floor and walks in with weapons ready, expecting to be attacked instantly. What she doesn’t expect is to see a seven-foot-tall abomination standing over the body of a young man, seemingly unconcerned about her presence.

Hera, who is no stranger to monstrous-looking companions, feels a deep revulsion as soon as it turns its eye on her. It looks as if it was once a man, but has been twisted and corrupted, leaving a large hump overtaking its head and shoulder and so much scarring it covers most of its face. All visible flesh is the color of a poorly healed scar—deep purple, mottled with red and black. In all the planes she’s walked, she has never seen anything like it. Strange magic radiates off the abomination, making her head feel full of cotton and her arms heavy as lead.

Unlike the other abominations they’ve encountered, this one doesn’t attack or even turn at first. Instead, he calmly stares at the body on the floor as if admiring a piece of art before turning and throwing its arms up in feigned surprise.

“Oh look, visitors,” it says, the deep voice strangely clear considering she can’t see a mouth on the thing. “I’d entertain you, but too much effort involved.”

“Niall!” Wynne gasps behind her. “What have you done to him?”

“He’s just resting,” the abomination tells her. Hera frowns at the hypnotic voice, the subtle move of its head. “Poor lad, he was so very, very weary. You want to join us, don’t you? Wouldn’t you like to just lay down and forget about all this? Leave it all behind,” it urges.

Hera blinks, trying to dispel the creature’s influence. Her arms and legs feel as if there are weights drawing her down, and bone-deep fatigue threatens to overwhelm her.

Behind her, she hears a clatter as Alistair falls to his knees behind her. “I can’t...keep my eyes open...” he murmurs. “Someone pinch...me.”

“I cannot rest here,” Morrigan says wearily. “This floor...it is...filthy.”

“Resist!” Wynne cries. “You must resist! Else we are all...lost...”

Hera nods as the others succumb, shaking her head for clarity when the abomination speaks again. “Why do you fight?” he asks reasonably. “You deserve more. You deserve a rest. The world will
go on without you…”

_He’s right...Ravenloft will be fine without you for- No! I have to fight it._ Hera stays on her feet, her sluggish mind trying to protect herself from the abomination. But even as she murmurs a spell, her eyes roll into her head, and she slumps to the floor.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter has one of my favorite moments between Alistair and Hera!
Hera wakes to find herself alone in the Fade- a place she has no connection to. Lost in the Thedosian dream-world, she must find a way to save her companions from themselves.

Hera wakes, confused. She lies on a patch of soft grass, and the sun beats down on her warmly. She knows by the quality of light that this is not Ravenloft- it is too warm, too yellow a sun for her beloved realm with its weak light even in the height of summer. She sits up, rubbing her head, and looks around. Where am I?

She’s in some kind of outdoor temple, with stone walls rising up on either side like an elaborate cathedral, next to a stone path leading up to a small flight of stairs and a platform of some kind. She stands, stretching, feeling as if she’s just woken from a long nap in the sun. Looking down the path that stretches ahead, she sees a figure waiting for her, and her heart leaps.

“Zeus,” she breathes and breaks into a run to reach him.

But when she reaches the stairs, she slides to a stop. It’s not Zeus come to save her, as she’d hoped, but Duncan. He waits, a look of excitement on his face, and he opens his arms and smiles down at her. Hera approaches slowly, elated that he’s alive after all, but confused as to how she got...wherever she is.

“Ahh, there you are, your Majesty,” he says happily, wrapping his arms around her tightly. “I’m not disturbing you, am I?”

“Wait...” she says as a blurry memory comes to the surface. An army destroyed by darkspawn. All lost. “You should be dead.”

“Dead?” he chuckles. “Me? I have been close many times, but I never quite made it all the way. I just wanted to make sure you were happy here in Weisshaupt. These grand halls were built by the first Grey Wardens; isn’t it breathtaking?”

Hera looks around, her confusion growing. Where am I? Weisshaupt is the Grey Warden home
Alistair told me about— but it’s thousands of miles away. How did I get here? And where are Alistair and the others? “I...I don’t know,” she says vaguely. “Something doesn’t seem...right.”

“Everything is as it should be,” Duncan assures her. “We have eradicated the darkspawn and the world is at peace.”

“We eradicated the darkspawn?” she asks, buying time as she struggles to piece her memories back together. A tower in the lake. Alistair. Morrigan. Wynne. “How?”

“It was a triumph for all of us, bringing down the archdemon and settling the underground ablaze,” He waves a hand slowly through the sky as if painting the picture of their victory for her.

Ostagar. That’s where Duncan died. The darkspawn overran us all.

“That’s not possible,” she argues, shaking her head. “You’re keeping something from me. Why?”

His face twists into sudden, irrational anger. “Foolish child! I have given you so much and you cast it back into my face! Can you not be content with the peace I offer?”

“I’m not a child, and you haven’t given me anything! The darkspawn are not gone,” she insists as the last of her memories fall into place. “To ignore them is irresponsible!”

Duncan seems to grow larger before her eyes, his fury a dark shadow on his face. “It seems only war and death will satisfy you! So be it! Have your war and your darkspawn- may they be your doom!”

Hera stumbles back in shock when he draws his sword and turns on her. “Duncan! What’s-” She’s thrown to the ground by a pushing force behind her, and looks back to see a mage and an archer aiming for her as well. Well, it seems this is an illusion, she thinks and smiles grimly. Good, I could blow off a little steam.

She fought Duncan at Ostagar when he tested her to become a Grey Warden, and though this illusion uses the same techniques and style as the man, it is slower, less powerful, and generally less effective against her greater dhampir strength and speed. Hera swirls, striking him with her sword and dagger, one move flowing smoothly into the next as she whittles away at him. Duncan falls, his body fading away as she moves to the mage, screaming a spell into the whirlwind of
snow and ice he flings at her.

The shadows cast by the temple walls - even by the mage and archer themselves - come alive and wrap themselves around her attackers. She dispels the blizzard with a casual wave of her hand, approaching the mage with a sharp smile.

“Pity you’re an illusion,” she says, drawing a fingernail down his cheek. “I could use a drink.”

She moves her hand and clenches her fists, and the shadows overtake their prisoners, snuffing the light out of them. Like Duncan, their bodies fade into little more than a breeze, and she releases her hold on the shadows. Alone, she looks around and hears a strange, muted sound behind her.

“Is this a door?” she asks, approaching a bizarre pedestal. It looks very much like some of the growth seen around the abominations in the tower, but it seems to almost hum with power. As soon as she gets close, magic vibrates through the air, so powerful it crawls along her skin like a thousand insects. “It has to be a door. But to where, I wonder?” she murmurs, reaching out to touch it.

Instantly she is teleported to another place, this one made of hard packed dirt and stone formations, rolling with worn hills and valleys and making her think of the floor of an ocean. Something similar to tree roots breaks up the monotony, forming arches or offering small pockets of shelter. But like everything else here, the roots aren’t like true trees; it’s as if someone once saw a tree decades ago, but remembers very little of it, making up for it with branching, vein-covered roots as thick as her torso.

A young man - the same young man the abomination had been standing over earlier - stands there, looking confused and very much alive. His stringy brown hair hangs in limp waves against sickly yellow cheeks, but his dark brown eyes are alert with suspicion and fear.

“Who are you?” he asks. “Where did you come from? Are you a demon? Wait...” He squints as she comes closer, taking a step back. “Do I know you?”

“No,” she answers, shaking her head. “Nor I, you. My name is Hera.”

“Good job getting out of that trap,” he says.
“Trap?”

“The demon traps everything that comes here in a dream it thinks they can’t- or won’t- try to leave. I thought I’d escaped, too, but I’ve been wandering these empty gray spaces for a lifetime.”

“A lifetime?” This is a dream, that’s why it placed me in Weisshaupt. It must have thought that’s where I wanted to be. “Is this the Fade?” she asks, her shock making her voice pitch higher than normal. "Am I asleep in the tower?"

The corners of his mouth turn up for an instant, and he answers as if talking to a child. “Why, yes. This is where we go when we dream.”

She looks around the barren landscape, the rolling hills of...nothing. In the distance, she can see the tall spires of what looks to be a city floating, but the mist in the air is too thick to see it clearly. “This is...unexpected,” she says wryly, her lips twisting into a smirk. “I don’t dream, you see.”

“If the demon trapped you here, I don’t see how it matters if you do or not. But beware,” he says, the brief flash of amusement replaced by a flat, serious expression that reminds her uncomfortably of the Tranquil in the stockroom. “This place...it does strange things to the mind. I am Niall, and I was trying to save the Circle when I encountered the Sloth demon. I expect our experiences were similar.”

“Niall...you have the Litany of Adralla, don’t you?”

“It is on my body, yes. The Litany was our weapon against the blood mages’ domination,” he explains. “But it’s too late, everyone’s dead.”

Hera shakes her head in confusion. “But why are there so many blood mages?” she asks. “I’ve been told it’s illegal and dangerous. Is it uncontrollable?”

“I don’t know,” he admits, shrugging. “They must have been practicing in secret, then teaching others.” He shakes his head, his nose scrunching up in disgust. “I knew these people, trusted them. The Litany was our only hope of saving the Circle, but now... This place drains you of everything,” he tells her. “Hope. Feeling. Life.”

“It’s not too late, I’m sure of it,” she tells him.
“No, there is no way out of here. You think there might be, but you’d be wrong. You see that pedestal there? I’ve studied the runes on it, runes that signify different islands of the Sloth demon’s domain. The Sloth demon itself is on the center island, but I can’t get there. The five islands around the center somehow form a protective ward. I thought I was getting somewhere when I figured that out, but I went to each island in turn, only to have my hopes dashed. There’s always an obstacle: you’ll see the path, but be unable to get to it, and it taunts you and drives you mad.”

Hera feels a spark of hope. “Could my companions be on one of those islands?”

“I...I don’t know,” he admits. “There are many dreamers. You might find a way to reach them through the islands if you’re lucky.”

“Tell me about this ward,” she says, hope and determination straightening her spine.

“I don’t know much. I think the Sloth demon has placed lesser demons on each of the islands, I’ve seen them. They take different shapes, but they’re there. Defeating them may be the only way to reach the Sloth demon, but you have to get to them first. I...couldn’t, I was too afraid to try.”

She nods, understanding. “You mentioned obstacles?” she prompts, wanting to learn as much as she can before setting out.

“Yes, obstacles. Mad dream things. A river of flame before a portal, or a door that shows you freedom through a keyhole no key will fit. I once saw a passageway smaller than my hand with a mouse going to and fro through it. Silly thing fled before I could question it.”

“A...mouse?”

“Oh, there are many. Many dreamers. Some think they’re mice. Others wolves, or nightingales. Each dreamer may know things another may not. The mouse could have told me what was beyond the passage, or how to get there, even how I might make myself small like him, and crawl through myself. And if one could make oneself small to walk one path, perhaps there are similar ways to walk the others.”

“Can you tell me anything about the Sloth demon?”
“Not much. You couldn’t say we were friends, really. Demons have their own hierarchies. They play their own games and mortals serve as pawns...perhaps even bargaining chips. The demon keeping us here probably rules this entire section of the Fade. It will not let us go easily. If at all,” he says with grim finality.

Hera sets her jaw, her eyes turning cold and flinty. A shadow passes over her face, and loose strands of hair wave gently as her magic makes her fingers tingle. “Then I will just have to defeat this demon,” she says firmly.

Niall stares with wide eyes at her for a moment before the shadow passes. Suddenly she is a tired, determined young woman once more. “Nothing dampens your spirits, does it?” he asks, feeling a little cheerful himself. “I don’t know whether to admire or pity you.”


“Don’t mind me, then.”

Hera looks around, wondering if the landscape here will change and shift under her feet- and if so, how she will navigate it- until she sees finding a path behind him leading to a portal shrouded in purple mist. There’s magic here similar to the mirror that first brought her to Ferelden, but it is a poor echo and not the clamoring call that drew her in so easily. I suppose this is the only way to go forward. Wouldn’t be the first strange portal I’ve gone into, she thinks, examining it carefully. Though in this world it might be my last. Still, I have to try.

She plunges in, and instantly she’s standing...somewhere else. No strange transition like most of the doors in Sigil, no wind or darkness; just a different place, like stepping from a room outside. Hera turns and sees one of the fiery rage abominations, it’s fury rolling over her in waves of heat, attacking something small on the ground before it. She can’t see what it is, but she can hear its cry for help, and attacks the demon from behind, freezing it in place before shattering it with her sword. As the shards of ice scatter, she looks down at her hand in wonder.

It seems the Fade has an effect on me, she thinks, opening and closing her hand. Her magic has always drawn on her own physical energy; when she’s exhausted, only the simplest of cantrips can be cast. But here, the cost of magic is less, drawing only the smallest of energy from her.

“Thank you,” comes a small, squeaking voice.
Confused, she looks around, expecting to see another dreamer standing nearby. A mouse raises up at her feet and speaks again. Niall said some of them think they’re mice. “Hello, sir,” she says with a smile. “Are you the mouse Niall mentioned?”

“Thank you,” the mouse says again, nodding. “But...too late for me...kill Yaveena, the demoness that rules here. She protects her master Sloth. There’s a door, a door only demons can see, the key must be in another realm. Take my power,” it says urgently.

“Your power? I don’t need, I-”

“Save any others trapped in nightmares. Kill the demons that guard Sloth. Take my…”

Hera and the mouse are enveloped in a green glow, and she hears a final squeak as it falls over, dead. Instantly the glow invades her, filling her senses and lungs until she feels a magical change happening to her. It feels as though a switch appears in her mind, and if she were to trigger it, she would become something else. Not one to leave a thing undone, she does so, and in a brilliant flash, she’s on the ground as a mouse.

By the Powers... she thinks. This is amazing! I’ve never been able to transfigure before- is this how Morrigan feels? No wonder she flies ahead so often. But it feels...temporary, in a way. I don’t know the words for it. She looks around, seeing a mound of dirt with a small passage dug into it. This must be the passageway Niall mentioned. Without hesitation, she goes through.

Like the portal, this is simply a change in scenery, not a true passage. Yet another rage demon attacks her, and she mentally switches back to herself. Since no one is there, Hera unleashes the force of her magic, freezing it in place almost lazily before it explodes in shards of ice.

“Oh, I like this,” she giggles, casting her favorite spell on herself. “Free pass on magic.” Instantly her hair is clean and arranged in neat braids around her head, and her clothing is mended and looks almost new. All the dirt disappears from her skin, and she feels fresh and renewed. Automatically, the small pleasure of it cheers her up, and she feels a boost to her confidence. “Yes, much better.”

Another portal, another path filled with demons. Hera uses her magic and weapons generously, feeling free of the shackles of secrecy here. The end of the path leads her back to Niall, who looks excited as soon as he sees her.

“Something happened, didn’t it?” he asks. “You look a little different, what happened?”
Hera shrugs nonchalantly. “I became a mouse.”

“Did you? Did it help?” he asks excitedly. “I know I saw the tiny holes— were you small enough to get through?”

Hera purses her lips at him and smirks. “I thought you’d given up,” she teases. “Why so excited?”

“I—uh—I don’t know,” he admits sheepishly. “You’re so much braver than I am. I was so sure it was impossible to get anywhere. Do you think you could learn other shapes? Maybe they could help you get to places you couldn’t otherwise.”

“I don’t see why not,” she says, gesturing to the pedestal behind him. “This is the same kind of pedestal that brought me here. Do I use it the same way?”

“Touch it,” he explains, “and you will see a map in your mind’s eye. Simply choose the path you wish to take.”

She taps her lip, eyes on the pedestal. In Sigil, some of the doors to other worlds were marked as one-way or branching; you could take the door to Midgard and detour to the three realms below or above it for instance. It is not so different from Sigil, then. “Thank you, Niall. I will be back,” she promises.

“Good luck, Hera.”

She approaches the pedestal and touches it, seeing the map he’d described. Four stars light up a dark sky, the path to each of them brightly lit, while another four are dark. It takes a moment, but the strange language naming the islands translate into common, and she wonders if magic here has a different language altogether. Of the selections, only four seem available to her, indicating that she must somehow unlock the paths to the others.

According to this, I left Weissaupt Fortress— that’s the Grey Warden headquarters— and came to the Raw Fade. It makes sense that I will have to defeat the ward demons in these four to be able to access the inner sanctum of the Sloth demon, and if Niall is right, then the others will be on those smaller Nightmare islands. This could be difficult, and if this is my spirit outside my body, then I’m really lying in the tower. Best to make quick work of it all, then, and use magic.
Hera travels from one island to the other, gathering knowledge on the Fade, darkspawn tactics, and how her magic works here. On each island, there is a theme—darkspawn, fire, templars tortured into madness, and blood mages. Everywhere there are demons and mages long past sanity. And on each island is another mage, lending their dying breath to give her the form he’d been using to save himself: spirit demon, stone golem, and a burning corpse to go with the mouse. She makes clever use of these, sometimes backtracking into other islands to reach the warding demon, and always thinking of Alistair, Wynne, and Morrigan lying on the blood-covered floor in the Tower.

The thought of them dying there pushes her past her normal limitations, and she has to pace her use of magic, relying on her sword and dagger and resting when she can. As one who has always adventured with a partner, fighting alone is strange, and she feels as if part of her is missing. Zeus has always been her other half, inspiring and supporting her with his bow or rapier. He was also the better healer, and she has to rely heavily on the health poultices and tinctures she carries when her own spell isn't enough. Even Alistair fights well with her, flanking her left side so that they can both have full range of movement and he can defend her off-hand as well. Halfway through the map, she realizes that she misses him far more than she’s comfortable with.

*What foolishness,* she thinks. *When we get back to Redcliffe I’m taking the first knight who’s awake to bed to get this nonsense out of my system.*

It seems to take hours, or maybe even days, to make her way through the labyrinth of islands, but Hera finds herself without hunger or too much fatigue, though she does return to the Raw Fade, where Niall waits, to rest when she needs more than a moment.

Niall explains more of the situation in the Tower during these rests, about how the maleficarum have risen up against the templars in a rash bid for freedom. Hera doesn’t say anything, but she isn’t sure that she wouldn’t have been one of them, had she been forced to live in a tower and perform magic at the whim of the chantry. She and Zeus were never exactly religious—aside from having been raised with a healthy respect for the Dark Powers that governed both Ravenloft and Fandemier—so she can’t quite grasp the concept that the chantry feels as if magic is to serve them in the place of their absent Maker.

When she finally defeats all four of the ward demons, she moves on to the first Nightmare island. There’s nothing Niall can tell her about them, only that each Nightmare will be personalized for the dreamer, and it will be difficult to get them out as the dreamer will believe this is the perfect place for them. Approaching the pedestal, she takes a deep breath and reaches out for the first island.

It looks very much like the Raw Fade, which must make it easier to adapt to each dreamer. Hera trots down the path until she comes across Alistair, standing with a red-haired woman and a couple of children. *He looks so happy,* she thinks when she sees him light up once he catches sight of her.
And I get to destroy that. Wonderful.

“Hey!” he calls with a goofy grin. “It’s great to see you again! I was just thinking about you, isn’t that a marvelous coincidence?” He continues before she gets a chance to speak, turning to the woman. “This is my sister, Goldanna,” he says cheerfully, “and these are her children. There are more around here somewhere. We’re one big happy family, at long last.”

Sister? He hasn’t mentioned a sister before… “Uh, Alistair...they’re demons, you know,” she says flatly, raising her eyebrows and glancing around at them.

“Oh that’s what everyone says about their relatives,” he scoffs. “But I’ve never been happier!”

“I’m overjoyed to have my little brother back,” Goldanna says. “I’ll never let him out of my sight again.”

“Uh huh,” Hera says. “This is starting to get creepy.”

“There’s nothing wrong with living with my sister,” Alistair defends. “I’ve never had a real family before.”

“I didn’t say there was,” she argues, hands on her hips and huffing out a frustrated breath. “I have lived with my brother for a hundred years and even we aren’t this creepy!”

“Well, Alistair, is your friend staying for supper?” Goldanna croons, watching Hera like a bird of prey.

Alistair gasps at the joy of the idea. “Say you’ll stay!” he pleads. “Goldanna’s a great cook! Maybe she’ll make her mince pie! You can, can’t you?”

“Of course dear brother, anything for you.”

I’m not a fan of this woman...Is she real? Does she exist outside the Fade, or is this some fantasy Alistair’s been dreaming of since he was a child? “She’s just a demon in disguise,” Hera insists. “Don’t believe any of this, Alistair.”
Alistair looks appropriately scandalized that she would say such a thing in front of his sister, and Hera sighs with resignation. “How can you say that about Goldanna?” he scolds. “She’s the soul of goodness. You’re acting really strangely,” he accuses harshly.

“Think about this and how you got here,” Hera persuades, coming closer and putting a hand on his chest. “Think carefully, Alistair.”

“I don’t feel like thinking right now,” he whines, stepping away from her. “I was never very good at that anyway. I think your odd behavior is brought on by hunger! Now come and have some pie,” he pleads, his cheerfulness returning. “I promise you’ll feel better.”

“I’d rather not,” she says rudely, pinching the bridge of her nose. I have come all this way, fighting for every step, only to get caught up in some lover’s spat and he isn’t even my lover!

“Sometimes I just don’t understand you. I’ll be here, then, if you ever want to visit.”

Hera watches him turn away and start playing with the two boys behind them. Scowling, Hera turns to Goldanna.

“Are you sure you won’t stay for supper?” the demon asks politely.

“Why don’t we just fight and get this over with?” Hera asks just as politely. “Frankly, I’ve had a long day, and I’ve always hated demons that masquerade as children.”

Goldanna’s expression hardens, and the voice that comes out of her mouth is not the sweet simpering sister from a moment before. “I’m not so easily disposed of, Grey Warden,” it rasps. Without warning- but also without surprise- Goldanna attacks and the two children with Alistair turn into walking corpses. Hera doesn’t know what Alistair will remember from this, so she hesitates to use her magic, instead drawing her blades and beating them back while he watches with confusion.

“Wait- no- that’s my nephew, Hera! You shouldn’t play so hard!” he shouts as she beheads one of them. “No, not that way!”
“Alistair, they’re demons!” she shouts back, glancing back at him.

“They’re children!” He puts his hands on his hips and glares at her. “Be nicer to them!”

Seven hells. Hera ignores him and takes out the other, leaving Goldanna last. It seems the demon impersonating his sister has neither weapon nor powers, so Hera runs her through with both blades and makes a messy, quick kill of her while Alistair screams in dismay.

It’s over almost as quickly as it began, and Hera leans on her sword, gasping for breath while Alistair shakes his head to clear it. Goldanna’s dead body morphs into that of a desire demon, and Alistair stumbles back from it in shock.

“G-Goldanna?” he stammers, eyes wide with disbelief. “I...I can’t believe it. How did I not see this earlier?”

“I don’t know,” Hera says, words dripping with sarcasm. “Maybe you should have listened to me? I did tell you,” she reminds him.

“Yes, well, uh, try not to tell anyone how easily fooled I was?” he mumbles, looking down at his feet.

She instantly regrets her sharp tone, seeing him respond the same way he does when Morrigan is too harsh. “Alistair, I’m-”

“Are we going now?” he asks, looking at his hands. They’ve gone transparent, and the rest of him quickly follows while odd heatless flames encircle him. “Wait! Where are you going? What’s happening to me? Hey!”

Just like that, Hera is left standing alone. “Well damn,” she mutters, putting her sword and dagger away as she walks back to the pedestal. “That went about well as it could have. On to the next one, I suppose.”

The second place on the map is little different from where Alistair had been held, but this time she finds Wynne, grieving over dead children from the Circle surrounding her. Wynne! She seems too sensible to fall for an illusion. “Wynne?”
“Maker forgive me,” Wynne moans, covering her face and kneeling. “I’ve failed them all. They died and I did not stop it.”

_What in seven hells? She’s been like this the whole time? Niall said it would be a good dream!_

“They’re not dead yet,” she explains gently, putting a hand on her shoulder. “The Circle can still be saved.”

“What about all this?” Wynne demands brokenly, looking up at her. “How can you say that when you are faced with this? Death, can you not see it? It’s all around us!”

“You’re in the Fade; this is a dream.”

“So why was I spared, if not to help them?” Her tears are genuine when she picks up a small, cold hand and presses it to her cheek. “What use is my life? Now that I have failed in the task that was given me...Leave me to my grief,” she commands weakly, waving Hera away and folding the boy’s hands over his chest. “I shall bury their bones...scatter their ashes to the four winds, and mourn their passing until I too am dead.”

Hera has to bite back a growl of frustration. “I’m finding it hard to have sympathy for demons,” she snaps.

“You mean you don’t even care?” Hera demands incredulously. “Do you even know why they’re dead?”

“Your blatant disregard for the souls of the dead strikes me as being utterly inappropriate,” Wynne snaps, raising her head and glaring at her.

“To fall apart so easily just doesn’t seem like you,” Hera argues and crosses her arms over her chest.

“You do not know me,” Wynne says scathingly. “You have no right to make such judgments!”

Hera approaches her slowly and puts a hand on her arm. “I am the only thing that’s real,” she explains, looking deep into her eyes. “Ignore everything else.”

“I do not know what this will accomplish. But I will do this if it will satisfy you,” she sighs, rising to her feet and dusting her robes off. “’Tis...difficult to focus...it feels as if something is stopping...
me from concentrating. I’ve never had so much trouble. Perhaps some time away from this place will help me think clearly.”

“That sounds like a good idea.”

The child whose hand she’d held raises his head slowly, grasping at Wynne’s robes. “Don’t leave us, Wynne!” he begs. “We don’t want to be alone!”

Wynne turns in terror, her face ashen at the sight of the dead boy rising. “Holy Maker!” she cries. “Stay away foul creature!”

“I told you this wasn’t real,” Hera reminds her, drawing her sword.

The boy ignores them and makes a pleading gesture. “Stay Wynne, sleep soundly in the comforting embrace of the earth. Do not fight it, you belong here with us.”

“No,” Wynne gasps, stumbling back. “No, not yet. My task is not yet done, it is not time yet!”

“Come,” the child urges. “Come away to your rest.”

“No!” Wynne shouts. Instantly the children surrounding her leap to their feet, but at least this time Hera has help dispatching them. Unlike Alistair, who had been lost to the grip of the dream, Wynne has no mercy for the undead children surrounding her. They seem weaker here, in an illusion, than they have in the rest of the fade, something Hera is glad for. When the last one falls into dust, Wynne turns to her with a look of gratitude.

“Is it over? Thank the Maker for you. Wait...what’s happening? Where are you going?”

Hera watches Wynne get swallowed by the same mystical fire that took Alistair. Alone again, Hera takes a moment to look out over the vast emptiness of the Fade and the bizarre, dark city in the distance. It occurs to her that Weisshaupt wasn’t the best illusion for the Sloth demon to choose for her- he could have chosen the Raven Court or her two years with Anatoly and her mother, and she might have been tricked into believing it.
“Perhaps that means it can’t read my mind,” she wonders aloud. “And if it can’t read my mind...then it doesn’t know what I’ll do next. That’s...interesting,” she says with a confident smile before turning back to the pedestal. “Morrigan, I hope you’re ready.”

What Hera finds in the last dream is not what she’s expected. She half expected to find Morrigan sitting at some lover’s knee with a baby in her arms, or lovingly spending time with Flemeth. Instead, she finds Morrigan and Flemeth shouting at one another.

“This is a little too familiar,” she chuckles, coming closer. I should have known better than to think Morrigan would want something sweet.

“Away! Away with you!” Morrigan demands sharply. “I shall have no more of your pestering!”

“I am your mother,” Flemeth reminds her archly. “Do you not love me?”

“You are as much my mother as my little finger, here, is the Queen of Ferelden,” Morrigan snaps. “I know you, Fade spirit, you cannot fool me!”

She’s aware of what’s going on, Hera realizes. That will certainly make things easier.

“Are you more clever than your own dear mother? Surely such pride must be punished!” Hera gasps when Flemeth raises a hand and slaps her daughter across the face. “There! That is for not showing respect!”

“That is far more like it,” Morrigan spits, “but it is too little, too late spirit.” She finally notices Hera standing there, staring at them in amusement. “Tis you at last! Come and rid me of this vexatious spirit! I grow weary of being prodded!”

Hera raises a brow. “Why is she prodding you?”

“You ask me? It cannot even read my mind well enough to form a decent copy! Yet it hounds me still!”

“She doesn’t even acknowledge her own mother! My heart,” Flemeth moans, “it breaks!”
“Uh huh,” Hera says flatly.

“Oh slay it, and quickly! Even the true Flemeth was never as annoying as this,” Morrigan mutters.

“All right,” Hera chuckles, drawing her sword. “I’m coming.”

Flemeth doesn’t even put up much of a fight, which is strange enough in itself. Hera quickly beheads the spirit to the background of Morrigan’s cheer. “Happy now?” she asks, turning to Morrigan.

“Tis about time!” she cheers.

“Oh, I can’t stop this part,” Hera adds as Morrigan’s image begins to fade before her.

“That was most- wait what is this? No, not this again! I refuse!” she shouts as she disappears.

Hera laughs as Morrigan fades away to some new and unknown fate. Morrigan’s refusal reminds Hera that she while may not know where they’ve gone, they can at least defend themselves now. Spirits high, she makes her way to the inner sanctum of the demon.
Sloth's Promise of More

Chapter Summary

Hera faces off with the Sloth Demon, who offers just enough to make her question what truly desires.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The transition to the demon’s inner sanctum is more difficult than the other places in the Fade. Instead of a simple blink from one pedestal to the next, Hera feels as if she’s pulled through water, holding her breath until her feet land on solid ground again. Whether natural or manipulated by the demon, this part of the Fade isn’t as barren as the islands where she’d found her friends. Towers of stone twist into the air, their bases wreathed in a blue-white mist emanating from clusters of crystal as blue as the lyrium she had seen Morrigan drink from time to time to renew her magical energy. The field is made up of gentle hills and valleys and dotted with some kind of tall stalk with a barbed, dark red head. Hera touches one carefully, but as soon as she brushes her fingertip against it, it crumbles to dust. In the distance, as always, the dark city floats beyond reach.

At first, she thinks she’s alone, but after a moment she sees the Sloth demon- appearing in the tall, grotesque Spirit form- standing in the center of the island. They stare at one another for a long moment, neither moving; for a moment, the demon looks curious, as if it doesn’t recognize her. Cautious, Hera walks over, ready to attack if necessary.

“What do we have here?” it asks in its soothing, deep voice, its head moving side to side. “A rebellious minion? An escaped slave?”

Can it see me? Or do I look different here than in life? Hera sneers as it laughs, throwing its head back with the sound.

“My my, but you do have some gall. Playtime is over,” it apologizes, “you all have to go back now.”

A soft breeze blows behind her, and Hera hears a pair of boots hitting the ground. She turns, hesitant and expecting more creatures to slay, but it’s Alistair standing there, his body appearing to grow more solid by the second.
“Oh! Here I am!” Alistair says, his eyes lighting up when he sees her. “And here you are! You just...disappeared. Well, no matter.”

“Alistair! You’re safe!” she cries, throwing her arms around him. “Thank the gods!”

“Maybe I should disappear more often.”

“If only you would,” they hear. Morrigan appears beside them, irritated and scowling. “See, spirit! I am not one to be summoned and disposed of when you like!”

“For once, I agree with her,” Wynne says as she appears, serenely dusting her robes off.

The demon nods, it’s skeletal face seeming to smile at them. “If you go back quietly, I’ll do better this time,” it offers, holding out a thin hand tipped with talons. “I’ll make you much happier.”

Hera hears the rolling voice in her head, filling her mind until she thinks she’ll explode from it. *What is it you want, exile? A home here, with a lover and your friends? I can give you what your soul craves...*

“I want to be free,” Hera whispers, shaking her head to clear it of the hypnotic voice. *Of what? She wonders suddenly. My life? My crown and brother? Or Ferelden and Alistair?*

“I made you happy, and safe,” the demon insists, his voice dripping with false melancholy. “I gave you peace. I did my best for you, and you say you want to leave? Can’t you think of someone other than yourself? I’m hurt...so very, very hurt.”

“Sorry, but I’d rather just be rid of your evil right now,” she quips.

“You wish to battle me? So be it. You will learn to bow to your betters, mortal!” He reaches out, the talons on the tips of his fingers lengthening into deadly needles.

Hera dodges, drawing her sword. “Joke’s on you,” she laughs. “I don’t have any betters.”
“We will see about that,” it laughs, its body stretching and changing before her eyes.

The demon transfigures into an Ogre, just like the one that nearly killed her in the Tower of Ishal at Ostagar. Before it can take a step toward them, it roars, its body paralyzed. “Go! I can’t hold it long!” Wynne shouts, her staff high. Alistair rushes past Hera, sword high and letting out a full-throated battle cry.

Hera follows, reminding herself to rely on the spirit forms she’s been given and not her own magic as the four battle the demon. It is an exhausting battle; every time she thinks they’ve beaten it, it changes into another form—first the ogre, then one of the fiery rage demons, and an abomination before finally, its own form once more. It’s a difficult battle, and Wynne exhausts herself keeping them healed during it so that she has to tap into the lyrium crystals nearby to keep her magic level high enough to keep up. Morrigan does her best to support with spells as well but also has to look to lyrium to keep herself in the fight. As for Hera and Alistair...well, she’s sure they’ll feel the effects of the battle once Wynne’s spells wear off.

“For the Grey Wardens!” Alistair shouts and makes a final swipe with his sword. The demon’s skeletal spirit head falls to the ground seconds before its body crumbles to lie beside it. Wynne and Morrigan both wilt where they stand, their faces pale and drawn. Hera and Alistair lean on their swords, breathing heavily and pressing a hand to whatever’s bleeding.

“Are you all right?” she asks him, noticing he’s holding his ribs.

“Fine,” he lies, sucking air through his teeth. “You?”

“Dandy,” she lies, biting back a groan as she straightens her shoulders. He laughs, a choked sound that quickly turns into a gasp of pain. Hera straightens up and sheaths her weapons before offering him a hand. “Shall we?” she teases.

“Oh I’ve never held a girl’s hand before,” he says in mock innocence, turning his shoulder and blinking at her in mockery of her coy moves. “Does this mean we’re married?”

Hera finds herself smiling in spite of the pain and exhaustion. I do hope I look a little less silly when I use that trick, she thinks. “Tricked you into matrimony so easily,” she plays along. “What will the Wardens do with you?” she asks as they go to help Wynne and Morrigan to their feet.

“Who is that?” Morrigan asks, pointing as Hera puts her arm over her shoulders.
Hera follows her gaze and sees Niall standing there, looking surprised and excited. “That’s Niall,” she says, he was the one lying on the floor in the Tower.”

“Niall! You’re here!” Wynne says happily, leaning heavily on Alistair.

“Wynne, you’re all right! I’m glad for that.” Niall turns to Hera, shaking his head in disbelief. “You were right,” he concedes with a wide smile. “You defeated the demon...I never thought...I never expected you to free yourself- to free us both.” His smile fades, and he looks down at his empty hand. “When you return, take the Litany of Adralla from my- my body. It will protect you from the worst of the blood magic.”

“Aren’t you coming to help?” Hera asks. “We could use your skills.”

“I cannot go with you,” Niall explains. “I have been here far too long. For you it will have been an afternoon’s nap, your body won’t have wasted away in the real world while your spirit lays in the hands of a demon.”

“You think you’re going to die?” she asks. “Niall, your body is injured, yes, but-”

“Every minute I was here the Sloth demon was feeding off of me,” he tells her. “Using my life to fuel the nightmares of this realm. There is so little of me left. I was never meant to save the Circle,” he continues, the words heavy with regret, “or survive its troubles. I am dying, it is as simple as that.”

“There must be something I can do,” she insists.

“Thank you, but it is too late for me. I do not fear what may come- they say we return to the Maker in death. And that isn’t such a terrible thing... My only regret is that I could not save the Circle. But you- you can. Take the Litany off my body when you return,” he demands. “It is important.”

Hera knows a lost soul when she sees one, and nods sadly. Not everyone can be saved, she reminds herself. It is a lesson she learned long before becoming queen, and one that has never eased the loss. “I will do this,” she says softly. “And honor your memory when this is all over.”
“I am not a hero,” Niall says with a sad smile. He glances at Alistair, and Hera can see a sudden yearning in Niall, as if all his life he had dreamed of being a knight in shining armor, but a trick of birth had locked him in a tower. “Perhaps trying to be one was foolish.”

Hera lets Morrigan stand on her own and reaches for his hand. “Ordinary people can do great things when they have to,” she argues gently. “Heroes come in all forms, Niall.”

“Dark times, greater acts of heroism, eh?” he asks wryly, meeting her gaze. “You may be right. Before I was taken to the Circle, my mother said I was meant for greatness, that I would be more than my ancestors could have ever dreamed. I hope I haven’t disappointed her,” he says, distressed.

“You didn’t, Niall.” Impulsively, she moves closer and puts a hand on his cheek before pressing her lips to his. “You are a hero.”

He blushes, letting out a small squeak before clearing his throat. Behind him, Alistair chuckles. “It is time for us both to be on our way,” he says, forcing his voice to be even and carrying even as he fights a grin. “Remember the Litany of Adralla. The Circle is all that matters now. Thank you and goodbye...friend.”

“Niall, is there anything you would like sent to your family?” Wynne asks. “A letter or anything?”

He shakes his head and rubs the back of his neck. “Just...tell my mother I was a hero, just once.”

Before they can answer, Hera feels a pull in her gut and looks down to see herself engulfed in the pale spirit flames for only a moment before the world goes black.

Chapter End Notes

So how did you all like my version of Skip the Fade?
The Litany of Adralla

Chapter Summary

Freed from the Sloth demon's dream, Hera sets her sights on ending the horrors in the Tower, but on her way encounters an angry young man trapped in a cage.

They wake on the floor of the same room, sticky with blood and bodies stiff with sleep. Hera wished she felt refreshed, as if she had truly napped and not fought an endless battle in the Fade. But even though her body is tired, she can feel magic coursing through her, crackling along her skin and giving her strength. She has to fight to keep it unseen by the others, wrestling with herself-something she’s never had to do before. A few feet away lies Niall’s body, gone cold with death. Hera runs her hands lightly over his body, finding the Litany scroll hidden in his sleeve. Quietly, she bows her head over him, praying to whoever may listen for his comfort in death, and that he return to his Maker.

“Poor boy,” she whispers, kissing his forehead.

“We need to move on,” Alistair says softly, brushing his hand over her shoulder.

Hera looks up at him, moved by the sadness in his voice, and rises, offering the Litany to Wynne. “Do you know how to use this?”

The old woman refuses to take it with a shake of her head. “It’d be best if you used it; you aren’t a mage, so he won’t be able to stop you. You’ll need to read it, and shout the words whenever the blood mages look to be casting a spell,” Wynne explains as they move to the stairs. “I will help watch for the moments. The Litany will block any mind-control they attempt to use on anyone who can hear it, so be sure to shout it as loudly as you can.”

Hera nods, unrolling and reading it, asking Wynne for the pronunciation of some words. After a moment, she thrusts it into her belt. “I won’t forget,” she assures them.

They battle their way through the tower; the higher they go, the more abominations they encounter. Hera looks with disgust at what the blood mages have wrought on their home, and wonders how much torture it took before they succumbed to the temptation of more power. She doesn’t disagree with their rebellion, but there were other ways, better ways, to get what you want. Putting innocent people in harm’s way would only make matters worse in the end. As she kills monster after monster, rage builds in the pit of her stomach for the maleficarum who destroyed so
many lives.

“This door will lead us to the top floor of the tower,” Wynne says. “The...the Harrowing Chamber is there.”

“Harrowing Chamber?” Hera asks, pausing.

“It’s where apprentices receive their final test,” Alistair explains, his voice strange and hollow. “They are sent into the Fade to face a demon that wants to possess them. It’s summoned by the Circle for this purpose. If they resist and defeat the demon, they are made Circle mages.”

“If they don’t?” she asks, feeling sick at the thought of such a test.

“The templars kill them,” he says flatly. “I saw it once, it was horrible.”

“That’s repulsive,” she whispers, thinking of all the wizards and sorcerers she’s met- some of whom were actually demons- and never did anything to deserve such treatment.

“It is important to know the apprentice has the strength of will to defend themselves,” Wynne defends, lifting her chin. “If they do not wish to go through the Harrowing, they have the option to become Tranquil.”

“And that strips them of everything they are,” Morrigan adds hatefully. “If one does not want to risk it, they brand them on the forehead and destroy their soul.”

“It is not like that, Morrigan,” Wynne interjects. “If you would just-”

“Absolutely not!” She snaps, raising a hand to cut her off. “You cannot justify it to me, chantry woman!”

Hera shakes her head, not believing what she’s hearing and glad she promised Tybalt to keep her own power a secret. These Fereldens- no, this world, it’s so barbaric. They make magic users torture themselves, or have their spirit crushed. Their chantry is cruel. No wonder the blood mages have done this. “Stop,” she says flatly. “Let’s just get through this. Connor needs us, and there are
mages who might still be saved.”

“You will save them, anyway?” Morrigan asks. “Knowing what they do to people like me?”

*People like us,* Hera corrects her silently. “No one is beyond help, Morrigan.”

Wynne lets out a heavy breath of relief. “Thank you, Hera. I was afraid that once you had seen what’s happened here you would change your mind.”

They pass through the door and see a young knight kneeling inside a shining ward. Hera approaches cautiously, ready to strike out if necessary. The knight wavers on his feet, scowling at them. His armor is covered in dried blood, bits of it flaking off with his movement. *How long has he been here?* Hera wonders, reaching out a hand to touch the barrier around him.

“How long have you been here?” Hera asks him softly as he begins to pray. “Have they kept you here all this time?” All around here lie the dead and broken bodies of what she can only assume were once templars, their bodies ripped open and left to foul the air as they begin to rot.

“Enough visions! If anything in you is human...kill me now and stop this game. Filthy blood mages getting in my head! *I will not break!*” he cries haltingly. “I’d rather die!”
“You’re not going to die,” Hera tells him. “No one else is going to die if I can help it.”

“Silence! I’ll not listen to anything you say! Now be gone!” He closes his eyes tight and then opens them again. “Still here…” He blinks in disbelief, knotting his hands in his blonde hair in frustration. “But that’s always worked before! I close my eyes, but you are still here when I open them!”

She hears a choked sound and looks over her shoulder at Alistair, looking pale and gray. “Alistair, are you all right?” she asks.

He shakes his head, leaning on a broken chair before jerking his hand away when he realizes it’s sticky with blood. “F-Fine,” he croaks.

Liar. He’s picturing himself here, forced into a life he hated only to meet such an end. Turning back to the knight, she puts her hands on her hips. “Just tell me where the surviving mages are,” she demands, finding it rather difficult to have pity for the boy after what she’s learned about the templars and the chantry. Even with his dead comrades surrounding them, she wonders if he ever took joy in mistreating the mages here. *I won’t be his judge, but is this truly undeserved?*

“*What* others? What are you talking about?” he asks.

“Irving and the mages who fought Uldred,” Wynne clarifies. “Where are they?”

“They are in the Harrowing Chamber,” he says sorrowfully. “The sounds coming out from there...Oh Maker,” he moans, covering his face as his breathing begins to quicken.

“We must hurry,” Wynne insists. “They are in grave danger, I am sure of it.”

“You can’t save them!” the templar cries, looking up at them with horror in his eyes. “You don’t know what they’ve become!”

“I have to try,” is all Hera says to him.

“But you haven’t been up there!” His voice cracks, splinters of his terror stabbing into Hera’s heart.
in spite of herself. She struggles to see past the templar armor and the dogma he wears like a shield, to see a tortured young man mindless with fear and bitterness at having seen his order slaughtered. “They’ve been surrounded by- by blood mages,” he growls, his finger stabbing the air as he points toward the stairs, “whose wicked fingers snake into your mind and corrupt your thoughts! The Maker should never have created magic, it only brings death and destruction!”

Wynne shakes her head. “There is great-

“No!” he screams. “You are just like them! Your kind should be exterminated like common rats,” he spits, his eyes hard and glassy. “You’re all nothing but a vermin on the world.”

“His hatred of mages is so intense,” Alistair says, pity coloring his words. “The memory of his friends’ deaths is still fresh in his mind.”

“You have to end it now before it’s too late!” he tells Hera, looking at her with desperation. “You’re not a mage, anyone can see that. Surely you understand why you have to kill them all!”

She shakes her head, her lips a hard line. “I will not kill an innocent.”

“Are you really saving anyone by taking this risk?” he sneers. “To ensure this horror is ended, to guarantee that no abominations or blood mages live, you must kill everyone up there!”

“I would rather spare maleficarum than risk harming an innocent,” Hera decides, her voice taking on a cruel tone mimicked by the twist in her lips. “Your suffering cannot sentence them all.”

“Thank you,” Wynne says, surprised. “I knew you would make a rational decision.”

“Rational?” the templar spits. “How is this rational? Do you understand the danger?”

“I know full well the dangers of magic,” Wynne tells him. “But killing innocents because they might be maleficarum is not justice. I know you are angry-”

“You know nothing!” he snaps. “I am thinking about the future of the Circle! Of Ferelden!”
“I do not fear maleficarum,” Hera says coolly. “They should fear me.”

“You may be confident in your ability to stand up to them, but what about the rest of us? Will you protect us from them?”

“We don’t know that they are all blood mages,” she argues.

“I am just willing to see the painful truth! Which you are content to ignore!” He makes a frustrated sound and grabs a wooden chair— the only thing the lies inside the confines of his cage— and swings it against the ward, putting the last of his strength into splintering it on magic he cannot defend against. “But what can I do?” he asks, his breathing ragged with exertion. “As you can see I am in no position to directly influence your actions, though I would love to deal with the mages myself.”

“We will deal with you once Uldred lies dead,” she responds. “You’ll get your own justice.”

“My cage is Uldred’s doing— or one of his mages. Once they’re dead, I will be free,” he says in a low voice.

“From what, templar? This tower? Your service to your tyrannical church? Freedom has its own cost,” she warns him, her voice heavy with knowledge. She can almost feel the weight of her crown at the thought of what Ravenloft’s freedom had cost her. “And it’s often more than we’re willing to pay. Stay safe; it will be over soon.”

As they walk away, she pauses and looks over her shoulder as he speaks again. “No one ever listens,” he says bitterly. “Not until it’s far too late. Maker turn His gaze on you, I hope your compassion hasn’t doomed us all.”

Hera turns away without responding and walks up the short flight of stairs to the next door. *You and me both, boy.*

*I am so grateful Alistair became a Grey Warden.*
Uldred has control of the Circle Tower and the mages, but Hera has the Litany. Is it enough, or will the blood mage prove too powerful?

Hera gasps as she opens the door. In the center of the giant chamber, three abominations shoot lightning from their hands at a single mage held floating high above the floor, torturing the poor soul as he screams and begs for mercy. To the side are three others, bound and forced to watch. The scent of blood and ozone makes her nose wrinkle, and she hears Alistair call on his maker in a hushed whisper.

“That’s Uldred,” Wynne whispers behind her, “the bald one.”

Her eyes light on a man in fine mage’s robes, approaching the mage in the center. He lifts a hand, and the abominations stop targeting their spell on the man, letting lightning crackle and spark into the air around them. The victim is magically lifted until his feet dangle above the floor, and Uldred lifts his chin for him.

“Do you accept the gift that I offer?” he asks confidently. The mage’s head bobs up and down, his eyes rolling back into his head. With a satisfied smirk, Uldred drops him to the floor as two of the abominations join him. They cast a spell without speaking- something Hera hasn’t seen any mage here do- and the result is a deafening sound of wrong notes played on a hundred different instruments with light flashing and electricity racing down their arms to assault the man on the floor.

His body twists and convulses, and his screams are barely heard over the terrifying sound filling the air. Hera watches in abject horror as the man’s body is corrupted and forced into a shapeless mass of muscle and split flesh. It seems to take forever, but the sound fades away, and a new abomination rises. Behind her is a chorus of gasps and curses from her friends, but Hera stays silent, watching. Her fury has been building throughout the tower- yes, the rebels might have had a good point, but this is too much. They have taken what might have been a memorable rebellion and twisted it into a villain’s daydream, torturing their friends and mentors, murdering one another in an effort to be in power.

While she does not relish the thought of being caged, she cannot excuse their actions.
“I can’t watch this anymore,” she says in a calm voice and steps further into the room.

The abominations turn first, then Uldred slowly turns to them, as if he can hardly lower himself to acknowledge them. “Ahh,” he says lazily. “Look what we have here.”

“Can we cut the small talk? It’s been a long day and I’d just like to kill you,” she snaps.

“I’m quite impressed you’re still alive,” he says. “Unfortunately, that means you’ve killed my servants. Oh well; they are probably better off, dying in the service of their betters than living with the terrible responsibility of independence.”

Hera matches his mockingly mournful tone with her own. “I’m sorry, are you upset I killed your lackeys?”

“We needn’t fixate on who killed whom,” he says generously. “That doesn’t help our relationship.”

“We don’t have a relationship, but that’s beside the point. What are you trying to accomplish by torturing these people?” she asks, tilting her head. “Everlasting life? Unlimited power?”

“A mage is but the larval form of something greater,” he explains calmly. But as he continues, madness lights his eyes, giving him a wild grin as he begins to shout. “Your chantry vilifies us, calls us abominations when we have truly reached our full potential. Look at them! The chantry has them convinced- they deny themselves the pleasure of becoming something glorious!”

“You’re mad!” Wynne cries. “There’s nothing glorious about what you’ve become, Uldred!”

Uldred laughs. “Uldred? He is gone! I am Uldred...and yet not Uldred. I am more than he was. I could give you this gift, Wynne. You and all the mages. It would be so much easier if you all just...accepted it. But some people can be so stubborn.”

“I’m glad so many of them have stood up to you,” Hera tells him. At least they all aren’t the sheep Morrigan thinks they are.

Uldred chuckles, wiping a hand across his mouth. “And what good did that do? I still won. Wait-
what do we have here?” he asks, looking over at one of the mages mumbling to himself. He’s older, his beard and regal robes splattered with blood. Like the others, he’s strung by his arms through magical force, his body shuddering under the strain. “Why, it’s the First Enchanter! Come, say hello, Irving. Don’t mind the blood,” he chuckles. “He’s had a hard day.”

“What have you done to him?” Wynne gasps. “Irving, I’m here!”

“S...Stop him,” the First Enchanter gasps. “He is...building...an army. He will...destroy the templars and...”

“You’re a sly little fox, Irving,” Uldred teases, wagging his finger at Irving. “Telling on me like that. And here I thought he was starting to turn.”

“Never!” Irving struggles out.

“That’s enough out of you,” Uldred snaps before turning his attention back to Hera. “He’ll serve me eventually. As will you.”

“What ever do you mean?” she asks, fluttering her lashes. “I don’t sweep and mop well, I should warn you.”

“Oh I’m not stupid!” he shouts, waving his arms. “Do you think I’m going to let you wander around this tower knowing you’re a pawn of the templars? You are a thorn in my side, and I must remove you before you fester!” He starts to murmur to himself, and Hera can feel a buildup of pressure and power around him.

“You can certainly try,” she offers sweetly. *Could I cast dispel without anyone noticing?*

“Killing you would be a waste,” he decides, taking a deep breath and struggling for calm. “Your raw potential with the strength of a demon behind it would be unstoppable! I can do that,” he says, sounding proud of himself for such an idea. “I can give you power, and a new life.”

“I’m sorry,” Hera says, her apologetic tone dripping with sarcasm. “I just can’t let you do that.”

“Fight if you must; it will just make my victory all the sweeter.”
“Don’t forget the Litany,” Wynne whispers. “It will thwart Uldred’s attempts to control the mages and win this fight for us.”

Hera nods and draws her sword and dagger, eyes widening when Uldred transforms into a ten-foot-tall monster covered in scales and spikes. Jaws full of razor-sharp teeth snap at her and the tail swings back and forth menacingly. With a roar, the creature stretches its arms out before swiping a clawed hand at her.

_shit. That’s bigger than the ogres here. And pointier._

The abominations swarm Morrigan and Wynne behind her, and Hera hears a cry as one of them is struck down, but can’t spare a glance back.

One of the young mages breaks free of his restraints and joins Alistair to take on the abominations, so Hera focuses all her energy on Uldred. He’s very powerful, and before long her arms are heavy with fatigue. She glances over at Alistair when he shouts, and sees one of the abominations shoot flames at him.

Uldred takes advantage of her distraction, the fanged mouth distorting a spell into an unrecognizable cacophony, and a dark power builds around him.

“Use the Litany!” Wynne shouts, and Hera obeys, beginning to recite the chant continuously through the fight.

These abominations are tougher than the ones they’ve encountered before, and Hera glances around, seeing the others struggling against them. _Looks like it’s just me, then,_ she thinks, rolling away as Uldred makes a low swipe with his claws.

_I can feel your power,_ she hears in her mind, his voice invading her thoughts through the Litany with a horrifying chuckle. _You’re different. The Litany will not protect you, little witch. You whore. I know you. Come to me, share my gift- I will leave you beautiful if you wish._

_Go to hell, Uldred._

His laughter is contorted into something like glass shattering, and it rolls over them like a fog,
ignoring through their armor to slice the flesh beneath. Hera is thrown across the floor, and he whips his tail around to beat her with it. She climbs to her feet, still reciting the Litany, and rushes him again.

This time she doesn’t bother trying to hinder him at the knee, she goes straight for the chest and head, leaping high and stabbing her dagger into the chest. Uldred roars and throws her aside, targeting Wynne, but Hera gets in his way again, taking the attacks meant for the older woman.

She can hear Alistair fighting, hears his exhausted cry for healing. For the first time since finding herself in Ferelden, Hera isn’t sure she can defeat this foe. He’s too strong, too driven, they’re injured and exhausted and at the end of their strength. Is this the demon meant for me? Has time moved faster for me than I thought? She tries to silence the thoughts and keeps attacking, parrying his claws, absorbing his blows so they don’t fall to anyone else.

Uldred’s strength is flagging too, she can see it in the long pauses between his spells and the way his physical attacks slow down, but he’ll still outlast her at this rate.

*I can’t do this much longer. I can’t hold back anymore.*

She stops reciting the Litany and gathers power in her center, letting the tension inside build until magic pulses through her blood and streaks down to burn her fingertips. It feels like stretching after a long ride as her power unfurls. The spell comes without words, as many simple spells do, but she bides her time, waiting for the right moment. The next time he throws her back, she uses the distance to run at him one last time, leaping as high as possible, sword aimed for his heart. Under her breath, she casts one of her favorite spells. Sheer magical power forms into six glowing darts; the power dancing down her blade like lightning as it plunges into him, exploding inside the beast’s chest in a brilliant white light.

*This will hurt,* she thinks, squeezing her eyes closed as the light builds to blinding brilliance.

White-hot pain engulfs her as the missiles catch her in their blast, and she screams in spite of her clenched jaw as the explosion burns up her arm, fusing the skin on her hand to the hilt of her sword. The explosion is blinding, and Uldred staggers, falling forward and taking her with him. Everything goes black as the mutated mage’s enormous body crushes her.
Magic

Chapter Summary

In light of her injuries, Hera breaks her promise to Tybalt and reveals a secret to Alistair. He, on the other hand, has romance on his mind.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Alistair paces in front of the fire, waiting for Wynne to come out of Hera’s tent. Hera had been badly wounded in the Circle Tower; when she’d struck the killing blow on Uldred, there had been some kind of magical explosion just before the abomination had fallen on top of her, crushing her. Wynne had been able to perform a quick healing spell so they could get her downstairs, but even then she had been unconscious the whole way down the tower.

Alistair had carried her himself, removing his armor and cradling her while the group descended the stairs. He’d laid her on a bloodstained pallet near some of the sleeping templars while he spoke to Irving, the First Mage, about the situation with the tower and Connor. Thankfully the Circle had agreed to help and set out immediately, promising to send Leliana and Sten back across, while Alistair and the others—Wynne included, having elected to stay with them—set their camp just outside the Tower. They had considered taking Hera across the lake to the Spoiled Princess, but Wynne had been anxious to properly tend her wounds. Now she, Leliana, and Morrigan were in Hera’s tent tending her, and had not come out since save for water and more bandages.

That had been three hours ago, and every now and then he heard a small, painful sound. We should have gotten her into a proper room with a bed and fire in the hearth. The night air can’t be good for her.

Finally, Wynne comes out, drying her hands on a piece of cloth and ushering the girls ahead of her. “She will live,” she tells him as he opens his mouth. “And she will mend. But she needs rest. A day or two will do it, I think.”

We don’t have a day or two, he thinks but says nothing. Wynne makes him think of an old chantry sister back in Redcliff, and he’d seen enough stern looks from that old women to know when to keep his mouth shut. I don’t know she’ll wait that long, anyway. “Can I see her?”

Wynne nods. “Yes, if you take some of the broth from the stew and convince her to drink it. The elixir I gave her for pain could make her feel ill if she doesn’t eat.” She smiles gently at him and pats his cheek. “Have faith, lad,” she soothes. “She will be fine. But for the love of the Maker,
don't rile her up. She needs rest and relaxation.”

Alistair gets a bowl of broth and ducks inside her tent. His stomach knots when he sees her, lying on her bedroll looking so small and fragile. Her body above the sheet is a mass of bruises, he can only imagine it gets worse under the sheet, and she’s covered in small cuts, healing slowly from Wynne’s spells. Her right arm is bandaged from shoulder to fingertip, burned badly from whatever Uldred had done as he died.

She takes on so much, all the time. She could have picked off the other abominations, let me or the mages handle Uldred, but she took him head-on. She’s...frustrating. And brave.

“Hey Hero,” she whispers, her eyelids lifting slowly.

He gives her a charming smile and sits beside her, careful not to spill the broth. “Hey pretty lady,” he answers. “Wynne says you’ll mend, but you need a few days’ rest first.”

“Can’t rest,” she argues weakly, wincing as she turns her head to look at him. “We need to get back to Redcliffe.”

“It’ll take the mages a day or two to get there, anyway,” he says, pulling her blanket higher. “And we can always take a shortcut by crossing the lake.”

She shakes her head. “Can’t. Connor needs our help.”

“And how are you supposed to help him if you can’t turn your head without being in pain?” he demands in a quiet voice. Anger and frustration seep into his tone, giving voice to feelings he hadn’t even been aware of himself. “Your recklessness nearly got you killed today! Look at your arm! Wynne doesn’t even know what happened to it, all we could see was a blinding light when you stuck your sword in him.” He scowls when she smiles under his scolding. “Why are you smiling?”

“You sound like my brother,” she laughs, then stops and puts her free hand to her ribs. In truth, she knew exactly what the light had been when she had stabbed the abomination: her spell had gone off, making it look like something he’d done. Unfortunately, doing it that way had meant purposefully catching herself with the spell as well.
“Someone has to tell you when you’re being stupid,” he informs her haughtily. Just as quickly as it appeared, his anger falls away, and he shakes his head before looking at her again. “Hera, are you all right? Truly?”

She nods. “Yes- don’t you believe Wynne? I will be fine. But Alistair, we have to get to Redcliffe.”

“We’ll cross the lake tomorrow afternoon and be at Redcliffe by evening,” he decides. “We shouldn’t be too far behind Irving and the mages, and it will be less taxing on you.”

She nods, accepting the plan. “Fine,” she says.

“Glad to see we’re in agreement,” he says with a grin. “Now, Wynne told me you need to drink this,” he says, lifting the bowl.

“Oh no,” she says with a grimace. “I’m not drinking anything else from her. I’ve learned my lesson.”

Alistair laughs. “Healing magic isn’t all it’s cracked up to be, is it?”

“Not in this world. In mine, it hurts for a moment- a terrible, searing pain that feels like a lifetime- but then it’s over and your wound is gone.”

“That sounds much nicer than slow and steady healing.”

“It’s very different, everything to do with magic is. Mages aren’t controlled by a church and Templars. Some wizards and sorcerers belong to an order, some don’t. It isn’t something to fear and regulate.”

“Magic is too powerful to go unchecked,” he argues.

“So are a lot of things,” she counters with a hard look.

“And what happens when one of them goes insane and starts killing innocent people? Or using the
dead to build an army?” he asks, raising his brows at her. “Like the demon possessing Connor
did.”

“There are people like my friends and I take care of it,” she says with a small shrug, completely
ignoring the voice in her head that reminds her that she has an army of undead at her beck and call.
“Or the order the mage belongs to do. Or the village hires a witch-hunter. No one deserves to be
enslaved simply because they lost the birth lottery.” She meets his gaze with a small smile. “Just
like no one should be forced to be something they aren’t because they’re a royal bastard.”

“Well.” He nods, his face turning red at the direct point she makes. “That may be so, but it doesn’t
change the fact that you have to drink this,” he reminds her. “Let me help you sit up.”

“Before you do, you should know I’m in an advanced state of undress,” she warns, a wicked gleam
in her eyes. “Not that I mind what you’d see.”

Alistair hesitates. “Should I get Wynne or Leliana?”

“I suppose that depends on if you want to have a look,” she teases. She laughs at the way he
blushes, giving proof of his indecision. “Help me up, I will hold the blanket in place,” she
compromises. “I promise not to corrupt you with my nakedness.”

He helps her sit up, eyes closed for safe measure. “I know you laugh,” he says when he’s done,
“but...I want to treat you the way you deserve. Like a gentleman should treat a lady.” He raises an
eyebrow. “Would- would you like to be courted by a gentleman?”

Guilt fills her, and she looks down at her hands. “Alistair...I’ve told Leliana that I can’t allow
anything but a casual flirtation,” she admits. “I am greatly in favor of a dalliance- and you would
have no regrets- but it wouldn’t be fair to start something that will inevitably end. I have to find a
way home once the Blight is dealt with.”

I can’t risk these feelings, she reminds herself. Whatever is between us should stay unexplored. She
risks a glance at him, finding his expression at once thoughtful and fearful as he stares at his own
hands. Seven hells, he’s beautiful, she thinks, knowing herself well enough to know when to admit
defeat. I’ve never wanted someone more. Just being near him makes me feel warm and soft inside.

Definitely not something a courtesan should ever feel, and the Raven Queen has no place in her
heart for romance.
Silence stretches between them, rattling her already ragged nerves. “I’d like to court you anyway,”
he says finally, looking up at her. “Can we take it a day at a time, and figure out the rest if we live
through this? Maybe we can look for your passage home together...maybe... Maybe I can go with
you.”

Hera feels a deep pleasure at his words but keeps her expression still. *What a lovely little lie. I hope
he gives me no cause to regret it.* “I’ve never been courted before,” she admits, feeling silly and
girlish.

*This is a mistake, but I want to bask in his light for a little while. Is that so wrong?*

*It might be the last great mistake I ever get to make, after all.*

“Really?” he asks, blinking in surprise. “You’re so...well, you’re you. How can no one have
courted you before?”

Hera raises an eyebrow, amused. “I live in a world where love is bought and sold to the highest
bidder. Why bother working for love when you can just buy an illusion of it?”

“Oh. Right. Good point.” His nervousness makes his voice unsteady, and he blushes.
“Would...would you like if I were the first? To court you, not to...not pay for it,” he ends, frowning
at the idea.

Hera smiles- it’s more of a grimace due to the swelling- and dips her head to hide it. “I think I’d
like that very much.”

He lets out a deep breath and smiles. “Good. I’ll start later when there isn't a Blight to compete
with for your attention. Now drink your broth.”

Warmth settles into her stomach even as her heart flutters at his smile. “Later, then. Will you tell
me about the other Wardens?”

“You first,” he says, watching her lift the bowl to her lips. “Did you want to be a Grey Warden?”
“Yes, I did. Duncan and I argued about it, actually,” she laughs.

“I remember. Why would he try to turn down a willing recruit as skilled as you?”

Hera hesitates. *He at least needs to know about my power. He could protect me should something go wrong- and something will inevitably go wrong.* “Because of the chantry,” she tells him.

Alistair frowns. “I’m not sure I understand.”

The warmth and flutter from moments before dissolve into dread as she looks in the direction of the tower, almost willing herself to see through the canvas. *I’m sorry Tybalt, but I have to break my promise to you, just this once.* “Your chantry would see me as an apostate,” she whispers. “I’m a sorceress, Alistair. Tybalt warned me not to use magic here, and Duncan tried to convince me to join the Circle- and I see now how terrible that would have been. Cailan wanted me to go to the capital and wait with his queen.”

“You’re a mage? Have you been using magic all this time?” he asks in a rough whisper.

“I was born with it, same as the mages here,” she explains, keeping her voice down. What is the emotion under his tone? *I can’t quite tell if he’s angry.* “But it’s different. And I have only used magic twice since I got here.”

“When?” he demands. His frown deepens, causing lines to appear between his brows.

“Right after we met. My clothes were filthy and covered in mud and blood.” *Angry,* she decides. *Definitely angry. At least a little.*

“And the second?”

She looks pointedly at her arm and says nothing.

“Oh Maker,” he groans. “You really are an apostate. I knew there was something you were
Oh, I’m hiding a lot, she thinks with another rush of guilt. “Not really. I’m not Ferelden, or even from this world. But,” she sighs, lifting one hand in helplessness. “You can give me to the templars if you like. They will not be able to hold me, should I release the full extent of my power. Nor will one of those hideous phylacteries work on me. It would simply get a lot of people hurt and slow down my escape. Then you will have dead or injured templars, a sorceress on the run, and you’re short a Grey Warden to fight the Blight.”

Alistair is quiet a long time, staring hard at her. Hera keeps her face open and calm, sipping the broth, trying not to let him see how her hand shakes. I should have told him sooner.

“Do you know what I am, exactly?” he asks finally. “Templars hunt and disable mages. Kill them if necessary. I have abilities that can do great harm to mages,” he emphasizes. “What if I had hurt you somehow? You should have told me from the beginning.”

“There’s a lot of things I would have liked to have said in the beginning,” she says guiltily.

“You swear you haven't been using magic?”

“Aside from those two instances, yes.”

“Will you swear not to use it again?”

“I-” Hera pauses before answering. The archdemon could require it. What if it came down to her life, or Alistair’s? I’ve broken my promise to Tybalt, I don’t think making another is wise. “I don't think I can,” she whispers. “Why should I make such a promise? Will you throw me to the templars if I don’t?”

Alistair scowls. “What am I supposed to do here, Hera? Morrigan’s told you the dangers of being an apostate. You’re lucky you’re a Grey Warden- the templars can’t touch you. Otherwise, I don’t know if I could protect you both from them.” He keeps his voice low, but she can hear his frustration, and she wishes she hadn’t waited so long. “Maker’s ass,” he mutters, rubbing his forehead.

“You’re not a templar, you’re a Grey Warden,” she reminds him, “you have no responsibility to the
chantry. You could just accept that I will swear not to keep my magic hidden,” she offers. “I cannot release it, and it will not abandon me. It is a part of me, as surely as the color of my eyes. But I am in complete control of it. You have nothing to fear from me.”

“Your arm is proof you aren’t.”

“My arm is proof that I am,” she argues. “I knew I was almost out of that fight, you had your hands full with the abominations, and Uldred had to be destroyed. I set off that spell knowing it would injure me, and knowing what it would look like to everyone else.”

Alistair stares at her, dumbfounded. “You mean...you were willing to keep your secret, even though it could seriously hurt you? Even though it did,” he corrects. “Why?”

“Yes. Because I wanted to obey the laws of Ferelden and keep my promise to Tybalt. And also,” she adds, blushing a bit, “because I didn’t want you to think poorly of me.”

“What about demons?” he asks. “Demons whisper and tempt mages into bringing them out of the Fade and into the real world. Have you been affected this way?”

“Demons whispering in my head?” she asks, tilting her head to one side. “No. You know the only dreams I have are brought on by the taint; I have no connection to your Fade and its spirits and demons. My magic is fueled by my...spirit, I suppose. I’ve never really thought about it,” she says with a one-armed shrug. “It’s as much a part of me as the color of my hair, and aside from the darkspawn hive mind, I dream of nothing. I don’t think I have anything your demons want.”

*Or a dhampir is too much like them to be of use,* she muses. *That’s possible, I suppose.*

“You’ll tell me if you start having unusual dreams or hearing whispers, won’t you?” His voice is laced with worry and the lines on his face have gradually changed from anger to concern, so Hera begins to relax.

“Yes. Alistair, please understand, my magic is different than the mages here. I can’t explain it, it just is. But if anything tries to make a bargain with me, it will be in over its head,” she says with a painful smirk.

“Two apostates, a Chantry sister, a murderer, and a Circle mage. Maker help me.” Alistair shakes
his head, chuckling. “I feel like I’m in the worst joke ever. Has anyone ever told you that you are the most stubborn woman they’ve ever seen?”

“At least I’m pretty,” she offers sweetly.

“Not right now you aren’t,” he says apologetically, stroking her mottled cheek gently. “You’re puffy and swollen and your bruises have bruises.”

“I’ll be fine.” She finishes the broth and sets the bowl aside. “Alistair?” she asks innocently.

“What is it now?” he asks suspiciously.

“Can I show you one tiny little thing?”

“Depends. Is it magic?”

“Yes, but it’s good magic. Please?”

He studies her a moment, then sighs. “What is it?”

“Give me your socks,” she says happily.

“My...socks? They’re filthy. And damp.”

“I know, that’s why I want them.”

He gives her a disgusted look but takes off his boots and hands her his socks. “I don’t know how well this will work with my off hand,” she muses, shaking them. “But this might be the most important spell I know.” After a few seconds, she frowns and shakes them some more. A moment later she seems satisfied, and hands back pristine, dry socks. “Now your feet,” she says orders.
Alistair stares at the socks, then at her. “I- you- they’re-”

“Feet please,” she giggles.

“What are you going to do to me?” he asks suspiciously.

Hera’s gaze travels over him hungrily, making Alistair blush again. *Hasn’t anyone ever made him feel handsome and wanted before?* “So many things,” she purrs. “But not until you say so. Now, feet.”

He scoots back and puts his feet in her lap.

“Oh *Maker* they smell,” she coughs, waving her hand in front of her face.

“It’s been a long day,” he says defensively. “Did you forget the blood and gore up to our ankles?”

She nods. In truth, she should be resting, and she knows it. After not having used her power in so long, she had put more into her spell earlier than usual, and between pain and sheer exhaustion, she’s ready for the day to end. But Alistair’s presence does something to her magic, refreshing it somehow, and she wants to explore it as long as he’ll let her. Focusing on his feet, she waves a hand lazily over them and watched as he jerks and cries out.

“Hey, that tickles!”

“Alistair!” Wynne’s voice snaps from outside the tent. “I told you to let her rest!”

“I’m sorry, Wynne!” he laughs. “She started it!”

“Well if you two don’t stop, I’m going to make you come back out!”

Hera and Alistair cover their mouths, giggling like naughty children. “Hush,” she whispers, waving her hand once more. “There. How’s that?”
He wiggles his toes in wonder. “They’re... clean. And dry. And they don’t smell,” he observes, putting one foot to his nose. “They smell like…?”

“Clean,” she giggles. “They smell clean.”

“Well, we haven’t had soap in a while,” he says with a shrug. “My last bath was in Redcliffe.”

“Alistair, I have soap,” she tells him. “And I’ll let you have it if you need it.”

He scratches his chest thoughtfully. “I think I might need some.”

“I could oblige you,” she offers, wiggling her fingers at him, “just this once. It’s cold out, and the lake will be freezing. A wave of my hand...even your clothes would be clean...”

He struggles with the desire to be clean but his unwillingness to leave her tent. “No,” he says finally. “I’ll go bathe,” he adds with regret.

“And come back?” she asks softly.

Alistair lifts his eyebrows. “You- you want me to come back?”

She looks away, trying not to show how much she wants him to come back. “If you don’t want to-”

“No! No, I want to,” he laughs, tilting her chin up carefully. “You just seem so tired, and you’re covered in bruises and cuts. But if you’re sure you want some more company...” She nods, her violet eyes startling among all the black and blue. “So I’ll be back,” he says cheerfully.

Wynne is waiting outside, arms crossed and looking stern. “Alistair, I told you not to get her excited,” she scolds.

“I’m sorry, Wynne. Really,” he says charmingly.
“Did she finish the broth?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Now I’m going to bed. Do not let that hound into her tent, he’ll only try to lay on her and her ribs are already broken. And you let her rest.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Leliana, will you help her into a shirt for the night?” she asks, turning to Leliana by the fire. “I don’t want her chest or arm catching cold.”

Leliana looks up from the small book she’s scribbling in and nods. “Of course, Wynne. I’ll go now.”

“Um, Wynne?” Alistair catches her before she goes. “Do you have any soap? Something that’s not…lady like?”

Wynne snorts. “You mean something not flowery.”

“Well, yes,” he laughs.

“Come along, son, I have something for you. A nice mint and elf-root blend they send us from Antiva.”

Alistair takes his time bathing in the lake, even though the water is as cold as Hera had warned. Clean and smelling pleasantly of herbs, he returns to camp and spreads his washed clothes to dry over a bush. Sten is on watch and largely ignores him as Alistair bypasses his own tent.

Ares barks happily, jumping on him as he heads for Hera’s tent. “Not tonight boy,” Alistair apologizes. “Wynne said you have to stay out.”
The mabari whines and lays down with a sigh, and Alistair calls out softly to Hera. She doesn't answer, so he ducks inside to check on her.

“Hera…?” He smiles down at her sleeping form. Aside from helping her into a shirt, he could tell that Leliana had run a comb through her hair and helped her to lie down.

*Her bruises look better already,* he thinks, sitting beside her. Hera’s hair spills across the pillow, like black oil over the sun-bleached linen. “Like a raven,” he muses quietly, running some of it through his fingers.

“Hmm?” She mumbles, her eyebrows drawing together.

“I’m sorry, I didn't mean to wake you,” he says softly. “Go back to sleep.”

She shakes her head, three little lines forming between her eyebrows. “I’m awake,” she yawns, opening her eyes.

He chuckles. “No, you aren't.”

“Mmhmm,” she mumbles, closing her eyes again and rubbing her cheek against the pillow.

*She looks so...I don’t even know,* he realizes, his heart thudding in his chest. *Fragile? Why do I feel like such an idiot around her?* “I should go.”

She reaches out with her good hand, catching his shirt weakly. “Stay.”

“Hera…” *Maker, I want to stay. I want to hold her and wake up with her in my arms. What am I thinking? She’s so...worldly, and I’m...not. She’d laugh at me if I said that.*

“Please,” she sighs.

The breathy word crumbles his resolve to go, and Alistair gives in. “Just for a little while,” he
relents, stretching out beside her pallet. Hera smiles and laces her fingers through his, cradling their hands to her cheek. “Just until you’re asleep again.”

He watches her sleep, filled with wonder at how young she looks. She can't be more than eighteen or nineteen, he thinks, blinking against the pull of exhaustion. And to take all this on… I can't imagine doing something this insane and sure to fail with anyone else. She makes me believe it’s possible; like I could do anything so long as she’s beside me.

Oh, Maker...what am I feeling? he wonders as sleep finally washes over him.

***

When Wynne looks in on her later, she frowns at the sight of the two Wardens, lying beside one another holding hands. Shaking her head, she touches Hera’s forehead to check for fever, then spreads a blanket over Alistair. I don't know what they’re playing at, she thinks. But they do seem taken with one another. Maker help them.

Chapter End Notes

I LOVE this chapter. It's one of the first things I ever wrote for this fic, and I have gone back and forth editing it to death. I hope you enjoy.
Hera is fascinated by the ritual the Circle of Magi uses to save Connor, leaving her hungry to know more about lyrium and its uses. Meanwhile, Teagan begins to grow bold.

Hera leans on Leliana on the walk from the lake to Redcliffe Castle, apologizing for slowing everyone down. She has to stop for rest frequently, and the third time, Alistair just picks her up.

“It’s not that I’m in a hurry,” he explains under his breath. “Well, I am, but you shouldn’t be walking anyway.”

Clenching her teeth against the pain, she nods, privately grateful for the gallant gesture. “Let’s go then.” In spite of how wretched she feels, she can’t help but indulge in the sweetness of being carried by the man who’s asked to court her.

What foolishness, she chides herself with a small smile. Just because he smells like sweat and leather and herbs is no reason to lose yourself over the desire of a man. You’re a master of desire, Hera, get it together.

The sunlight plays on his hair, sparking it into fiery spun gold and making him look like one of the celestial winged beings she’s met in Sigil. He catches her staring, violet eyes wide, and grins smugly.

Gods above, she thinks breathlessly. He couldn’t pull a rabbit from his hat, yet I am utterly enchanted.

They pass through the village with as little fanfare and delays as possible, and get to the castle by mid-afternoon, as promised. At the gates, Hera demands to be on her feet and walk in herself. After a hard look, he relents, keeping close in case she stumbles.

When they walk into the main hall, the Circle is there, along with Teagan, Isolde, and Jowan. Isolde is pale and knots a handkerchief in her hands while her brother in law is busy giving instructions to Ser Perth. The disgraced Jowan is speaking in hushed tones with Irving and the
mages, their expressions grave.

“Are we too late?” Alistair asks, fear for the boy giving his voice a brittle edge. “Where’s Connor?”

Teagan steps forward and takes her hand. “Thank the Maker you’re here,” he says quickly. “Ser Perth says Connor has been cornered in the eastern tower. Unless you object, the Circle is ready to begin.”

Hera turns to Senior Enchanter Irving. “Good. What do we need to know?”

“Only what mage will be going into the Fade,” he says.

“I will do it,” Wynne volunteers.

Hera looks over at her. “Are you sure? Morrigan can go.”

“I am sure,” she insists. “Trust me, Hera.”

How many times have I said the same? Asked some poor stranger to simply trust me? Wynne’s words carry the weight of knowledge and power, so Hera nods. So be it, I will put myself in the other place this time. “Wynne it is.”

Irving nods, and gestures for Hera to step back. Alistair guides her to a chair, giving her a stern look that clearly tells her she’d best give in without a fight. According to Irving, it is to be a long process, full of complex magic that requires a great deal of lyrium. Watching them prepare, she longs to reveal her sorceress nature, to go into the Fade and destroy the demon herself, but she knows that would be a horrible idea- if it was even possible to make the journey. She has no way to know how the Sloth demon had managed to send her there the first time, or if it would work a second. But even if she did know, her injuries are more serious that she would like, and the Templars and the chantry would have something to say about it, she’s sure. Of all their problems in Thedas, that is a situation she has no desire to handle.

Mages move around the room, snuffing candles until the only light left is the flickering fire at the far end of the hall. Hera watches in fascination, leaning forward in the chair when two of the mages begin drawing a circle on the floor and ringing it with runes while the others prepare lyrium
potions. One of them pours a small vial of lyrium onto the drawn circle and the runes light up in a flash of blue. With a whisper from Irving, a pretty elf mage steps back, petulant at not participating in the remainder of the ritual.

“What is that?” she whispers.

“A binding circle,” Alistair murmurs, leaning down to talk directly into her ear. “I saw it during my training. If something goes wrong, and Wynne becomes possessed—”

“It will keep her and the demon trapped,” Hera finishes, not taking her eyes off Wynne as she steps into the circle and lies down. “A clever precaution. Why isn’t she standing with the others?”

“She must be watching to be sure nothing goes wrong.”

Irving brought out a large bottle, glowing brightly in the shadows. When Alistair sucks in a breath, Hera glances up at him, raising her eyebrows in question. “Raw lyrium,” he whispers. “It’s dangerous to mages; the shock of absorbing so much mana so quickly can kill them.”

She turns her eyes back to Irving carefully removing the cork from the bottle, being sure not to spill any on himself. *They must be able to absorb it through the skin, as well as internally,* she guesses.

A ripple of anxiety moves through the mages as Irving pours it into a small brass bowl. As soon as it touches the metal it begins to bubble and steam, sending out a burst of magical energy so powerful the hairs on the back of Hera’s neck stand up. Irving closes his eyes, concentrating only on the ritual, his hands moving around the vapor coming off the bowl, shaping and teasing it without ever coming in contact with the soft glow.

The vapor branches out like a vine, sending wispy tendrils to each of the mages around the circle, pooling over Wynne lying flat with her eyes closed. One by one, each of the mages holds out a hand to welcome the lyrium mist, shivering slightly as it slowly swirls around them.

Faintly, Hera can hear beautiful, chiming music, without rhythm or meter. She looks around for the source, but it’s so faint and muffled it sounds as if it’s coming from far away. No one else seems either disturbed by it, if they even hear it.

“Can you hear it?” Alistair whispers, leaning over her shoulder. “Mages say that lyrium sings to
That’s what it is, she thinks, her gaze moving back to the glowing bowl. It’s the lyrium. How strange, I’ve never heard anything like it. “Faintly,” she whispers back. Curiosity almost drives her to move forward, to become part of the ritual herself and see how the lyrium responds. She keeps her seat, unsure of what may happen to Wynne, Connor, or the mages if she were to interfere.

Perhaps Wynne or Morrigan can tell me more. I may want to experiment with it sometime.

The vapors surround each mage, sending more tendrils out to mirror the circle on the floor. As more mages are connected by its circuit, the air takes on a charged feel. Hera feels that if she touched a piece of steel the shock would set off bright sparks. Finally, all the mages are connected, and the circle’s soft glow intensifies into a nearly blinding blue light.

Beside her, Isolde and Teagan cover their eyes, making small sounds of surprise. Hera, however, is so deeply invested in watching that she can hardly blink.

And then Wynne leaves her body and enters the Fade.

It’s as gentle as a sigh, her body going rigid for a heartbeat before softening into what appears to be a deep sleep.

The mages don’t move from their lyrium-wreathed circle, but the young woman left out approaches Teagan and speaks softly. He nods and approaches Hera, kneeling beside her chair to speak softly.

“My lady, I’ve had some rooms prepared,” he says. “Surana says this could be a long ordeal, and the mages will stay like this until it’s over. Why don’t you all get some rest? I’ll have baths and clean clothing sent up.”

She shakes her head slowly. “Sten, you and the others go rest,” she says over her shoulder. “Takes Ares, if you don’t mind. I’ll stay with Wynne.”

“Are you sure, Hera?” Leliana asks, looking worried. “You’re the one who needs rest.”
“Oh, I’ll just sit here a while and come up as soon as Wynne is back,” she promises, waving them on. “Go. You deserve a rest.”

Sten doesn’t argue, only nods and follows the servant, calling to Ares. Leliana looks like she wants to protest, but Morrigan stops her with a look and beckons to her. Alistair stands behind Hera, unwilling to argue, and Ares lays at her feet.

“Are you certain, my lady?” Teagan asks, taking her hand. “Your injuries-”

“Are fine,” she assures him. “I will wait for Wynne. See to Isolde,” she adds, nodding toward the nervous arlessa fidgeting by the fire.

He leaves her to go to Isolde, and Hera sighs and leans back against the chair, rubbing her temple with her unbandaged hand. In truth, she could sleep for a week, and then a day or two more, but she refuses to go to her bed with Connor still in the demon’s grip. Enough time has been wasted due to her injuries already.

She’s so focused on watching Wynne she jumps when she feels Alistair’s hands on the base of her neck, kneading the tense muscles there. “Sorry,” he whispers, moving his hands away quickly. “I didn’t mean-”

“Please, don’t stop,” she answers, pulling her hair over her shoulder. “It feels nice.”

He chuckles and returns his hands lightly to her shoulders, his thumbs making small circles. Hera’s sigh is almost inaudible, but she feels herself relaxing slowly under his attentions.

*Is this courtship?* She wonders. *Or is this comfort from one friend to another? He said he wanted to wait until after the Blight was dealt with- did he change his mind? Oh, gods, it feels so nice I don’t even want to question it.*

Hours later, Wynne’s eyes open, and one of the mages help her sit up. “How did it go?” Irving asks, handing her a cup of wine. “Is the child free?”

“Yes, the demon’s hold on him is broken.” Wynne shakes her head to clear it, the lines in her face deep and craggy in the shadows. “It was not a difficult encounter,” she says, her words heavy with exhaustion, “but it was quite draining. How long was I in the Fade?”
“Several hours. Let’s get you up to a room,” Teagan says, offering his arm. “You are more than deserving of a rest. I can’t thank you enough for what you’ve done.”

“I could not allow a child to suffer,” she says weakly. “Do not let me keep you, Bann Teagan,” she adds. “You have much to discuss with our young Wardens.”

He nods and gestures for a knight to escort her to her room. Once the mages have all gone out, he turns to Hera and Alistair. “Forgive me, my lady,” he apologizes. “The mages said you had been badly wounded at the tower. I admit my mind was elsewhere when you arrived. How are you?”

“I will mend,” she says, waving vaguely to her arm. “This is a burn, nothing more.” Alistair coughs, sounding very much as if he were choking on the word “liar,” and she frowns up at him. “Where is Connor?”

“Ser Perth will find him,” he assures her. “He can’t have left the tower without being seen.”

She nods. “Can Alistair and I see the Arl?”

“Yes, of course,” Teagan answers, watching how quickly Alistair offers to help her to her feet. “I shall take you directly.”
The Urn of Sacred Ashes

Chapter Summary

With Connor out of danger, Hera's attention turns to saving Arl Eamon.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The three of them make their way through the castle and find Isolde outside the door of the arl's chambers, wringing her hands. “My lady, is something wrong?” Teagan asks.

Isolde looks guilty and shakes her head. “I just do not know how I will tell him when he wakes,” she says, tears filling her eyes. "How do I tell him his son is a mage?" Her voice cracks and she buries her face in her hands, weeping.

Hera lets go of Alistair’s arm to reach for her hand, but he keeps a hand on her elbow to steady her. “Honestly,” Hera advises. “Tell him of your fears, of your love for your family. He will understand if he is as good as I’m told.” Is that true? she asks herself. Is my own brother so good that he will understand my fears and love for both him and my subjects? Will he understand that I had no other choice?

Isolde nods, squeezing her hand. “I will. Thank you, my friend. I owe so much to you for saving my Connor.”

Hera demurs softly, and without further delay, they enter the sickroom. A physician stays with Arl Eamon constantly, and he rises and bows to the arlessa and bann. “These are the people who have saved Connor,” Teagan explains, introducing them. “Alistair spent his boyhood here, if you remember, Erik.”

“Oh yes, I remember the boy well,” the physician chuckles. “It is good to see you, young Alistair.”

“I wish under better circumstances,” Alistair mumbles, suddenly abandoning Hera to move closer to the bed.

She wavers without him, and Teagan rushes to her side, putting an arm around her and solicitously
taking her hand in his. “We shouldn’t let you fall,” he murmurs, rubbing his thumb over her knuckles gently.

Hera thanks him softly, flicking her eyes toward him a moment before moving her gaze back to Alistair. Grief makes him look both years younger and centuries older at once. Summoning the last of her strength, she nods to Teagan and steps up to Alistair, putting a gentle hand on his arm, offering him what comfort she can as they look down at the Arl of Redcliffe. She doesn’t look at Alistair, giving him a private moment to compose himself. The arl lies as still as death amid the pillows, but his chest rises and falls in slow, steady breaths. His skin has the waxy look of illness, and Hera can smell the sweet decay of death in the room.

Almost without realizing it, Alistair’s arm comes around her waist, and they lean into one another.

She studies the arl curiously, looking for...something. This is the man who raised Alistair, who hurt him so badly, abandoned him to a fate he was ill-suited for. The man who still inspires such confidence. Who repaired a broken amulet and kept it safe all these years. Who had made a poor boy feel worthless for having the bad luck of being born Maric’s son. My knowledge of him doesn’t balance Alistair’s feelings, she thinks, looking up at Alistair, but I’d give anything to ease his pain.

“I’m sorry,” Alistair whispers to the arl. “Get better, and we’ll talk.”

“Eamon has much to mourn and rebuild,” Teagan says behind them. “Should he recover. But at least he can be thankful that both his son and wife are safe.”

“I owe you my deepest thanks,” Isolde adds as they turn to face them. “I nearly…” She covers her face with her hands and takes deep breaths to keep from weeping again. “I can scarcely believe Connor is the boy he once was.”

"Where is Connor now?"

"Sleeping in his room," Teagan tells her. “He will want to see you later, I imagine. But our task is not done yet. Whatever the demon did to my brother seems to have spared his life, but he remains sleeping. We cannot wake him.”

“Surely there is some kind of healing magic,” Hera begins, “we could-”
“The Urn!” Isolde cries suddenly. “The Urn of Sacred Ashes will save Eamon!”

Hera raises her brows at Isolde’s cry. Ser Perth had mentioned this Urn and its mystical healing power. *If that is what it takes, so be it. The Blight must end, and I must return home.* “I will seek out this Urn,” she says with more bravery than she feels. Beside her, she hears Alistair’s sharp intake of breath at her words. "If you're certain it will heal him."

“We will?” he asks hopefully.

Isolde’s eyes fill with happy tears, and she takes Hera’s hand. “I am grateful for your eagerness to help restore my husband,” she tells her. “Find Brother Genitivi, the scholar, in Denerim, he has been researching the Urn’s location for several years now. The knights that returned say they have been unable to find Genitivi, but perhaps the Maker will lead you to him. I will pray for Him to do so.”

“I am needed in the hall,” Teagan says regretfully as Isolde kneels by the bedside to pray. “There is much to do, and you need a great deal of rest. Follow me, I’ll show you to your rooms.”

Hera nods, leaning heavily on Alistair as Teagan leads them down the corridor.

“Would you and your companions feel up to a small celebration later tonight?” Teagan asks. “A private dinner, with myself and Isolde. And Connor if he is well enough.”

“That sounds lovely. They deserve a good meal,” she says.

“And you deserve a long rest,” Alistair cuts in. “We could all do with a real bath and change of clothes.”

“Alistair is right,” she tells Teagan. “Perhaps we could impose on you for a few necessities…?”

“It is taken care of already,” he reminds her gallantly and attempts to take her arm from Alistair. “I will see to everyone’s care and comfort while you recuperate.”

Hera thanks him generously, giving him a rare, genuine smile. The grateful smile turns amused
when Alistair stays beside them, even after Teagan indicates which room in the corridor is his. Unperturbed, Teagan bows and kisses her hand before leaving.

“Does he know you’re a bastard?” Alistair asks, following her into her room.

Hera shrugs, reaching for the knot of her sling. “Probably not. I didn’t see any need in telling him. Does it matter?”

“I just think his manners wouldn't be so sweet if he knew you and I were the same,” he says lightly. “Do you need help with that?”

“If you would,” she says, turning. Once he has the sling untied, she lowers her arm slowly with a grimace. “Seven hells, that hurts,” she hisses.

“I wish I could do something for you,” he says honesty ringing in his voice. “To help.”

“You could help me undress,” she offers with a seductive smile over her shoulder.

“Or I could find you a maid!” His voice breaks and he clears his throat, blushing. "I could find you a ladies' maid," he repeats, deepening his voice considerably.

She laughs and turns to face him, then leans her forehead against his chest. “Thank you,” she says softly.

“For w-what?” he asks, awed.

“Just...being you. I feel so lucky to have you here.”

“I feel the same way,” he confesses. “I’m just so glad you’re...you.”

“Instead of some other nobody unlucky enough to die with the rest of the Grey Wardens?” she teases, looking up at him with a grin.
“It’s a small club,” he chuckles. “Get some rest. You need it.”

She takes a deep breath and turns away to dig in her pack. “I will. But I found something in the Tower that I think Morrigan will be interested in.”

He raises an eyebrow at the black, leather-bound book she holds up. “In the Tower? When did you find that?”

“Irving’s office,” she explains. “You and Wynne were looking over his desk.”

He nods. “Right, we were looking for something about Uldred’s plan, I remember. I’ll let you get to that,” he adds, jerking his chin toward Morrigan’s room. “I’m quite certain she doesn’t want me anywhere around.”

Hera laughs and follows him back out, careful of her arm. “Enjoy your nap. I’ll see you at dinner?”

He flashes her a brilliant smile. “I wouldn’t-”

Ares barrels into him, barking in excitement, and they both tumble to the floor. The mabari gains his feet quickly, moving to leap at Hera, but she lifts a hand. “No,” she commands and points to the floor.

In response, Ares sits and tilts his head at her, tongue lolling out the side of his mouth.

“I’m going to feel that later,” Alistair groans, rubbing his back as he climbs to his feet. “Where has he been?”

“Sten took him when they left,” she says, scratching Ares behind the ear. “You shouldn’t knock people over, Ares. It’s rude. Come on, boy, let’s go see Morrigan. I bet she has more yummy herbs in her backpack.”

Chapter End Notes
One of my favorite things about this project is how Alistair is so affected by Hera, and how it comes out in a personality change. In this particular chapter, my beta LoreKeeper said: "of all the flavors to be, he chose SALTY."

I love it.
Watching Hera flirt with Bann Teagan brings Alistair nothing but misery and confusion; when he confronts her about it, he sees another facet of her character.

“What’s wrong with him?” Leliana asks, leaning over to whisper to Morrigan and looking at Alistair. They’d all come down to the main hall for a lavish dinner after the castle’s servants had brought them new clothes and baths.

“I think young Alistair is jealous,” Morrigan whispers back. “If looks could kill, Teagan would have been dead the day we arrived in Redcliffe.”

Alistair sits off by himself, arms crossed and brooding. Why is she so interested in Teagan? he wonders, watching Hera flirt and giggle with the Bann across the room. Even battered and bandaged with her right arm in a sling she manages to look desirable. Surprisingly, her bruises have faded significantly since just this morning. Wynne’s spell must have been powerful, or Hera had gotten an exceptional nap since he saw her earlier that afternoon.

I never did like Teagan all that much. Why isn't he married, anyway? A lord needs a wife to have an heir. He spends too much time at Redcliffe. He needs to see to his estate when this is all over.

“I suppose he is the reason she was so eager to return,” Leliana gossiped, watching them with interest. “Wynne said she would at least need a day or two to recover, and she wouldn't even wait a day to set out.”

“I’ve never known a man to inspire such foolishness,” the witch sneers. “And yet last night she was lying in her tent close to death, and now she flirts with him.”

“Do you think it’s love?”

Leliana’s tone is sappy and soft and it makes Alistair grind his teeth. Instead, he drains his wine cup again and gestures for more from a nearby elf.
“Why must it be love?” Morrigan’s demand is followed by a scowl worthy of her mother. “Why
can it not simply be that she likes his form and desires him in her bed? I imagine she is used to a
certain level of attention and sex, and she clearly hasn’t gotten it here.”

Would you two shut up? You aren't helping.

“I think it’s romantic,” Leliana sighs, resting her chin on her fist. “She appeared just in time to save
the village and rushed to his nephew’s aid. She nearly died saving the Tower, and she did it for
him.”

“She did it because of the treaty,” Morrigan reminds her. “She would have gone to the Tower of
Magi even if the boy had died.”

“But the boy didn’t die,” Leliana points out. “She made sure to save him. And in a few days, we set
out to search for Andraste’s ashes, to cure the bann’s brother.”

“And you think she does that out of affection for Teagan? Does the Blight not play into your wild
romantic fantasies?”

Alistair leaps to his feet before Leliana can answer. “I’m going to bed,” he grumbles. “Goodnight.”

The girls flinch at his tone and watch him stalk over to Hera, interrupting her conversation and
pulling her away from the bann. “Hera, can I talk with you before you retire?” he asks in a low
voice. “Privately,” he adds flatly with a pointed glance at Teagan.

“Certainly,” she says politely, ignoring his rudeness. “Now?”

He shakes his head. “No, just...later.”

She nods, promising to knock on his door before she goes to her own bed. Alistair goes up to his
room, not because he’s tired, but because he can’t think with everyone around. He feels stirred up,
angry at Teagan and Hera, and he doesn’t know why. The uncertainty is what puzzles and upsets
him most. Pacing, his thoughts settle into a pattern.
Does she flirt like that with everyone? Is that just something a woman like her does? Does she want to spend the night with him? Does flirting mean anything to her? What about when she flirts with me- is she laughing at me for my inexperience? I said I wanted to court her like a lady, and she said she’d like that, but here she is giving smiles and laughter to someone else. Maker, I’m a fool. I shouldn’t have said I wanted to court her at all. Was she serious when she said she wanted me to, or was she just being nice? I don’t understand, why is-

His thoughts are scattered by a light knock on the door. “Alistair?”

“Hera,” he breathes and clears his throat. “Come in.”

She enters, looking incredibly different than she had a half hour before. Then, she had looked vibrant and energetic, beauty shining even beneath the discoloration of her skin. Now, she looks tired and pale beneath her bruising, and her shoulders sag. Had she looked so weak in the main hall?

“You wanted to see me?” she asks, adjusting the scarf Wynne used to devise a sling for her injured arm. Even her voice is rough with exhaustion.

Concern floods through him, and his anger and frustration fade away. “I wanted to thank you,” he says, gesturing for her to sit. “You went out of your way to save Connor when it would have been easier not to.”

“A child needs his mother,” she explains as she sinks into a nearby chair. “And I doubt the arl would thank me for allowing a blood mage to kill his wife.”

“I just wanted you to know I...are you all right?”

Hera gives him a tired smile, and his chest tightens. “I’m just very tired,” she admits. “I was glad when you gave me an excuse to come upstairs.”

“Really? You seemed to be enjoying yourself.”

She shrugs her uninjured shoulder. “Making people believe that is part of what I do. Flirting, feigning interest, all of it.”
“Do...do you do that with everyone?”

“No. Only when I’m being paid, or I think I can get something from it. Or, like now, I need to make a connection with someone in power.” She sits back, letting her legs sprawl in a rather unladylike fashion. “Why do you ask?”

Of course, she’d use her...skills as a way to get ahead. That’s what courtesans do, isn’t it? “Did you-” he stops himself before he looks like a fool. Maker, I can’t ask her that. She’ll laugh at me.

“Did I...?” she prompts.

“Did you mean it when you said you’d like to be courted by a gentleman?” he blurts.

She nods in understanding and doesn’t laugh at him at all. “I meant it when I said I’d like to be courted by you. Why?”

“I was wondering.” Some of the tension leaks out of him. Thank the Maker. Maybe she doesn’t like Teagan as much as I thought. “You’re tired, I shouldn’t keep you.”

“Is something bothering you?” she asks, pinning him in place with her beautiful eyes. “You seem...moody.”

“I’m concerned for you, of course,” he says quickly. If he needed any sign that she was exhausted, that was it. Normally, Hera could read him like a book; her gaze doesn’t affect him any less, but at least for now he can keep his thoughts to himself. “Last night you were in a lot of pain. You don’t seem much better tonight.”

“I’ll be fine. What’s on your mind?”

“Why do you always say that?”

“You’re ignoring my question.” Her lips move into a ghost of a smile, and Alistair finds himself
returning it easily.

“You’re ignoring mine. I’ll answer if you do.”

She hesitates, and he wonders what else she is keeping from him. “Because I am fine. I always am.”

“You don’t have to be,” he says softly.

Hera stands and moves to the door, pausing to put a hand on his forearm. “Yes, I do,” she says just as softly. “Sometimes we don’t get that choice, Hero.”

He looks down at her hand, then into her eyes. “Not all the time.” Hera’s lip trembles and she blinks rapidly. Maker’s breath, I didn’t upset her did I? “I just mean- you-” he sighs and puts a hand over hers. “I’m sorry I’m such an idiot. I’m just trying to say that you don’t always have to be fine with me. We’re Grey Wardens, we have each other’s backs.”

For a second he thinks she’s going to throw herself on the bed and cry, but to his relief, she only nods. “Thank you, Alistair.” She gives him a sad smile, and he feels a strange drop in his stomach at the depth there. “That means quite a lot to me. Goodnight.”
Chapter Summary

Hera experiences a true nightmare for the first time and looks to Wynne for help and comfort.

Hera jerks awake, gasping in pain and fear. She puts a hand to her aching ribs and tries to take slow breaths. What was that? she wonders, sitting up slowly. The darkness is a comfort, but the smoldering fire has made the room too warm, so she gets to her feet, adjusting her sling, drawing a blanket over the linen nightgown Isolde provided and slipping into the corridor.

It must be late, she realizes, seeing how low the candles have burned. She wanders silently, nodding to yawning guards as she passes. In only a few days they've gotten used to her midnight walks, usually accompanied by random questions about the geography of Ferelden. But tonight she had no attention to spare them.

That wasn’t a dream from the darkspawn, she admits to herself, taking a door leading to the ramparts. Nor was it a vision. That was something else- a real dream, perhaps?

The cool air helps, as does the feeling of solid stone beneath her bare feet. Breathing deeply, she looks out over the lake, sparkling with reflected starlight, and shivers at the memory of her dream.

She was in the dungeons of Ravenloft Palace, in chains and kneeling on the cold wet stone and looking up at Strahd. Magic glows in the iron, cutting off her power and leaving her helpless. “You sought to kill me?” He’d laughed at her, shivering and bleeding at his feet. “Stupid slut.”

Hera closes her eyes, willing the image to go away, but it only plays out against her closed lids. Her uninjured hand moves from holding the blanket over her shoulders to grip the stone before her for balance, the intensity of the dream coming back to make her dizzy with fright. The cool breeze slides the blanket off her shoulders, but her shivers have nothing to do with the air.

“Tatyana reborn,” he chuckled, squatting before her. “Oh, you were good. So close. Do you know what ruined it for you?”

Sobbing so hard she couldn't speak, Hera shakes her head.
“Your kiss was too true,” he said, stroking his beard. “You wanted it too much.” He stood abruptly, snapping his fingers at someone in the dark beyond him. “I have a gift for you, pet.”

A guard drags a body from the darkness and drops it before her. The face would be unrecognizable to anyone else, but Hera would know the shape and cut of his features even if she were blind. Hair the color of moonlight has been cut into short, ragged tufts and is stiff with blood. Hera screams, clutching the dead body to her chest and throwing her head back.

Magic pulses through her, threatening to rip her apart without an outlet, and Strahd-

“Are you all right?”

Hera flinches, her knees nearly buckling beneath her. Face pale and eyes wide with horror, she turns to see Isolde standing there, as sleepless as she. Isolde rushes over, catching her arm and brushing Hera’s hair off her face.

“Hera, what is it?” she asks. “Guard, bring a stool for the Warden,” she orders over her shoulder. “Is it your injuries?”

“Y-You startled me,” Hera stammers, brushing tears from her cheeks quickly. “I-I’m fine.”

“You aren’t,” Isolde disagrees gently as a guard sets a wooden stool nearby. “Why don’t you sit and tell me what troubles you?”

Hera shakes her head, raising a trembling hand to cover her eyes as she sits. “It’s nothing, my lady,” she insists. Isolde’s tenderness surprises her- she had set herself to actively dislike her, but here the woman was, treating her as gently as a child. “I am fine.”

Isolde kneels beside her, rubbing her arm. “I know fear now,” she says softly. “A mother’s greatest fear is losing her son, and you’ve gone through unimaginable horrors to save mine. I will never be able to thank you enough, Warden.”

“He was a child,” she says, keeping her voice even and eyes on the stone before her. “He didn’t deserve to suffer.”
“And neither do you, my friend.”

Hera looks at her, reminding herself not to let her mouth hang open. “Do you know who didn’t deserve to suffer?” she spits, her eyes glinting like steel. “Alistair. He was a child, and you treated him like—”

“Like he was in line for my husband’s title?” Isolde counters. “As if I was jealous of a bastard-born son? Yes, I didn’t believe Eamon when he said that he was not Alistair’s father. I was younger than you are now— and anxious to ensure my son’s inheritance.”

“And now you’ll lose him to the Circle and the estate to Teagan.”

Isolde shrugs. “Perhaps. That is for Eamon to decide. All I can say is that I was young, and I resented a boy because I thought he represented Eamon’s relationship with someone else. Who wouldn’t hate a constant reminder that you are not your husband’s only lover?”

“Is Eamon yours?” Hera asks, her voice harsher than necessary. “Or did you abuse and hurt Alistair out of spiteful jealousy?”

“Yes, he is,” Isolde defends, straightening her spine. “And yes, I did do it out of spite and jealousy. But all I can do is ask the Maker’s forgiveness…” She stands, brushing her hands over her skirt. “And Alistair’s.”

Hera’s fear from her dream had slowly dissipated in the wash of anger she’d directed at Isolde, but now even that ebbed away. Has this changed her so much that she would comfort me like a mother and ask Alistair’s forgiveness? “You’d do that?” she asks, looking up at the arlessa. “Ask him to forgive you?”

Isolde nods. “I have realized that I could have held him as an aunt, but I was foolish and petty. His willingness to help Connor…” Tears fill her eyes, and she laughs at herself as she rubs them away. “Much changes when you become a mother, Hera.”

_I wouldn’t know_, Hera thinks, watching Isolde quietly. _Dhampir women are barren from birth._
“I should go before I embarrass myself,” Isolde says quickly, her cheeks red. “If you should like to talk about what bothers you...know I am here.”

Hera nods, confused as to Isolde’s character. *She was so cruel to Alistair as a child and certainly didn’t welcome him home with open arms. But just now...I suppose coming so close to losing Connor has given her new perspective. For Alistair’s sake, I hope she’s telling the truth.*

She sighs and twists her hair over one shoulder. If nothing else, Isolde’s change of heart had given her some distance from her dream, allowing her to think about it logically. *It had to be a dream,* she decides, slowly returning to her room. *Alistair said the Fade is where they go when they dream, could I have somehow awakened the ability when the Sloth demon sent me there? Perhaps Wynne will know.*

***

“Wynne, can I ask you something?”

Wynne nods, not raising her eyes from a long pair of needles wrapped with yarn in her hands. “You may, but only if you sit and rest as I instructed,” she says, waving a hand to the chair across from her. “How are you feeling, Hera?” she asks, finally looking up. “You don’t look as if you slept last night.”

“Better,” she says, shifting the sling on her shoulder and remembering the harrowing dream she’d had. “It doesn’t hurt much. How are you feeling? Have you regained your strength after the Fade?”

The older woman gives her a critical look, reminding Hera of the look her own mother gave her whenever she and Zeus were naughty. “Mostly, yes,” she answers, resting her craft in her hand. “Leliana told me that you have no connection to the Fade, is that true?”

Hera nods. “I...It’s a long story.”

“We aren’t going anywhere for a few more days.”

With a deep breath, she explains finding the mirror and Tybalt, then falling into Ferelden. “We don’t have anything like the Fade,” she adds.
Wynne leans forward, curiosity lighting her blue eyes. “You don’t? What was it like for you when the Sloth demon sent you there? You seemed...unusual when I saw you,” she says. “You almost seemed to be standing in shadow.”

“I can’t describe it,” Hera admits in a quiet voice. “And I’ve tried to find the words.”

Wynne studies her carefully, the curiosity in her face softening into concern. “Did something happen to you there, my dear?”

Tears prick her eyes as Hera’s dream returns to her. Hating herself for such a display, she blinks them away and nods. “I think so. Before I joined the Grey Wardens, I’d never had a dream in my entire life,” she explains.

“And now?”

“Last night I had a nightmare,” she murmurs, looking down at her lap. “It was horrible.” She can feel Wynne’s eyes on her, so she shoots a glance up at the woman. To her relief, Wynne doesn’t press her for details, but merely reaches out to take Hera’s hand in her own.

“Are you all right?”

“It was frightening,” she admits with a shuddering breath. “Do you think it’s possible the Fade...changed me, somehow?”

“It’s quite possible,” Wynne agrees, sitting back and taking up her needles and yarn. “The Fade is where we go when we dream, but if what you say is true, you had never been there before. Perhaps when the Sloth demon forced you into the Fade with his dream, it activated the sleeping part of you, and now you have a connection.”

_And what does this mean for my magic?_ Hera wonders, pursing her lips. “Lovely,” she mumbles. “I have to say, dreaming is rather overrated.”

“For some, I daresay it is,” Wynne chuckles. “But hopefully you’ll have some good dreams as well.”
Hera struggles with Ferelden geography and the secret she can't share with anyone.

Hera rubs her temples and yawns before adjusting her arm. She’d taken off the sling, but it still ached, even after rubbing elfroot salve into it. The kitchen staff of Redcliffe Castle had long gone to their beds, leaving her to the warmth of the kitchen with a lamp to work by. The old butcher block table and dim room are comforting, reminding her of long-ago taverns and adventures.

Before her lay the map of Ferelden from her backpack, presumably part of her recruitment gear, and she’s been staring at it for more than an hour. *Orzammar is closest...technically,* she thinks, following the line of the road in the sputtering candlelight. *But dwarves are...well I’d just rather save them for last. And the Urn must be found first, that is our priority. But if we’re...somewhere on the lake...Denerim is still so far, and we leave tomorrow. I don’t even know what road to take! How old is this thing- it must be older than I am! There is so much to do before next spring- a year isn’t long enough to accomplish all this. Will they be left without a leader? Will Alistair be ready to lead them by then?*

*Am I going to have to die without seeing my brother again?*

The thought enrages her so much she pounds her fist on the table, eliciting a sharp snap as a thin line splinters down the length of the table. *No! I didn’t survive that damn castle just to-***

A footstep behind startles her, and she ducks her head, turning to look briefly over her shoulder and reach for her dagger at the same time.

Alistair didn’t think she’d heard him enter the kitchen or gather food, but he hasn’t realized that she was so on edge. He steps back at her bared teeth and the fire in her eyes, raising the tray in his hand. “I’m sorry,” he says quickly, “I just thought you might want a snack.”

She closes her eyes and he watches her carefully as she rearranges her expression to one of tired serenity and puts her dagger away. *I hadn't realized... She doesn't share any of the burden with us. “Are...are you all right?” he asks gently.*
“Yes,” she says tiredly, bowing her head and covering her face with her hands for a moment. “I’m sorry.”

“Do you always think you’re going to be assassinated?” he asks, trying to keep his tone light and setting the bottle of wine down so he can unload the cups and plate of cheese he’s brought.

“Only most of the time,” she says a little too honestly, lifting her head and pushing her hair back. “Assassinations in the Raven Court aren’t unusual.”

“Uh, I was joking,” he says uneasily, raising his eyebrows.

_Damn, I have to get myself together_. Hera raises her eyebrows and turns her shoulder, giving him a dazzling smile. “So was I,” she lies. “Couldn’t you tell?”

Alistair shakes his head, amused. “Sometimes I don’t get your jokes.”

“You wouldn’t be the first.”

“You look like you need some help,” he says, nodding to the map. “Anything I can do?”

“You can start by showing me where the hell we are,” she mutters, passing a hand over the map. “This is the lake, right? Why isn’t Redcliffe on here?”

He takes a look, screwing his face up as he studies it. “Because this map is...broken,” he laughs. “It must be one of those silly things fashioned before the war with Orlais. The kind of stuff librarians hang on the wall. Where did you get it?”

“It was in my backpack,” she explains, sitting back and peeling the cloth away from the cheese. “With all my other gear when the Quartermaster outfitted me.”

He laughs again and gets up. “Wait here,” he instructs and goes off to his room. When he comes back with his own map, he finds her asleep on the table, head pillowed by her left arm.
Alistair takes a selfish moment to look at her. She looks so serene, even with the greenish bruises still covering half her face. The bandages came off her arm and shoulder this morning, but he noticed earlier that she was still favoring it, the skin of her hand and wrist pink and tender. He was glad they had decided to stay at Redcliffe for a couple days and allow her to heal and rest before going off on this mad chase for the Urn.

Hera wakes, a small cry escaping her. She bolts upright, sniffing and startling Alistair this time.

“Are you sure you’re all right?” he asks, hanging back in case she draws a knife on him again.

“I am,” she insists. “I was just resting my eyes until you came back.” The lie sounds so bad even Hera grimaces as she speaks.

“Oh, well that’s different,” he chuckles and spreads out the map. “Now, here is Redcliffe.” He moved his hand, and went on, “Lothering’s here,” and again, “and there’s Denerim.”

Hera leans over, studying his map. “I think a drunk raccoon drew mine,” she mumbles. “Why do people even draw ornamental maps?”

Alistair laughs and keeps talking, pointing out the differences between the maps. He keeps his voice low, knowing that it can echo down the hall eerily this late. She’s close enough that he can smell the rose oil in her hair and on her skin, remnants from a rare moment of luxury earlier in the day. It isn’t long before the gentle pressure of her leaning against his arm turns into the weight of her sleeping again, and he stops talking to look down at her.

He shifts, turning slightly to face her so she can lay against his chest and keeping his touch light, afraid to hold her too tightly. He knows that one day she’ll leave, or one of them will die, or any other number of things that could drive them apart. And if he’s honest with himself, he’s been lonely so long that he doesn’t know how to let his guard down. Duncan had been the last person he’d opened up to, and now even Duncan is gone.

He doesn’t know what it is, but he finds himself always wanting to be around her, to talk to her; it must be a useful skill in her business. She sees through his jokes to the heart of matters, she knows what he’s thinking. She makes me feel important, he thinks, brushing the hair off her face. Like I’m more than just...useful.

They sit in the quiet kitchen of Redcliffe Castle, the candle burning low and Alistair thankful that
he woke up starving.
Knowing they're headed for Denerim, Alistair asks a personal favor and Hera can't stop herself from teasing him a little.

“He’s dying。” Alistair whispers brokenly, looking down at the arl’s bed. “He’s dying, and I can’t help him.”

“Yes you can,” Hera assures him. “We’ll find the Urn.”

He looks over at her hopefully. “You don’t think it’s a fool’s errand? You don’t strike me as a woman who chases after myths.”

“You’d be surprised.” She smiles and squeezes his arm. “We’ll find it, don’t worry.” She lets him have another moment, hearing a breathless prayer whispered to his Maker, before stepping back. “Come on,” she says gently, offering her hand. “The others are waiting, and it’s a long walk to Denerim.”

“About that,” he says as they leave the Arl’s room. Hera’s brows draw together when he shakes his hand from hers, rubbing it against his chest and clearing his throat. “Denerim. You know, maybe this isn’t the best time to be thinking about this, but I was wondering if we might be able to... look someone up.”

Hera raises an eyebrow. “This wouldn’t be some former lover of yours, would it? Some sweetheart from your past?”

*Will it bother me if it is?* The thought surprises her; she’s never been a jealous woman- in her experience, jealousy could kill a career as easily as help it.

“A former what?” he sputters, horrified at the thought. “No! Do you honestly think I would suggest we go see... together? No!” he says quickly, blushing.

Hera laughs, putting her hand to the wall and holding her sore ribs. “I’m sorry,” she laughs. “But it
wouldn’t be the first time it’s happened. I’ve made quite a lot of money going to look someone up.
"

Alistair glares at her a moment until he starts laughing with her. “You’re awful,” he accuses, unable to keep the amusement out of his voice. He takes a deep breath, and his earlier seriousness returns. “The thing is, I have a sister. A half-sister. I told you about my mother, right? That she was a servant in Redcliffe Castle, and she had a daughter...only I never knew about her. I don’t think she knew about me either. They kept my birth a secret, after all. But after I became a Grey Warden, I did some checking and...well, I found out she’s still alive. In Denerim.”

“Have you contacted her?” she asks, sobering quickly as her heart aches for her own brother.

“No, I thought about writing her, but never did. And then we were called down to Ostagar and never had the chance. She’s the only real family I have left, the only family also not mixed up in the whole royal thing,” he explains. “I’ve just been thinking that...maybe it’s time I went to see her. With the Blight coming and everything, I don’t know if I’ll ever get another chance to see her. Maybe I can help her, warn her about the danger. I don’t know.”

“If you want, we could try,” Hera agrees.

“Could we? I’d appreciate that,” he says with relief. “If something happened to her and I never at least went to see her, I don’t know if I could forgive myself. Her name is Goldanna and I think she remarried but still lives just outside the Alienage. If we’re in the area...well, it’s worth a look.”

“Of course,” she says. “We’ll go as soon as we talk with this scholar Genitivi.”

His smile brightens the whole day, and Hera is glad she can grant him such a simple wish. They meet up with the others in the courtyard, all ready to set out. Many of Hera’s effects have been put on Ares’ back in a special pack made for him, as Wynne is adamant that she not carry anything as heavy as her tent or cooking pot until the raw pink skin has fully healed.

She surveys her new friends: Leliana, excited to seek out a religious relic; Sten, determined and steady; Morrigan disdainful and bored already; and Wynne, who simply seems happy to be along for the adventure, and to get some sort of revenge after Ostagar. Ares barks happily and leaps in circles at the joy of seeing his mistress.

And Alistair, looking at her in a way that makes her heart skip.
“Well, I suppose we’re ready,” she says cheerfully, picking up her pack and slinging it onto one shoulder. *There’s something about beginning a journey that always makes me feel lighter.* “We’ll stay off the main roads…”
Assassin

Chapter Summary

Sten explains Hera's profession to Wynne, much to everyone's enjoyment. All the while, crows watch from the shadows.

“Wynne, how can you do that and walk at the same time?” Hera asks, nodding to Wynne’s knitting. For nearly a week, Hera had been watching her knit as they walk. The elder woman has a string of yarn coming out of her backpack, running under her arm, and a long strip of knitted...something...curling into a bag on her hip. She must have gotten the wool in Redcliffe before they left, and has been happily knitting as they travel. Hera’s seen people do it before, of course, but never so mindlessly. “It’s fascinating.”

“Don’t you know how to knit?” Wynne asks, surprised. “I thought all young ladies learned. They taught us in the Circle so that we would have something to while away what little free time we had.”

Hera shakes her head. “I am not exactly a...lady,” she explains. Or young. “Not like you mean, anyway.”

Wynne gives her a confused smile and tilts her head. “I’m afraid I don’t understand, dear. You seem perfectly well-educated and polite, like a noble’s daughter.”

“Thank you,” she says with a smile. “My mother and instructor both would be happy to hear that. But I’m a courtesan, Wynne. Not a proper lady.”

“A prostitute,” Sten clarifies, disapproval coloring his tone. “She sells her body for fornication.”

“I see,” Wynne muses, a small smile playing on her lips. “Thank you for the explanation, Sten.”

Leliana and Morrigan burst into laughter, and Alistair blushes. “Well, yes,” Hera laughs. “But there’s more to it, Sten.”

“The ‘more’ you speak of seems pale in comparison to the deed itself. Why do you use such
strange words to describe yourself? Your profession is necessary, and of no matter to me.”

“Well, that’s quite nice of you,” Hera giggles before turning back to Wynne. “I was court-raised. My mother taught me many things to do in idle hours—music and arts—but knitting was something...other people did,” she says vaguely.

“People not selling their bodies for fornication,” Sten offers.

“Sten, would you kindly stop?” Hera asks testily over Leliana and Morrigan’s cackles. “I think she gets it.”

“I apologize,” he says flatly. “It is not the act, but the purchase of, that I disapprove of.”

“Why is that, Sten?” Leliana asks.

“Sexual release is not something to be bartered. It is something to be given, like healing.”

“And yet a girl has to eat,” Hera reminds him. “It is my living, Sten.”

“You were incorrectly assigned a task that is unsuited to you,” he explains. “You are no priest or Tamassran.”

“And yet this is what I am,” she says. “I am a courtesan just as you are the Sten.”

Sten is quiet a long moment, looking far ahead as they walk. “You could be more, under the Qun,” is all he says.

Hera tilts her head, arching a brow. No one’s ever said that to me before. Even my throne is something I took for myself. “Thank you, Sten. I think.”

Wynne laughs and pats Hera’s shoulder. “I shall teach you to knit if you...what is that?” she asks as they round a bend in the road, quickly stuffing her knitting into the bag on her hip. Hera follows her gaze and sees a woman running toward them, looking utterly terrified.
“Oh thank the Maker!” the woman gasps as they meet. “We need help! They attacked the wagons, please help us! Follow me, I’ll take you to them!”

Hera glances at the others before they all break into a run, following. “Darkspawn?” Morrigan asks. Both Grey Wardens shake their heads, saying “no” in unison. As they get a little closer, the path leads into a valley between two low but steep hills. Inside, they can see the wagons—two of them have broken wheels, and one lies on its side. Shattered crates litter the road, and several dead bodies lie amongst the wreckage.

Hera sniffs the air suspiciously, lifting a hand to slow them down, and scowls. *That blood is at least a few hours old...* “Something’s wrong,” she says in a low voice.

“This is a slaughter. Who did this?” Leliana asks softly as the woman ahead slows her pace.

“I don’t like the look of this,” Alistair mutters, his eyes roving the brush on the hilltops alongside them.

They hang back, following cautiously, and Hera doesn’t realize their mistake until the woman approaches a short male in leather armor and whispers to him. Cursing, they draw their weapons too late; the ambush is a success. More than a dozen men and women rise from the ruined wagons and the surrounding shrubs with bows and swords drawn.

“Look out!” Morrigan screams, and Hera barely avoids a falling tree. Rolling to her feet, she meets the eye of the leader across the distance. The elf draws his sword and dagger, a fierce look in his eye.

“The Grey Warden dies here!” he proclaims, pointing his sword at her.

“Take out the archers!” Hera orders, throwing the words behind her. “Ares, protect Wynne!”

As one, they move into action, Leliana and Morrigan training their arrows and spells on the archers on either side of the road, and Wynne working healing and supportive spells almost continuously, with Ares snapping at anyone who gets too close. Sten turns his attention to the assassins that have come behind them, while Hera and Alistair focus on the ones to their front.

The assassins do their job very well, sinking arrows and blades into them before they receive their
own wounds. At least once she hears an explosion and a shouted curse from Alistair as he takes a path up the side of the gorge. It’s followed moments later by the sound of swords clashing, so she doesn’t worry. Hera takes small enjoyment in deeply cutting the treacherous woman across the chest before coming face to face with their leader.

It almost seems too soon: neither of them are ready for the encounter, and they stare at each other for a second. “You’re prettier than they said,” he says with a charming smile. His bronze skin is offset perfectly by sun-bleached blonde hair, his sharp elf features complemented by stark black tattooing sweeping from his temple down to his jaw.

“You’re out of friends,” she says as the sound of battle fades away. A seductive smile spreads across Hera’s face, and he looks as if he might speak again, but she surprises him with a direct punch to the face- hilt in hand- making his head snap back and his knees buckle. She grins as he collapses like a pile of bricks, kicking him in the ribs for good measure before turning to survey the rest.

Alistair and Sten are walking back to the road, and Wynne is kneeling beside Morrigan, who has a cut across her back. Leliana seems no worse for wear, aside from a dark red patch on her cheek. Sten jerks an arrow out of his thigh without so much as a grimace, throwing it away distastefully. Alistair looks annoyed by a superficial cut on his arm.

“Everyone all right?” she asks, putting a hand on her sore ribs. I’m doing my own healing spell on these tonight, she decides, healing with their spells is taking too long. I wonder if my magic is just stronger, or does the magic here not work as well on me?

They all respond in muttered curses. Wynne pauses in her treatment of Morrigan, looking around at the bodies of assassins and previous victims, frowning. “How did they know it was us?” Wynne asks. “He mentioned the Grey Wardens specifically.”

Leliana nods. “These are assassins- look at their placement. They came ready for an ambush. These wagons and bodies...it’s all just stage dressing. They attacked a wagon train ahead of us to give the appearance of needing help.”

“It is a good thing Bodhan stayed in Redcliffe a few days,” Alistair says. The merchants had a habit of traveling ahead of them, restocking as they went and then meeting Hera somewhere along the road. “He and Sandal wouldn’t have been able to defend against this kind of attack.”

Hera tilts her head at her friend and raises a brow, looking at Leliana methodically studying the area. And how would a sweet chantry sister know all that, Leliana? Alistair reaches out and
touches her cheek, making her flinching in surprise, and his fingers come away bloody.

He frowns, staring down at his fingers. “You’re bleeding,” he informs her, showing the blood on his hand.

“I don’t feel anything,” Hera says and takes the bandage Leliana hands her to wipe her face. “Sten, do you need stitches?” she asks, digging into her pack for a poultice and bandage. “I’ve a neat hand so you needn’t worry about it hurting too much.”

“No,” he assures, sitting down and stretching his leg out, “a bandage will do.”

She washes and treats his would quickly, blood dripping off her jaw as she works. The cut on her cheek doesn’t hurt, and she worries even more when she realizes she can’t actually feel her cheek. “Does anyone feel anything strange?” she asks. “Numbness or burning?”

“No,” Morrigan says, leaning forward and resting her elbows on her knees while Wynne bandages her back. She hisses in pain, glaring over her shoulder at Wynne before turning back to Hera. “Why, do you?”

Hera nods, poking various spots on her face. “My face feels...I can’t feel anything.”

“It must be poison,” the witch says, gesturing weakly for her backpack. “Look in the front pocket, there’s a vial of cure-all, it has a green label. Dab some on it.”

“How do you know it will stop this particular poison?” Alistair asks, going through the pocket she mentioned.

“It’s a cure- all you nitwit, not a cure- some .”

They start to bicker, but Wynne cuts them off and orders Morrigan to silence and Alistair to apply the medication to Hera’s cheek. With a clean bandage, he dabs it carefully, and she hisses as the cure-all takes effect. The cut stings and pulls whenever she moves her face, but at least she can feel it.
“You might need a stitch or two,” he says apologetically. “Or if Wynne isn’t too tired after she’s done with Morrigan, she can fix it.”

“I’d rather she see to Sten first and make certain he doesn’t need anything else,” she argues. “That arrow went rather deep.” She looks up, meeting his eyes. And I can heal myself, she adds silently.

Leliana comes over and squats in front of her, taking Hera’s chin and turning her face. “I don’t think it will scar,” she decides. “It’s clean, and the blade was sharp. You certainly don’t seem to have any scars anywhere else. Wynne, do you have any of that bandage adhesive the Circle makes?”

Wynne nods to the pot sitting beside Morrigan, and Leliana smears some of the mint-scented jelly around the cut before pressing the bandage on firmly. Hera grits her teeth against the pain but says nothing, listening instead to Morrigan cursing at Wynne for clumsiness.


Hera gets to her feet, leaving them to their devices, and walks over to the leader. She nudges him with her boot, crossing her arms over her chest. “Wake up you wretch,” she mutters, half tempted to pull his blonde hair until he wakes.

He moans, his body tensing for a moment as if he’d spring up and attack. Hera puts a boot on his hand, leaning just enough on it to let him know that would be a bad idea. Almost instantly he relaxes, groaning again and raising his head.

“My...what? I...oh,” he says, opening his eyes and seeing her. “I rather thought I would wake up dead. Or not wake up at all, as the case may be,” he adds as Alistair comes to stand behind her. “But I see you haven’t killed me yet.”

“That could easily be rectified,” she informs him.

His eyes roam over her appreciatively, a slow, smug grin spreading over his face. “Ooh, you’re a rather aggressive little minx, aren’t you? Lovely too,” he adds. “But if it’s questions you’re planning on asking me, let me save you a little time and get right to the point. My name is Zevran-Zev to my friends. I am a member of the Antivan Crows, brought here for the sole purpose of slaying any surviving Grey Wardens. Which I have failed at, sadly.”
“I’m rather happy you failed,” she quips. “I’m rather fond of this body.”

He gives her another one of his long, sultry looks, his golden eyes darkening. “So would I be, in your shoes. For me, however, it sets a rather poor precedent, doesn’t it?” he chuckles, sliding his hand out from under her foot and sitting up slowly. “Getting captured by a target seems a tad detrimental to one’s budding assassin career.”

“Too bad for you then.” Hera keeps all pity out of her voice, remembering how, only a year before, she executed her own cousin. *If he thinks to find too much mercy, he may be disappointed.*

*Which is a shame, because he looks absolutely delicious,* she thinks, knowing exactly how those full, pouting lips would feel along her neck. *In a purely professional sense, of course.*

“Yes, it’s true,” he says dramatically, putting a hand to his chest and hanging his head in shame. “Too bad for me.”

“What are the Antivan Crows?” she asks Alistair, glancing back as the others join them.

“They are an order of assassins out of Antiva,” Leliana offers. “Very powerful, and renowned for always getting the job done…” She smirks down at the assassin. “*Usually.* Someone went to great expense to hire this man.”

“Quite right,” Zevran agrees, strangely chipper for someone who might come out of the conversation dead. “I’m surprised you haven’t heard much of the Crows out here. Back where I’m from, we’re rather infamous.”

“Not for being good assassins, I hope,” Hera says lightly.

“Oh fine, is that what you Fereldens do?” he teases. “Mock your prisoners? Such cruelty.”

“I am not Ferelden,” she informs him haughtily. “Who hired you to kill us?”

“A rather taciturn fellow in the capital. Loghain, I think his name was? Yes, that was it,” he assures them. “I have no idea what his issues are with you. The usual, I imagine? You threaten his power,
yes? Beyond that, I am not loyal to him. I was contracted to perform a service.”

“And now that you’ve failed that service?”

He chuckles nervously, his eyes flitting over the various weapons they wear. “Oh, well, that is
between Loghain and the Crows, and the Crows and myself.”

“And between you and me?” Hera asks, squatting to look him in the eye. He might be an assassin,
but they couldn’t have sent a better-looking one, she admits. His blonde hair, dark skin, and gold-
tinged brown eyes give him an exotic quality compared to the paler Fereldens. Even the black
tattoos scrolling from his forehead and down the side of his face make him look dangerous and
exciting. If he had tried seduction instead of ambush, he might have had a chance, she realizes,
thinking back to the night at the Spoiled Princess, when all she’d wanted was pleasure and no
obligations.

“Isn’t that what we’re establishing now?” he counters in a sultry voice, leaning forward slightly.
His gaze moves from her eyes to her mouth, his lips parted slightly.

“When were you to see him again?” she asks softly, stroking a finger along his jaw.

“I wasn’t.” His eyes lift back to hers, the color darkening slightly. “If I had succeeded, I would
return home and the Crows would have informed your Loghain of the results if he did not already
know. If I had failed, I would be dead. Or at least I should be, as far as the Crows are concerned.
No need to see him then.”

“If you had failed?” she asks, unable to keep amusement from her voice. Something about this elf
makes her think of Zeus, whether it is his sharp features and quick tongue or his careless attitude
she isn’t sure.

“What can I say? I am an eternal optimist. Although the chances of succeeding at this point seem a
bit slim, don’t they?” he laughs. “No...I don’t suppose you’d find that funny, would you?”

“Why are you telling me all this?” she asks suspiciously.

“Why not?” he laughs. “I wasn’t paid for silence. “Not that I offered it for sale, precisely.”
“And how loyal are you to your employers?” Morrigan asks, scowling at Wynne behind her trying to pin her clothing back together.

“Loyalty is an interesting thing,” he muses, leaning to one side to get a good look at Morrigan. “If you’re finished interrogating me, we can discuss it further.”

Hera reaches out and turns his chin back to look at her. “I’m listening.”

“Well here’s the thing,” he begins. “I failed to kill you, so my life is forfeit. That’s how it works, if you don’t kill me, the Crows will. Thing is, I like living. And you are obviously the sort to give the Crows pause. So let me serve you, instead.”

“Can I expect the same loyalty from you?”

“I happen to be a very loyal person,” he says indignantly. “Up until the point someone expects me to die for failing. That’s not a fault, really, is it? I mean, unless you’re the sort who would do the same thing. In which case...I don’t come very well recommended, I suppose.”

“You must think I’m royally stupid,” she scoffs and stands, turning away.

“I think you’re royally tough to kill,” he tells her. “And utterly gorgeous. Not that I think you’ll respond to simple flattery,” he adds when she turns back to him. “But there are worse things in life than serving the whims of a deadly sex goddess.”

Alistair nearly chokes, and Hera throws her head back and laughs. “You have no idea, Zevran. But what will you do for me?” she asks. “Do you have other skills beyond failing at assassination?”

“I am skilled at many things,” he informs her, insulted. “I can fight with stealth and pick locks. I could also warn you should the Antivan Crows attempt something more...sophisticated...now that my attempts have failed. I could also stand around and look pretty, if you prefer,” he offers charmingly. “Warm your bed. Fend off unwanted suitors. No?”

“Bed-warming might be nice,” she muses.
“See? I knew we would find a common interest,” he says cheerfully. “Or two. Or three. Really, I can go all night. So what will it be? I can even shine armor,” he adds. “You won’t find a better deal, I promise.”

“Very well,” she laughs, liking him more by the minute. “I accept your offer. You can stay with me until I find a way home.”

Zevran gives her a confused look. “And after?”

She shrugs. “You’re free to do as you like.”

“What?!” Alistair screeches. “You’re taking the assassin with us now? Does that really seem like a good idea?”

Hera winks at the elf before looking over at him. “Don’t worry about it,” she persuades. “We could use him.”

“You can use me all you like,” Zevran murmurs.

Don’t tempt me, she thinks, deeply amused at Alistair’s reaction.

Alistair glares at the elf a moment before relenting. “Hmm, all right. All right. I see your point. Still, if there was a sign that we were desperate, I think it just knocked on the door and said hello.”

“I knew you would,” she says happily.

“A fine plan,” Morrigan says lazily. “But I would examine my food and drink far more closely, were I you.”

“That’s excellent advice for anyone,” Zevran agrees.
“Welcome to the party,” Hera says, offering a hand to help him up.

“I hereby pledge my oath of loyalty to you,” he says formally, “until such a time as you choose to release me from it. I am your man, without reservation...this I swear.” He bows his head, and Hera laughs.

“Where I’m from we seal a deal like this with a kiss,” she says suggestively.

“I am most happy to oblige,” Zevran says excitedly, coming in for a kiss.

Alistair blocks his advance with an arm. “You know there are other ways of dealing with people, right?” he asks Hera in an irritated tone. “You don't have to flirt with them?”

“Of course there are.” Hera gives Zevran a cheerful wink. “But they’re not as fun. Why, jealous?”

“What? No! I just- you don’t have to use your...womanly wiles against everyone!”

“What a shame,” Zevran moans, disappointed. “You seem rather adept at it. Perhaps later, yes?”

Hera grins. “Perhaps. Start going through these bodies. Take anything useful.”

“Yes, ma’am!” He gives her a lazy salute and starts stripping his former comrades.
Zevran's Oath

Chapter Summary

Alistair has spent all day waiting to speak with Hera privately about Zevran, but she's concerned with keeping the peace.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“All right, Hera,” Alistair says, approaching her on her way back to the campfire. She’d been bathing in the lake and spent a glorious, silent hour floating in the cold water alone, with only Ares to ward off intruders. “You can’t have meant that earlier, about the assassin.”

Hera looks up at him and frowns, wringing out her damp hair. “Zevran? I absolutely do.”

“Hera, he tried to kill you! You, specifically!” he reminds her, pointing. "You can’t trust him!"

Tilting her head, she raises an eyebrow. “He’s sworn himself to my service, and I have no reason to disbelieve him.” It certainly wouldn't be the first time I acquired a companion in an unusual way, she thinks, remembering when Jamison had knocked on the door to her room at an inn in Ravenloft. She’d been entertaining herself with a local, and he’d given her a rascal’s grin and offered to take over for the poor man. He must be burned out, he’d said, letting his eyes trail up and down her naked body hungrily, don't worry, firecracker, I can take the heat. "Why shouldn't I believe him?"

Alistair growls in frustration and runs his hands through his hair. “Because he’s a murderer, Hera! Loghain paid him to kill you, why would you think he’d keep his word?”

“Because I’ve offered him something more valuable than what Loghain or the Crows have,” she answers. “Freedom.”

“And if it’s a ploy to get close to you, only to finish the job?”

“Then I expect you to avenge me and continue on the quest.”
Alistair shakes his head, unable to come up with a satisfying response. “I just...I don’t want you to get hurt,” he says finally.

She smiles up at him and resists the urge to touch his cheek, knotting her fingers together instead. “I know, and I appreciate that. Trust me, Alistair,” she says softly, "even if you can't trust him."

He takes a deep breath, running his hands through his hair again. "Fine. All right. But I'm watching him,” he tells her firmly. "Closely."

Hera bites her lip, indulging in a long, slow look at him, her manner turning to seduction in a heartbeat. "I'd rather you watch me,” she purrs.

He laughs and wags his finger at her before walking to the fire, threatening Zevran with torture and a slow death should he so much as lay a finger on Hera. Hera laughs as Zevran makes a remark about Hera requesting all ten of his fingers on her, and Leliana has to jump between them to stop Alistair from hitting him.

“Boys,” Hera scolds as she approaches. “Calm down. Zevran’s only teasing, Alistair.”

“Of course, of course,” Zevran charms, his accent growing thicker with persuasion. “I am only teasing; I would never harm the beautiful woman who saved me from certain death by the Crows.”

“And Alistair would never harm an ally,” Leliana declares, shooting the templar a motherly look. “Would you?”

“No,” Alistair grumbles. “I just want to make it clear that if you turn on us, the darkspawn won’t get a chance at you,” he clarifies, pointing at Zevran. “I will destroy you.”


Alistair’s jaw clenches, and he nods. “Of course. Zevran and I will have first watch.”

“Good plan!” Zevran says, clapping his hands. “Spend some quality time together. Get to know
one another. That is how it shall go, yes?”

“If you insist,” Hera yawns. “I’ll take second with Ares. Sten and Leliana deserve a night off. Wynne can have the third.”

“Alone?” Zevran asks, glancing at Wynne.

“I am more than capable of listening to you all snore,” Wynne snips. “And Morrigan shall keep me company.”

“Oh, joy,” Morrigan groans. “I’ve been sliced open, assaulted by assassins, and I get third watch. Glorious.”

“It will give me a chance to check your wounds,” Wynne says happily. “You know healing magic can take time.”

“It’s settled, then. Ares,” she calls and holds her tent flap open for the mabari to go inside. In Redcliffe, she’d bought him his own bedroll, and fashioned a harness for him to carry it himself. Now, in her new tent- larger than the one she originally gave to Leliana- she watches him bump it with his nose until it’s unrolled and he can lay comfortably. With a sigh of delicious relief, she sits and pulls off her boots, rubbing her sore feet. Before she can get too comfortable, however, she hears Alistair call her name. “Yes?” she asks, biting back a yawn.

He steps inside, looking shy and guilty. “I apologize,” he says quickly, looking down at his feet. “For threatening him, that is. It was stupid, and I shouldn’t have acted that way. I...I do trust you, Hera, and if you say he’ll be true to your oath, I believe you. He just...” His jaw clenches and she can see his hands twitch before curling into fists. “I don’t like how he flirts with everyone.”

Hera sets to braiding her damp hair. “I appreciate your intention, but that sort of egotistical display really has no place here. Especially not over me,” she adds. “We have bigger problems, Alistair. Just...just don’t kill each other, please? At least not until I’ve had a hot bath and slept in a real bed.”

“Who knows when that will be?” he jokes.

“Exactly. Perhaps you’ll be friends by then.”
He laughs and pats Ares on the head. “Don’t hold your breath,” he advises. “Goodnight.”

With a deep breath of relief, Hera falls back onto her bedroll and is asleep almost instantly.

Chapter End Notes

Zevran's FINALLY here! I've been waiting for this new phase forever, and I know some of you lovely readers have, too.
The Dryden Legacy

Chapter Summary

A peaceful morning in camp is made far more interesting by a stranger with a story, and Hera’s flirtation with Zevran grows.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They walk north for ten days, avoiding the main roads and making slow progress through the countryside. All too often the road ends in some unmapped village, and they’re forced to follow a river or the North Road until they can veer off it again. Hera prefers to travel out of easy sight, and now that they have a renegade assassin and a bounty on their heads, her habit puts everyone else at ease as well.

She frets, taking watches alone so she can pace and consult the map over and over, counting the days and the miles. Time seems to be moving faster and faster with every dawn, the day of her next name day haunting her as the season changes from summer to fall. They’re still a week from Denerim when they meet Levi Dryden.

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When Hera wakes, there’s a wagon rolling into camp. Wynne had the last watch, claiming that she doesn’t need as much sleep as the rest of them anyway, and has Hera’s cup of coffee ready. “You’re a goddess,” she murmurs, inhaling deeply. “Have I told you that you’re my favorite?”

Wynne chuckles and pokes the fire. “I doubt that, my dear. Do you know him?” she asks, nodding toward the wagon. Its driver is currently parking next to Bodhan’s wagon.

Hera shakes her head and takes a sip. “No. But he seems to know me,” she says, confused when he stands on his bench and waves. “I suppose I’ll go find out.”

“You do that, I’ll start breakfast.”

“Ooh, what are we having?” she asks.
“I was going to scramble some eggs with last night's venison.”

“Sounds delicious,” Hera chirps and rolls a few potatoes out of the ashes. They’d put them near the fire the night before to slowly bake overnight. It wasn’t much, but it was warm and filling in the chill mornings. “I’ll be back soon. Ares, to me.”

The mabari follows as they cross the clearing, but lowers his head and growls, staying close to her side as they approach the middle-aged man jumping down from the bench. “You’re a hard woman to find,” he says cheerfully, pushing dark red hair off his forehead. He gives Ares a nervous look and takes half a step back. "Fine animal, the mabari,” he stammers.

Hera raises her eyebrows. “Am I? Ares, do be quiet,” she scolds the dog. "It's rude."


She shakes her head and sips her coffee. “Duncan never mentioned you. My name’s Hera.”

“How did you know Duncan?” she asks.

“Really?” he says, shoulders slumping in disappointment. “He never told you of ol' Levi? We’ve known each other for years...But here I am carrying on while you have a Blight to stop- I don’t want to waste your time. But you see...Duncan promised that together we’d look into something important for the Wardens. And for me. But poor Duncan’s...well, no more,” he says sadly. “A tragedy it is, ‘bout that. But I know he would want his work carried on, his pledge fulfilled.”

_Here we go..._ she thinks. “How did you know Duncan?” she asks.

“It’s a bit of a tale,” he says, his cheerfulness returning. “But I’m the one who brought the Grey Wardens back to Ferelden. Well, I was one of the ones,” he amends. “There were a lot of us. Maker’s breath I’m a bit nervous. Honored to be here, really.”

_Back to Ferelden? I’ll have to ask Alistair later._ “What promise did Duncan make you?”

“My family...well, the past is a bit checkered, you see. Nobles look at us with disdain. My great-great-grandmother Sophia Dryden was the last Warden-Commander of Ferelden, back when the Wardens were known as freeloaders. So King Arlen banished the Wardens, and he took House Dryden’s lands and titles.”
“That’s a bit...drastic.” *And yet, drastic measures are sometimes the right ones,* she reminds herself silently.

“And then some,” he agrees. “Not much is known about that time. After King Arlen died there was a civil war, loads worse than this one, and our family was on the run, hunted by enemies with nary a friend in the world. But Drydens are tough,” he says proudly. “We rebuilt. We became merchants. And we never lost our pride.”

*So I see. You tell quite a story, Levi.* “So what favor did you ask of Duncan?”

“I asked for the truth,” he explains. “My family reveres Sophia Dryden. We know she died at the old Grey Warden’s base, Soldier’s Peak; we want evidence to clear her name. It won’t restore our land or our title, but it *will* restore our honor.”

“I’ve never even heard of Soldier’s Peak,” Hera tells him, wondering if he’s telling her a tall tale or if she should wake Alistair.

“Well, no one’s been to Soldier’s Peak since Arlen’s day. At least none that’s come back. I’ve spent years mapping the maze of tunnels to the Peak and I found the way a few years back. So I went to Duncan, I did, and I said that he could reclaim the old base and my family could have its honor.”

“A few years? Why didn’t Duncan help you?” she asks suspiciously. “If you and he were such good friends, what happened?”

“Darkspawn surfaced in southern Ferelden,” he explains. “And Duncan got plenty busy recruiting new Wardens and meeting with good King Cailan. Duncan said he would help after the battle at Ostagar- said there might be useful things at the Peak. But he never had the chance.”

“So what do you need from me?” She takes another sip of coffee, watching him closely.

“I can pick my way through the tunnels at the base of Soldier’s Peak, but the place- well, they say it’s haunted. *And it’ll be dangerous for certain. I know it’ll be out of the way, your dwarf friend said you were headed to Denerim, but this is important to both my family and the Wardens. Will you think on it, at least?”*
She nods. “I’ll need to talk it over with the others, but yes, I’ll think on it.”

“I appreciate that, Hera,” he says with a nod. “Mind if I stick around until you decide?”

“Be my guest, but stay with Bodhan,” she warns. “Safer that way.”

“Oh, of course, of course. Thank you,” he says, trying to contain his excitement.

She nods and salutes him with her tin cup before she and Ares walk back to the fire. “Is Alistair up yet?” she asks Wynne as she tops off her cup.

Wynne jerks her chin toward the creek. “He went to the creek a few minutes ago with Zevran. Leliana, do get up,” she chides the tent she shares with the bard. They’d decided it was simply easier for them to have a larger tent and only pitch one than to each be saddled with a bundle of heavy canvas each day. “Even Zevran is awake now.”

Hera laughs at the grumbling that comes from inside and heads into the woods. The stream is a few minutes’ walk from their campsite, but her hearing is good enough that she can hear them long before she sees them.

“Zevran, do you mind if I ask you a...personal question?” she hears and stops in her tracks.

“You may ask, but I may choose not to answer,” Zevran says amid splashing water.

Hera creeps close enough to just see them through the underbrush. Both are waist-deep in the clear creek, shivering in the crisp autumn morning as they scrub themselves with soap. Knowing something amusing will come of this, she crouches down and takes a drink of coffee.

“Fair enough,” Alistair concedes. “Have you...had very many...women...in your time? I mean, you seem like the sort of man who…”

“I have indulged from time to time,” Zevran admits. “When my interest is not...elsewhere.”
“Right. Well, how do you...woo...them? Is there a...technique, or...?”

*Oh gods,* Hera thinks, covering her mouth and trying not to laugh. *Oh, bless his sweet golden heart. Zevran is not who he should be asking!*

“Woo them?” Zevran asks, shock making his voice pitch higher than normal. “Are you quite serious?”

“Uh...yes,” Alistair laughs nervously. “I-I don’t know what else to call it.”

“So let me get this straight,” Zevran says slowly, waving his bar of soap around. “You have never... *wooed*? Not once? You are...woo-less...as it were?”

“All right, bad idea,” Alistair says grumpily. “Never mind.”

Hera falls over, laughing soundlessly and dropping her cup, spilling coffee in the grass. After she regains composure and brushes the grass and leaves from herself, she picks up her cup and approaches noisily. “Boys?” she calls as if she didn’t already know where they are.

“Over here, my Warden,” Zevran answers loudly. “But be forewarned: I am in my glorious flesh and you may be tempted to swoon. Do not fall into the creek; you may drown.”

She breaks through the brush and puts her hands on her hips, looking down at them. Alistair takes a few hurried steps back, into deeper water so it covers him to the waist. Giving him a strange look and shrugging, Zevran faces her, hands on his hips as well.

“Can I help you, my Warden?” he asks suggestively, rocking his hips back and forth.

Hera gives him a mischievous grin and raises her eyebrows. “I...think not,” she says sadly, dropping her eyes from his face to his hips. “The water is a little cold, don’t you think? You'll have to be at your best to help *me.*”
"Maker's breath," Alistair groans and turns away from them.

Zevran looks down and laughs, throwing his head back. "Ah, Hera, you are too clever by half. Come closer and tell me what it is you have come for."

Hera sits on the bank and pulls her knees to her chest. "Alistair, have you ever heard of Levi Dryden?"

“What? Me?” he squeaks, looking over his shoulder.

“You are Alistair,” Hera teases, eyeing the muscles of his back and shoulders appreciatively. "If I could dream of those hips, that would make the Fade and its curses bearable. "Levi Dryden," she repeats, breaking away from visions of sweat-slick skin under her hands. "Do you know of him?"

“Duncan mentioned him a few times,” he says, turning back to his bathing. “Why?”

“He’s here.”

“Here?”

“Yes.”

Zevran dives into the water, rinsing the soap from his hair and body. Hera loses sight of him, but Alistair’s shriek and the riot of bubbles coming from beside him reveal his location soon enough. “Zevran, don’t tease him,” Hera chides, hiding her smile. “I’m trying to talk with him.”

“How can you talk when there are two handsome, virile, naked men in your presence?” he asks, coming out of the water and grabbing his towel. “Amor, you don’t even look at me,” he pouts.

Hera grins and shields her eyes. “I fear that I would die of lust should I look too closely,” she flirts. “All that golden, glorious flesh, just made for pleasure.”

Zevran lowers his eyelids and holds open his towel. "I am yours," he says huskily.
Hera's laugh nearly drowns out Alistair's disgusted snort. "You are too much for me," she sighs, covering her heart with her other hand. "I must stay keep my distance. Safer for us all this way."

“You tease me mercilessly,” he accuses, knotting his towel around his hips with an offended sniff.

“Alistair,” she says, keeping her eyes covered. “Dryden?”

“Do we have to have this conversation while I’m naked?” he asks, his voice breaking.

Hera sighs, pretending to be annoyed. “I suppose it will wait.” She gets to her feet and winks at Zevran. “Nice,” she says with a grin.

He grins in response. “I can do better than nice.”

“I’m sure you’d like to try.”

Chapter End Notes

Maker, I love Zevran and Hera together. They're so perfect.
Chapter Summary

Alistair has a very personal reaction to the idea of going to Soldier's Peak.

“Soldier’s Peak, eh?” Alistair says, rubbing the back of his neck. “It’s not too far—just a day or two north of here, I think.”

“So it wouldn’t be out of the way?” Hera asks, looking at the map. “If we’re...here?” She looks up to see him nod. “And Levi says it’s here,” she points to a mark on the map. “Then it wouldn’t be much of a problem, would it?”

“A day or two north is also a day or two into the mountains,” he says. “It’s not a straight road, we’ll have to go around, and it’s probably already snowing up there. Soldier’s Peak is in the mountains, that’s why the Grey Wardens used it, it was easily defended.”

Hera taps her bottom lip, frowning in thought. *Arl Eamon needs to be our priority.* “What would the trip from there to Denerim be like?”

He shrugs. “Honestly, I don’t know. I’ve never been there, I only heard a little about it from the other Wardens. I can’t imagine it would be too hard, though, moving south again...Wynne, what do you think?”

Wynne shrugs and gives voice to Hera’s main concern. “There may be benefits to reclaiming the base. But we have to weigh the immediate cost of time against Arl Eamon’s health.”

Hera nods, chewing her bottom lip. “We don’t even know when we’ll be this close again—*if* we get this close again.”

“What should we reclaim this base?” Sten asks.

“It would be nice to have a home base for the Wardens when this is over,” Alistair tells him. “And there could be Grey Warden records there—like how to do the Joining.”
“Oh, the history of a place like that!” Leliana sighs. "A rebellion and siege! How exciting!"

“Is there any reason we should go?” Morrigan asks, waving her hand over the map with irritation. “’Tis miles out of the way, and likely filled with demons to dispose of. The simple possibility of old records for a dying order is not a great enough prize, I say.”

“Is there any reason not to go?” Zevran asks, toying with his whetstone.

“Yes,” Morrigan says with frustration. “The Arl may die while we’re on a fool’s errand.”

“He’s lasted this long,” Zevran points out. "And we may fail this Arl Eamon, anyway. A few more days will not make much of a difference."

“I believe it is the Grey Wardens’ choice,” Wynne reasons. “The last Warden-Commander made the promise, it falls to them to decide.”

“Duncan did promise.” Hera looks to Alistair, who’s lost in thought. “Alistair?”

“Let’s take a walk,” he suggests, jumping to his feet and striding off without her.

Hera shoots the party a confused look and hurries after him. “Alistair, is something wrong?” she asks once she catches up. “Is it something about Levi?”

He just sits on the forest floor, covering his face with his hands, taking deep breaths. “It’s me,” he whispers. “I just...Duncan and I...we were going to do it. Go to Soldier’s Peak and see what was there.”

“After Ostagar,” she finishes, kneeling beside him. “Alistair, can I tell you something?” He looks up at her, waiting for her to continue. “You’re not Duncan,” she says gently. “You don’t have to take up his mantle and be Warden-Commander.”

“But someone has to-”
“I can do it,” she offers with a small smile. “At least until you’re ready. He was like a father to you, I understand that. You’re allowed to grieve, when and how you need to. I’m not going to make you do something that will make it worse. If you don’t want to go to Soldier’s Peak, we won’t go.”

“I want to go.” His voice is low, but the tone is even and determined.

“Are you sure?”

He nods. “The Warden-Commander made a promise to someone the Grey Wardens owe much to. If the others don’t want to go, they can go on to Denerim and we’ll meet them there.”

Hera manages to keep the smile from her face. He’ll make a good leader one day. “Very well. Let’s go tell them.”

They stand, and she turns to go, but he grabs her hand. “Hera? Thank you,” he says, clearing his throat.

She squeezes his hand quickly, then slips free. “We’re Grey Wardens; we’re here for each other. Let’s go back to the others.”
Chapter Summary

Late night watch is the perfect time for Alistair to work on his courtship. Hera uses the shared time alone to learn more about one another.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Tell me about growing up in Redcliffe.”

Alistair smiles. A lot of their conversations start this way, one demanding a story from the other in the small hours of the night. Neither of them seem to mind, as they’re on watch and staying awake anyway. They walk along the edge of their campsite to keep warm, comfortable with one another in the darkness. It hides how often she makes him blush, at least, and sometimes, the dark makes him bold enough to hold her hand. Unlike now, as he rubs his damp palms on his pants leg.

*I’m such a fool,* he thinks, palms sweating. *How can she even be interested in me? She’s so...experienced. I’m everything she’s not. And yet...when she looks at me, I feel like I could do anything. “Redcliffe? Really? We’ll be at Soldier’s Peak tomorrow. I should tell you Grey Warden stories.”*

“Those will be nice,” she agrees, clutching her cloak closer. He’s jealous of the fur lining her cloak for getting to be so close to her. “Later.”

“Well, it gets hot in the summer,” he says. “That was when I didn’t mind sleeping in the stable, it was cool at night.”

“You slept in the stable?” she gasps.

He nods, his expression guarded. “It was made very clear that I was not in line for the throne, that I wasn’t a prince. I was a bastard.”

“That’s horrible.”
He shrugs, ignoring the pain in her voice for him. “It was how it was,” he says with a lightness he doesn’t feel. “I liked the horses. They didn’t care who I was, or the bad luck of my birth. They just wanted to be treated well.”

Her hand slips into his, and his stomach flips over. “Isn’t that what everyone wants?” she asks sadly, and his mouth goes dry.

Clearing his throat, he closes his hand around hers. “I suppose so. Most of them didn’t treat me badly, so to speak, but Isolde resented me and the rumors that I might be Arl Eamon’s son. She found ways to make my life hell, so it was almost a relief when they sent me to the chantry.”

Almost.

“But you hated it there,” she says, her melodic voice filling in the parts she already knows. “They made you wash dishes.”

“I was horrible,” he jokes. “I hated everything about that life. Sometimes the silence would get so bad I would stand in one place screaming until one of the brothers came running. I would tell him I was just checking to make sure I could be heard.”

She laughs, the sound bright and surprised at his antics, and his heart skips. “What would they do?”

“Give me kitchen duty- alone. I didn't mind so much, you get to know the scullery cats really well.” Maker, help me come up with another joke, he prays. “What was Fandemier like as a child? Were you a terror at court?”

“Oh no,” she says, and purses the lips he dreams about. “Zeus was the outgoing one who made mischief. They adored him for it and forgave him every little thing. Mother made sure I knew how to be a perfect lady. By the time I was seven, every move I made was calculated to skew things my way.”

“Did you know then? That you would become a courtesan? That seems...young,” he says disapprovingly.

She shakes her head, and the scent of roses comes off her hair. “No, I didn't begin learning my art
until I was much older, but I think Mother knew in her way. Zeus, she allowed to be a playboy- an advantageous marriage was her hope for him. He serenaded boys and girls by the score and flirted with everyone. I, on the other hand, watched the court and saw how power and influence ebbed and flowed. I had to learn how to control my magic, as well, and that was taken very seriously.”

“I have trouble picturing you as a serious little girl,” he chortles. The snow starts to fall in thicker flakes, sparkling in her hair for seconds before melting. She’s so beautiful in the snow.

“I wasn’t all serious, not really. I was trained to be charming and endearing on the outside, and keep my thoughts to myself. But compared to my brother…” She shrugged. “He was popular, and I kept my distance unless he drew me in. It served me well when I returned to court.”

“After your training.”

She nods. “I was fifteen when I was sent away to learn my art. Two years of frustrating, wanton lectures and demonstrations,” she laughs.

“You missed your brother?” Of course, she did. I’m an idiot.

“Terribly. He’s my other half,” she says, looking down at the palm of her free hand. “Even now I feel as if you can’t know me without knowing him.”

“One day we’ll meet.” He squeezes her hand quickly, trying to think of something to make her smile.

“I do hope so.”

“Tell me more,” he says as they circle the camp again. “About you and your brother.”

“I asked you about Redcliffe first,” she reminds him. “You’ve hardly told me anything.”

“There’s not much more to tell. I’m a bastard. I slept in the stable. I went to the chantry.”
“And you met Duncan,” she reminds him. “He conscripted you. You became a Grey Warden.”

“Then I met you, and the whole world fell apart,” he jokes, ducking his head to hide the goofy smile on his face. *It had to, to make room for you.*

Her laughter trails into the darkness behind them, her cold hand wrapping around his. “You’ll learn that I am a shaker of worlds, Hero.”

Chapter End Notes

I love how sweet this chapter is, don't you?
“Tell me about Ravenloft,” Alistair suggests, sitting with his back to the fire. They’d circled the camp for an hour, and came back to shovel snow away from the center of camp and build up the fire. It’s difficult for Hera not to simply use magic to move the snow- and to give herself a much more comfortable bed in her tent- but she keeps her promise to hide her skills in the forefront of her mind. *It's so incredibly...human,* she thinks, trying not to pout as they sit before the fire.

Hera turns to watch him stretch his legs out and lean back on his elbows. “Ravenloft? Why?”

“You’re always learning about Ferelden, I thought it might be nice to talk about your home. Unless you don't want to,” he adds, concern flooding his face. "Is it painful to talk about home, being trapped here?"

Hera looks down at the mending in her hands. “*Home* is...well, it’s a word for it, I suppose. I only lived there a little over a year before coming through the mirror. It’s...rather different than Ferelden- or anywhere, really.”

“*You’re* rather different,” he chuckles, “so I’m not surprised. I’d like to hear about it, I don’t want to be totally ignorant when we go there.’”

Her stomach flips at his words; in her experience, promises made during seduction and lovemaking are rarely remembered and never kept. *He really wants to go back with me.* “Ravenloft is ruled by a Dark Lord, in this case, a woman known as the Queen of Darkness- the common people call her the Raven Queen- who is in turn policed by a…” She pauses, trying to find a simple explanation for an inexplicable power. “A force, I suppose, known as the Dark Powers. They are not pleasant to deal with, and mostly devise ways to torture and annoy the ruler. Like your Maker, perhaps, but less distant and more meddlesome.”

“How did you come to be there?”
Hera smiles. “Honestly, I was in a bath when it happened. I had taken a personal night off and was indulging in a delicious bubble bath and a frivolous romance novel. The next thing I knew, I was standing in a dark, foggy forest, dressed in an elaborate antique gown. Zeus was there, as well, dressed just as strangely. We met three others in the forest, all unsure of how we had gotten there, and decided to join together to find a way out of our situation. It really is a rather long story,” she says. “And boring.”

“You can skip to the good parts,” he suggests.

She takes a deep breath. “To make a long story short- well, less long,” she begins, “there was a curse on Ravenloft, and its Dark Lord. Strahd von Zarovich was the current ruler but had usurped the throne. He had allies in the court who had passed information along to him, and he used it to assassinate the true king and found a way to lock all the portals leading in and out of the realm. As Lord of Ravenloft, he was firm, and after a while, generally well-liked until he fell in love with his brother’s betrothed, Tatyana. The peasants don’t care much who rules them,” she explains, “so long as their day-to-day life doesn’t change.”

“Really? I would have thought regicide would be a sticking point.”

“Mostly for the nobility, who knew the king personally. On the day Tatyana was to marry his brother Sergei, Strahd killed him, and pursued Tatyana so doggedly that she finally threw herself from the walls of the castle. Watching her love die and his murderous brother’s obsession with her was too much; it drove her mad.”

“How horrible,” Alistair murmurs.

Hera studies the needle in her hand, struck with how similar it is to the weapon she used to kill the creature who’d stolen her father’s throne and locked her and her brother away from their birthright. “It was. The Dark Powers are also...guardians, I suppose, of justice and law, and saw what Strahd did. He was cursed to become a creature of the night, a vampire, for killing his brother and causing the insanity and death of an innocent woman. Part of that curse locked Ravenloft in a veil of mist, shrouding the entire country so that no one knew where they were or how big Ravenloft was and filling the forests with monsters not too different from your darkspawn. That's all slowly changing as the mists roll back, however,” she adds. “Strahd eventually died, but the Dark Powers resurrected him, dooming him to relive finding Tatyana, falling in love with her, and losing her over and over for centuries. In turn, he tortured the people under his rule, until Ravenloft became a dark and dangerous place, somewhere no one in their right mind would travel to.”

“And this is where you come in?”
“Yes,” she says with a smile. “My brother and I led our new friends through the castle, filled with haunting nightmares and traps of all kinds. I had been told the story of Strahd by several villagers, each telling more romantic than the last. I was...quite entranced by the time we reached the castle,” she admits, feeling foolish about her past infatuation. “I had girlish fantasies of being the true Tatyana reborn, of healing his heart, breaking the curse, and finding love for myself. But when we got there...it was not to be,” she says flatly, looking down and knotting her fingers together. “His spirit had been twisted and corrupted, and even if he had been alive, he was incapable of love. All that was left of Strahd was pain and rage. The only choice was to destroy the curse and free him. I made a pact with the Dark Powers to end his curse and put another on the throne, restoring Ravenloft to its former glory. Then...I seduced and killed him.”

No need for him to hear all the gory details, she thinks. If I tell him about the things that were in the castle, he’ll never set foot in my kingdom.

“What...kind of pact?” he asks, a tremor of anxiety in his voice.

Hera looks down at her hands. “I had to give up the future that had been set for me, and accept whatever came.” She laughs a little bitterly. “What was worse is that they told me what I was trading away.”

“What did they tell you?”

Hera is quiet a long time, remembering. She had stood between planes, in a dream state or something similar, and spoken with an echoing chorus of voices, agreeing to their demands and countering with her own. If Zeus had been there, if she had told him, he would be furious that she traded her life away. In payment for Ravenloft and destroying Strahd, she would be queen, and choose her heir- but at a great cost. Precisely two years after she was crowned, she would die at the hands of a demon. “I don't really remember,” she lies smoothly. “I remember Strahd, and not a lot else.”

“It must have been hard,” Alistair says. “Were you really in love with him?”

“No,” she answers, her voice hard. “I thought I could have been. I was caught up in the story and willing. But no. He was...” She looks into the darkness, her eyes seeing the way she’d pressed her body close to Strahd’s, their lips meeting in a passionate kiss just as she slid her dagger between his ribs. “He was a monster. Incapable and undeserving of anything I might have felt.”

“Who rules in Ravenloft now?”
Me, she thinks, dashing the thought away before it can slip out. It’s too late to tell him now, and best he never knows the truth. If we do make it to Ravenloft together...well, he’ll learn the truth then. “The Dark Powers chose her; she is the Queen of Darkness. The Duke of Shadows claims she is the lost daughter of Ravenloft’s original ruler from centuries past- a man named Drakul, who was visiting an ally when Strahd usurped his place. A fair ruler, I think, and she has opened the doors to Ravenloft again.”

“Is she well-loved?” he asks, smiling at the happy ending of her tale.

Hera smiles, thinking of the warm welcome she receives anytime she rides through the nearby town. “I think so. The court adores her, and she works very hard for the people.”

“Is there a lot of work to do?” He laughs, ducking his head shyly. “I'm sorry, I’m asking so many questions, you may not even have all the answers.”

Her smile grows, happy to talk about her home with him. “I don’t mind. I help where I can; my knowledge of statecraft makes me useful, and I still own a brothel in Sigil. Ravenloft is a small province, with one large town at the castle and a few villages, forests, and the mines, but it is enough to keep anyone busy. And there’s the court she keeps,” she sighs, picturing the nobles that make up a great deal of her friends and family, "two dozen of the most beautiful and dangerous creatures- Zeus and I, included. It’s still dark and mist-wreathed most of the time- a natural mist,” she explains quickly, "the gothic beauty of it will never change- but the sun shines a little brighter, and the harvests are a little better. They mine for precious metals there, as well. It is the largest source of trade.”

“It sounds like you miss it.”

“Does it?” she asks, tilting her head. "I’m rather proud of the way things are, and my hand in it.”

He nods. “Has anyone ever told you that you’re an intense woman?” he chuckles. “But talking about your home, you seem...lighter, somehow. Happier.”

She looks away, ignoring how her chest aches with longing to return home. “I do miss it. It’s home now, or whatever comes close to home. My brother and I live at court and serve the crown, traveling to Sigil to tend our business there from time to time, but we always return to Ravenloft.”
“Where is Sigil? Outside of Ravenloft?”

She nods. “Sigil is...difficult to explain. It is a city outside of any world but holds doors to nearly every world in existence. Somewhere there is one to Ferelden,” she tells him. "I'll have to visit the Cartographers to find the right path when I return."

His eyes grow wide at the idea. “That’s fascinating. When this is all over, we’ll go back to Ostagar and start searching,” he says excitedly. “I can’t wait to see you in your own element.”

Hera smiles at his enthusiasm. “I don’t know if you would like it,” she warns, “but I’d like if you came to visit.”

“How could I not like Ravenloft?” he asks, sitting up. “It has the most beautiful ambassador.”

Hera blushes and looks away. Why am I blushing? This is hardly the first time I’ve been called beautiful. “You think I’m beautiful?” she asks nonchalantly.

Alistair laughs. “You know you are.”

“It’s just nice to hear someone agree with me,” she jokes, making him laugh louder.

She turns when she hears Zevran crawling out of his tent, muttering and heading into the darkness to relieve himself. “It seems our watch is over,” she says, looking up at Alistair.

“It seems so, raven,” he murmurs, boldly twirling some of her hair around his finger.

“Raven, is it?” she asks breathlessly, watching his eyes darken as he leans into her space, filling it with his warmth. Please kiss me. Please let me know what you want, she pleads silently. Please do something before I die of desire.

He makes a humming sound of agreement. “For your hair. Unless you don’t like it? I won't call you that again if—"
“No,” she says quickly. “No, I like it.”

Alistair looks suddenly shy and pulls his hand away. “I’m sorry, I just...don’t know how to do any of this,” he laughs. “I’ve never courted anyone before.”

Hera smiles and takes his hand, lifting it to press her lips to his palm. “You’re doing just fine, Alistair,” she says softly. “Take your time; I’ve never been courted before.”

He lets out a breath of relief. “So...it’s all right if it goes slowly?”

“Perfectly all right,” she murmurs as he leans closer. Her eyes drift down to his lips, and she suppresses the urge to close the distance herself. The scent of leather and soap and Alistair fills her senses, making her feel like she has a head full of wool. “I have all the time in the world.” His breath quickens, and warmth spreads through her as she tilts her head for his kiss.

Before their lips can meet, there’s a delicate cough behind them, and they jerk away guiltily. “What a good thing there was nothing to watch for,” Zevran laughs, standing beside Leliana. “Is that not right, bella?”

Leliana grins down at them. “A very good thing,” she agrees. “I suggest you take this to your own tent.”

Hera watches Alistair bolt for his tent, his face red and mottled, and stands slowly. “Your timing is awful,” she scolds her friends gently.

Zevran chuckles and pinches her cheek. “I somehow don’t mind interrupting.”
After traveling north to Soldier's Peak, Hera finds a clue that could change her situation entirely.

“Soldier’s Peak has strategic and symbolic importance,” Alistair reminds Morrigan for the hundredth time. “Duncan said that alone made the endeavor worth it. Then there’s the Warden history and perhaps some relics there.”

Each word was accompanied by a puff of warm fog, reminding Hera of the dragon-borns she’s met and how they always run a little hotter than everyone else. The dark, iced-over tunnels Levi’s been leading them through have completely blocked out the otherwise clear, cold day, and a strange wind howls its way through the maze like a haunting spirit.

_Not a bad place for a dhampir, really_, she thinks, tugging her hood further down.

“All I know is that it’s snowing earlier than it would be if we’d gone on to Denerim,” she grumbles. “And I’d rather be in an inn by the fire, eating a meal I didn’t have to kill and cook.”

Hera pulls her own cloak closer against the icy air. “You have a point,” she mumbles, blowing into her cupped hands. “How is it so cold here, and only a day ago there wasn’t a hint of snow?”

“There’s always snow in the mountains,” Levi explains.

“Lovely,” she mutters, wishing she’d taken Wynne up on her offer to teach her to knit a pair of mittens. She could kick herself for not realizing she could wear them inside the fur-lined ones she’d gotten from Bodhan.

“I do not find it so cold,” Zevran says, proudly wrapped in an orange wool scarf Wynne had made for him.

_He had the foresight to ask for mittens_, Hera thinks sullenly.
“Right now I’d split your guts and crawl inside if it would keep me warm,” Morrigan tells him. “Shall we see what Crows are made of?”

Hera laughs, the sound echoing oddly off the tunnel walls. “Let’s not,” she decides, momentarily forgetting her discomfort. “Morrigan, you could have stayed at camp,” she reminds her. “Leliana and Wynne could be teaching you to knit yourself a nice warm shawl right now.”

“And leave you at the mercy of these two buffoons?” she asks, gesturing to Zevran and Alistair. “Hera, you need me more than I need a fire.”

“Hey!” Alistair says. “I haven’t done anything!”

“Today,” Zevran reminds him. “I do not think your comment about warts has been forgotten, my friend.”

Alistair chuckles gleefully at the memory. “That was a good one.”

“I hate you,” Morrigan tells him venomously. “So much.”

“All right,” Hera says, calling the attention of the group. “Levi, there’s light ahead, is that the exit?”

“You can see that far? Those Wardens knew what they were doing when they recruited you,” he murmurs in awe.

Hera shrugs. “I eat a lot of carrots,” she says lightly.

He gives her a bizarre look and nods. “Is that so?”

A little while later they emerge blinking from the tunnels. “Here we are,” Levi says grandly. “Soldier’s Peak.”
Hera’s breath catches at the majesty of the fortress. It’s as large as Ravenloft Castle, its towers reaching into the clouds and the walls joined solidly with the mountain. In the blinding light, it looks like something out of a story- a sleeping castle covered in snow.

“And what exactly are the five of us to do, should we encounter an army of darkspawn or demons?” Morrigan asks.

“Defeat them.” Hera says simply, excitement building. Castle raids and crawling through dungeons have always been her favorite adventures, offering thrills one just can’t find with armies and politics. Good honest fun killing things that go bump in the night, she thinks, her hands twitching in anticipation.

“An army, Hera?” she asks incredulously. “Do you know what an army is? Against five?”

Hera glances at Alistair and knows he feels it too. She can see it in the grin spreading across his face, in the sudden swiftness of movement as he checks to make sure his sword is ready to draw. Looking over her shoulder, she gives Morrigan a smile that speaks of danger and darkness. “It wouldn’t be the first time I’ve gone against such odds,” she says smugly. “Let’s go.”

She and Alistair practically leap into action like horses pulling at their tracers, leaving Zevran and Morrigan trailing. “They’re insane,” Morrigan grumbles.

Zevran laughs. “My dear Morrigan, I believe they are just excited. Don’t you ever get excited about anything?”

“No. These are the worst Grey Wardens I have ever heard of.”

“These Grey Wardens are barely out of childhood,” Zevran reminds her.

“More’s the pity,” she hisses. She tilts her head when she hears Alistair’s war cry. “Oh goody, they’ve found something to play with already.”

“Shall we, my dear?” Zevran offers, drawing his swords.
By the time they reach the courtyard of the fortress, Alistair and Hera are trading blows with five undead creatures in ancient armor. Morrigan waves a hand lazily and sets them ablaze, and Hera turns with a cheerful smile when the creatures fall dead.

“You decided to join the fun after all,” she chirps. “But you might want to look behind you.”

Zevran bares his teeth and turns, seeing four more straggling toward them. “Couldn’t let you have all the fun!”

Once the courtyard is clear, Hera kneels and examines the armor on them. “These are two different forces,” she muses. “Look, this has the Warden’s symbol on it, and these are…I haven’t seen this crest anywhere, do you know it?” She looks up at Levi for the answer.

“My guess would be they’re King Arlen’s men,” Levi tells her, pointing to the armor. “The last anyone knew of Soldier’s Peak was the rebellion Sophia Dryden led against Arlen.”

“Rebellion? Why would they rebel?” Hera frowns, moving her gaze to the ancient Grey Warden corpses. Nice armor, though, she thinks, brushing a bit of leathery skin off a breastplate. I wouldn’t mind something like this myself.

Alistair answers for her. “The Grey Wardens are not beholden to any one king,” he explains. “They do what they must to defeat the darkspawn. If King Arlen was giving them grief…” He shrugs. “Whatever the reason, it was the catalyst that got us banned from Ferelden.”

“Hmm. Well, I wish it was in better shape,” she says, rising. “It’s quite striking.”

“Maybe we’ll find some inside,” Alistair suggests. “It is one of our keeps.”

They enter the fortress carefully, unsure of its condition. Inside, they find a mess of papers- it looks as if a storm has blown through, leaving chairs overturned and a large candelabra leaning heavily to one side. Their entrance lets in a breeze, making more pages flutter and an ancient wheel of a chandelier creak as it swings above them. Hera picks up a page and reads over the spidery handwriting. “It’s a journal,” she muses, looking up. “There is more to leading men than sorcery, she told Avernus,’” she reads. “Then it talks about a rousing speech ‘she’ gave- Sophia, perhaps?”

“Very likely,” Alistair agrees, taking the page from her. “I assume the ‘human despot’ is King
Arlen. Do you think he would have had them executed?"

“I would, were I him,” Zevran says.

“You’d hang your own mother,” Morrigan points out.

“Not my mother, but someone’s, yes.”

“Levi, if these are the things she said, it seems greatness is in your blood,” Hera comments.

“That’s kind of you to say,” he gushes. “Generations of Drydens said our stock were lions; fierce, proud, and noble.”

“Hey look at this,” Alistair says, calling them over to a wall. On it is a faded poster that reads:

On these grounds, Virtuous Men stood against a Tyrant. They stood defiant and stood for Freedom.

And they died.

Signed,

Captain Melo, The Black Ferret, Chair-Thrower Lopez, Ser Derek of Orlais, and Jason the Longbow

The list goes on, naming all the Grey Wardens who’d stood against King Arlen. “Jason sans les Argonauts,” Hera murmurs. “I know that name…”


“Latin…?” Zevran asks. “It sounds a little like the Tevinter tongue.”

“It’s just another language,” she says. “But I know of Jason. One of his Argonauts was a patron once. He’d found a door to Sigil and told me about him.”

“Perhaps this Jason found your door as well,” Morrigan suggests. “If one adventurer found it, so too another.”

Hera nods. “Well, that certainly is interesting. If he came without the men, then he came without the Argo- his ship.” she adds. “So he didn’t take a water passage.”

_I’m not the first_, she thinks, goosebumps raising the hair on the back of her neck. _There could be a hundred other doors leading to Thedas! If a hero from Midgard made it...By the Powers, the possibilities are endless._

_Thedas could be opened up to new technology, new ways of using magic- their whole chantry view on it could crumble! Mages could be as free here as they are anywhere else in the planes!_

The next room holds an arcane horror, and Hera wonders if there’s anything abandoned in this world that isn’t overrun by demons. But they do find a hidden love letter, which makes her laugh, and she tucks it away to read to Alistair later. They move through the fortress, encountering more undead with decrepit armor and weapons falling to pieces.

“Why is there such unrest here?” Morrigan asks. “Are these poor souls trapped, or are they so bitter about their end that they’ve simply stayed?”

“Something’s off,” Hera agrees. “It feels...well, it feels a bit like the Fade here.”

She nods. “I agree. Something is wrong, these Grey Wardens have done something to cause it.”

“Look here,” Levi calls, “another book.” This one is badly burned, and they can hardly make sense of it. “The...truth?...must be told,” he reads. “About what? Their rebellion?”

“Perhaps there’s more elsewhere,” Hera offers from the nearest door. “Let’s go.”
She turns and comes face to face with a dozen grinning skulls with razor-sharp blades pointed directly at her.
Hands of an Assassin

Chapter Summary

Zevran hasn't felt like a true member of the group until now. Hera only wishes she hadn't had to pay the price for it.

“I am no healer,” Morrigan reminds them, looking down at Hera and shakes her head. “Not for something like this. I am sorry, my friend. Alistair, you do it.”

“Me? What? Oh no,” he stammers, waving his hands. “I can't even mend my own shirt!”

Hera looks at Zevran, standing a little behind her friends. He’s only been with them a short time, and in spite of his wild flirtation and charm, it’s clear he doesn't feel entirely welcome. She’s noticed that he prefers to keep watch alone, and sets his camp away from their circle. He knows they don’t trust him, thinks that Hera kept him alive to force him to help her. That was why I brought him to Soldier’s Peak, to prove otherwise. Wynne had mentioned feeling particularly tired after the long cold walk, so Sten and Leliana had stayed with her, leaving Hera with the perfect opportunity.

But now here she is, a deep gash in her leg bleeding all over the place, and no healer in sight. I should have brought Wynne, she thinks, hissing through clenched teeth. Morrigan’s only learned a little of her healing magic. The undead Grey Wardens had ambushed them, and since she’d been closest to their entrance, she’d taken the brunt of the damage, the worst of it a rusty sword cutting deeply into her thigh.

“Zevran,” she gets out between clenched teeth. “Zev, you have to do it. You’ve got steady hands, right?”

“Me?” he squeaks and holds his hands up to refuse her. “No, amora, you do not want me to do it. I am an assassin, not a surgeon.”

“Yes I do,” she insists, looking up at him. “Help me, please.”

He stares at her a long moment, and she can feel his question in the look.
“Zevran, I trust you,” she tells him. “You won’t hurt me.”

He hesitates only a second before her words send him into action. “Morrigan, my dear, get the needle and gut from Hera’s pack,” he says quickly. “Alistair, there is brandy in the side pocket of my backpack. Give her a big drink.” He kneels beside her, ripping open her pant leg. “Normally I would have given you a nice dinner and poured a bottle of wine into you, then you would not mind my ripping your clothes off. Alas, you must forgive me,” he adds with a roguish grin. “This will be painful,” he says to her in a low voice, and he looks genuinely upset that he can’t make it less so. “I am sorry.”

Hera grasps his hand in her blood-smeared one. “I don’t mind a little pain,” she says, smirking up at him. “Just promise to bring a little pleasure into it, as well.”

“For you, amora, I will bring all the pleasure I am able.”

Morrigan and Levi stand with their backs to them, watching for more trouble. Alistair moves her to his lap, getting her off the icy floor, and Zevran sits between her legs to access the gash in her thigh better. If she wasn’t in so much pain, Hera would laugh at having both men holding her so intimately. She doesn’t cry out while he works, but she does turn her face to Alistair’s arm from time to time whenever Zevran splashes more brandy on her leg.

Unsurprisingly, Zevran’s hands are quick and nimble, his stitches small. Hera wonders where he’s learned to do this; if it’s a skill the Crows teach their recruits so they have no need for surgeons or physicians, and decides to ask him later. “Zev,” she says with a grimace. “Distract me. Tell me about Antiva.”

“Oh, you wish to know of Antiva, do you?” he says with a cocky grin. “The only way to truly appreciate it is to go there. It is a warm place, not cold and harsh like Ferelden. In Antiva it rains often...but the flowers are always in bloom, or so the saying goes. I hail from the glorious Antiva City, home to the royal palace. It is a glittering gem amidst the sand, my Antiva City. Do you come from someplace comparable?”

“Ravenloft,” she gasps, her whole body arching in pain as he reaches the widest part of the wound. “Quite dark and misty.”

“You know what is most odd? We speak of my homeland, and for all its wine and its dark-haired beauties and the lilting flutes of the minstrels...I miss the leather the most.”
“Is that some kind of euphemism?” Alistair asks dryly.

Zevran has to stop what he’s doing and laugh. “It may as well be. But not this once, no. I miss the smell,” he tells her, glancing up at her as he goes back to his work. “For years I lived in a tiny apartment in Antiva City’s leather-making district, in a building where the Crows stored their youngest recruits- packed in like crates. I grew accustomed to the stench, even though the humans complained of it constantly. To this day the smell of fresh leather reminds me most of home more than anything else.”

“You sound like-” she hisses, the burn of the alcohol mingling with the stabbing pain shooting from her hip all the way down to her toes. She shifts involuntarily, trying to find a way to relieve it to no avail. “Like you’ve been away from home forever,” she finishes, taking a deep breath.

“Oh, not so long,” he says, patting the inside of her thigh with a smile. Beads of nervous sweat form on his forehead, and now and then he looks up at her, amber eyes meeting hers. You can trust me, his look seems to say. When this happens, they nod to one another, acknowledging the unspoken promise between them. “Almost done now, my Warden,” he says softly, and gently runs his hand down her leg. “Morrigan, that room at the end of the hall, can you move our things there? She will need to rest a while, and that is the best place should we need to defend it.”

“As you wish,” Morrigan says simply, and Levi starts gathering their packs. “Shall I start a fire as well?”

“Please,” Alistair says, not looking away from Zevran’s hands. “We’ll be there soon.”

As they go, Zevran starts talking again. “This is my first time away from Antiva,” he explains, glancing from Hera to Alistair and back again. “The thought of never returning makes me think of it constantly.”

“I understand that,” Hera says softly, looking distant and sad.

“Before I left, I was tempted to spend what little coin I possessed on leather boots I spotted in a store window. Finest Antivan leather, perfect craftsmanship...Ah, but I was a fool to leave them. I thought ‘ahh Zevran, you can buy them when you return for a job well done!’ More the fool I, no?” He pulls the last stitch tight, making her yelp, and ties it off. “There you are, bella. You have good skin, it will not scar.”
“Your home is still there, Zevran. You aren’t trapped here,” Hera says in a low voice. *Not like me.*

“True, and it is a comforting thought,” he agrees, sitting back on his heels. “One simply never knows what is to come next. How could I have expected I would be defeated by a beautiful Grey Warden, a woman who then spares my life? I could not.”

“Flatterer,” Alistair grumbles.

Zevran gives her a small smile as if they share a secret. “Now, if it is all the same to you, I would prefer not to speak more of Antiva. It makes me wistful and hungry for a proper meal.”

Hera awkwardly leans forward, wrapping her arms around his arm. “Thank you,” she whispers and kisses his cheek. His body goes stiff with the gesture, and she pulls away quickly, letting him have his space. Zevran’s smile deepens a little more, revealing a charming dimple as a faint blush tinges his cheeks and the tips of his ears.

“Come on, pretty lady,” Alistair says, shifting her so he can stand. “Let’s get you somewhere less bloody.” Hera nods, letting him carry her down the hall. “That was brilliant,” he says under his breath. “Did you know he could do stitches?”

Hera shakes her head. “I had a guess he’d be nimble, but no, I wasn’t sure.”

Over his shoulder, she watches Zevran worriedly. He’s still sitting there, covered in her blood and staring at his hands. *A killer turned healer,* she thinks. I wonder if he ever considered himself anything more than an assassin.
A Doorway of Hope

Chapter Summary

When the group finds a mysterious mirror spitting out demons, Hera is convinced she's found a way home at last. But will she leave her quest unfinished?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

They give Hera an hour to rest, and Morrigan performs a small healing spell her mother taught her—good for little more than a scraped knee—but combined with Hera’s own supernatural healing, it is enough. She lays back against Alistair while Zevran quickly mends her pant leg, teasing him.

“I’m ashamed,” she teases. “I must be losing my touch if men are trying to get my clothes on me.”

Zevran takes the bait. “Amora. I would rather cut them off you slowly, with a sharp knife and steady hand, and tease you for an hour while I do so. It is only that this is no place for such fun that I stop myself.”

Hera laughs. “Would you? That’s something no one’s done in a very long time.”

“Um, do we have to talk about how he wants to undress you?” Alistair grumbles. “Not to mention how other people have done it.”

“I could give you some pointers,” Zevran offers, “tell you the finer points of the art of undressing.”

“Oh shut up,” Morrigan sighs. “Hera, you tease them too much. One of them will think you mean it one day.”

Hera raises an eyebrow at her and gives her a wanton look. “If only you’d think so, pretty witch,” she flirts.

“You disgust me,” Morrigan snaps, but looks a little pleased anyway. “Are you ready to go?”
“I think so,” she says, “Zev, help me up.”

Zevran grabs her hand hauls her to her feet. “Are you certain?” Alistair asks when he hears her grunt.

“Yes,” she says, shaking her leg a little. “It’s well enough. Morrigan, you should get Wynne to teach you more healing magic,” she suggests, “you have a knack for it.”

“What a joy, learning at the knee of a preachy chantry mouse,” Morrigan says sarcastically.

“Let’s move on,” Levi suggests. “I don’t like sitting around here, it makes me nervous.”

Hera lets them precede her, and casts a small spell of her own under her breath to relieve the pain in her leg. Alistair hears her mumble and looks over his shoulder at her, but she just smiles and picks up her pack.

Back down the hall and up a small flight of stairs is a large room with a thick layer of dust on every surface. A dry-rotted table leans precariously, missing a leg, and above it is a painting so thick with grime it’s hardly recognizable. “The Great Hall, unless I miss my guess,” Levi says, gesturing to the time-darkened portrait of an old man on the wall above a fireplace full of spiderwebs. “That must be the first Commander of Soldier’s Peak.”

“You know a lot about the place, don’t you?” Alistair asks.

“Oh, of course,” he says enthusiastically. “We Drydens have always been proud of Sophia Dryden. Soldier’s Peak holds history for more than just Grey Wardens.”

The air smells strange, something underlying the stale and dusty; Hera’s nostrils flare with annoyance when she can’t quite identify it. Something’s...strange here. I just can’t put my finger on it.

“What is that?” Zevran asks, heading up another short flight to the next level. They see a table to one side of the long room, but at the other is a mirror and four gear-like contraptions on the ground.
“A mirror!” Hera cries, grabbing Alistair’s arm. In the dark room, it emits a purple glow, lightning crackling along its edges and a strange miasma issuing from it. It looks nothing like the one Hera and Tybalt passed through, the frame made of heavy marble instead of carved dark wood. There’s no whisper of adventure, no magic tingling along her skin; all she can feel is the electric snap of lightning in the air.

*Not all doors look the same,* she reasons. *Or feel the same, for that matter. This one could go to Midgard. Or Sigil, or any number of places. It could still help me go to Ravenloft. Is this how Jason arrived?*

“Does it look like the one you came through?” Alistair asks, panic twisting his features.

“No, but it’s close enough!” she says cheerfully, running toward it. Morrigan grabs her, pulling her to a stop as large demon steps through.

Undead rise up from the gears on the floor but don’t move forward. Morrigan freezes the demon in place, and the two men rush the undead. Hera is distracted as she fights, unable to focus with hope so nearby. It makes a difficult skirmish more so, and it seems to take forever before the demon disappears, roaring and fading away like a shadow.

In the sudden silence, Hera walks toward the mirror, awe-struck. She can hear Levi and the others begin talking behind her, but she ignores them, all her focus tuned to the mirror before her. The magic in her blood races through her, and she can hardly hear anything beyond her heart beating.

*Home,* she thinks, reaching out to touch the rippling glass. *Is it true? Could it be the way? I can go home, and never have to come back to this wretched, cursed world where everything about me is anathema. If I can get home... I could send help. I could help end the Blight in days...*

*I could see my brother again.*

“Hera!”

She’s jerked out of her thoughts by Alistair grabbing her arm and looks up at him in confusion. “W-What?”
“You don’t know if that’s a door!” he says harshly, tugging her back to where Levi and the others are still talking. “Why would you just go touching something a demon just came through?”

“Alistair! What if it’s my mirror?” she argues, jerking her arm out of his reach and stomping back up the stairs. “I’ve been here for months- this could be it!”

“We don’t know anything about it!” he shouts, picking her up and putting her over his shoulder.

She raises her voice to match his, her fists pounding on his back. “I don’t know anything about the one I fell through, either! Put me down, you brute!”

“Twould seem our leader has finally seen the light,” Morrigan quips, watching him unceremoniously dump Hera on the floor.

“And how do you know it will work?” Alistair demands, rubbing the small of his back with a grimace. “Leave it alone.”

Hera jumps to her feet and stands toe-to-toe with him, seething with rage and barely quelling the urge to slap him. “What are you so angry about? Alistair, that’s a door and I know it! Why won’t you let me go? ” she asks, her voice shaking with unshed tears.

“Hera, would you be reasona- ow ! That was uncalled for!” he cries when she kicks his knee.

Hera bolts around him, using her damphir speed for once, but Alistair somehow manages to grab her ankle in a vice-like grip, jerking her feet out from under her. She hits the floor with a thud hard enough to raise dust and rolls over, glaring at him.

“ That’s a door to another place,” Morrigan corrects her softly, kneeling beside her. “You couldn’t have come through that mirror, Hera. I’m sorry, but if you go through it now...I do not know where you would go. Where it is would likely be overrun with demons. I don’t even know how to open it,” she adds, helping her sit up.

“I’m sorry, Hera,” Alistair adds, moving behind her again.
Hera looks back at it, shaking her head. “No...that’s it ,” she says passionately, looking back to her friend. “Morrigan, don’t lie! I know that’s my way home. Help me, and I will give you anything you desire. You could come with me!” she suggests. “A world where you’d be truly free to practice magic as you wished!”

“That sounds tempting, my friend, but I am sorry.” Morrigan shakes her head sadly, meeting Alistair’s eyes over Hera’s shoulder. “Unless you live in some other part of this world, it cannot help you. That’s called an eluvian, an ancient device elves once used to travel, but this one seems to lead directly to the Fade. I doubt very much that you came through one to get here.”

Hera stares at Morrigan a long moment, her eyes begging her to be lying. “No,” she whispers, and climbs to her feet, ready to run back to the mirror. “No, I came through a mirror, I can go back through one, too. I’ll show you,” she says, trying to move past Alistair again.

“Hera, no,” he says in a gentle voice, grabbing her arms. They struggle, and she manages to slip out of his grasp, this time making within arm’s reach before he jerks her away, wrapping his arms around her from behind.

“Alistair, please,” she whispers, yearning to touch it so much that she leans so far forward he’s all that’s keeping her on her feet. Tears start filling her eyes and she doesn’t bother to hide them. “I have to go home. Zeus needs me. Why don’t you just let me go?”

“I’m sorry,” he says again, wrapping his arms around her. “Don’t go, not yet.”

“I have to try,” she chokes. “Let me try. If Jason came through this mirror, I can come back. Please.”

Hera twists out of his arms and reaches for the swirling glass, hesitating long enough to pull her glove off her shaking hand. Wait- can I really leave? Abandon the quest? she asks herself. Could I forgive myself if I left everything, left Alistair, now? She glances back at him, standing there looking helpless and heartbroken, and then back at the mirror.

For Ravenloft? For Zeus?

She takes a long, slow breath, her heart pounding in her ears, and reaches out once again. This time her hand doesn’t tremble. Her fingertips graze the surface, but instead of dipping into it, like she should have been able to do, they simply rest on glass so cold and full of lightning it stings her
Disappointment crashes into her like a wave, all the stress and fear of the past months threatening to drown her. Her tears turn into a storm and a low, bitter sound escapes her as her fingers curl against the glass. Zevran quietly ushers Levi and Morrigan down the stairs and leaves the Grey Wardens alone. Hera weeps with fury, slapping at Alistair’s hands when he tries to comfort her.

“I hate this world,” she says in a quivering voice. “I hate Thedas and everything in it! Why am I here?” She turns away from the mirror and shouts at the ceiling, a magical wind whipping through the room and sending dust, bones, and bits of debris flying through the air. “Damn the Dark Powers! Damn you all!” she screams. “All I wanted was peace and you just give me more death and destruction! I hate you!”

Alistair’s heart breaks as he watches her: trapped in a world at war, finding and losing hope within heartbeats. So he waits patiently while their strong, unflappable leader breaks apart in a filthy hall of a decrepit fortress, ignoring the hurtful things she says and ready try to cleanse her of magic should it get out of hand. He hates having to constantly move her away or put himself between her and the mirror, but he’s afraid if she destroys it more demons will come out. It’s a bitter thing, he thinks, watching her shriek and curse gods he’s never even heard of. I wish I could help her, do more for her.

Finally, the fire in her burns out, and she sinks to the floor and covers her face. Alistair approaches her carefully, kneeling and embracing her. Hera turns into his arms, burying her face in his chest and sobbing. He waits until she’s quiet, patting her back and letting her get it out.

“You have the patience of a saint,” she croaks after a while, wiping her face.

“Like Andraste herself,” he jokes, but his expression doesn’t quite live up to the cheer in his voice. With a heavy sigh, he brushes the hair off her face, catching a tear as it streaks down her cheek. “I’m sorry, Hera.”

Her face flushes, embarrassed, and lets her hair fall back into her face, hiding herself from him. “I’m sorry I’ve made such a scene,” she says bitterly. “I shouldn’t have said- I didn’t mean-”

“I understand,” he says softly, tilting her chin up to look at him. “I’m almost certain you don’t hate Zevran, anyway.”
“Or you,” she sniffs. Alistair pulls a handkerchief from his pocket and hands it to her.

Hera untangles herself from him and stands, crossing her arms and staring at the mirror from a distance. She takes a deep, shaking breath, staying silent long enough for him to wonder what she’s thinking. “The first time, I could feel magic all over my skin, almost taste it in the air,” she says finally, frowning. “It’s not like that here. My magic is silent; there’s nothing. It must have been my own desire,” she decides, taking another calming breath and straightening her shoulders. “Do you ever see something and just know that it’s destiny bringing you together?”

“Sort of,” he says, coming up beside her. “I guess I felt that way when I met Duncan.”

She nods, her expression unreadable. “I knew my destiny was tied with my mirror the moment I saw it. This one is as silent as a grave.”

“We’ll find a door,” he promises her. “Just...not one with demons coming out of it, all right? That disqualifies this one.”

He watches her out of the corner of his eye as she shakes her head and drops it into her hands. “I wanted it to be the right one,” she confesses. “So badly every nerve told me it was. But I’ll know when I find it. It will call to me. Damn me to seven hells,” she says with a bitter laugh, “I feel like an idiot.”

“Do you need a moment alone?” he asks, “I can get the others, give you a moment.”

Hera nods, grateful for the time to compose herself. Alone, she has to stop herself from shattering the glass. Rebraiding her mussed hair, Hera silently berates herself for being so foolish. Even so, disappointment hangs on her like a damp shroud, and she turns away from it as Morrigan comes up the stairs alone.

“Morrigan, I’m sorry I called you a liar,” she says quickly. “I didn’t mean it.”

“Desire does strange things,” Morrigan says with an easy shrug. “I understand. Shall I explain the mirror once more?”

“That’s not necessary,” Hera says with a shake of her head. “I understand. Thank you.”
Pity crosses Morrigan’s face as the men follow behind. “I am sorry, truly.”

“Let’s just move on, shall we?” she asks flatly.

Hera takes out her frustration on the undead that attack them through the fortress. As she slices through dry-rotted bone and sinew, she asks herself if she would truly have left. *I hesitated once the moment was there...would I truly have gone, if I knew for certain where it would lead? Would I leave him so soon? And what about the Blight? There’s no way to know when I would be able to return with an army. I’d rather bring him with me, let us embark on a new adventure together...but he would never leave Ferelden in danger. And...I don’t think I could leave him to all this alone, either. Is that love? Ravenloft needs me, and I hesitated to return, even if only for a moment. Am I a fool in love, unwilling to return to my throne over a man?*

*What absolute nonsense. Love is nothing but a hindrance. This is desire,* she reminds herself firmly, *plain and simple. A slow-burning one, to be sure, but even this fire will flare and die, like all the others.*

Not knowing the answers to her questions makes her angry. Thinking that she might actually be in love makes her angrier, and she becomes brutal in battle, scattering bones and crushing skulls beneath her boot. Her mood is appropriately foul when they find their way to the Warden-Commander’s office and see a broad-shouldered, short-haired woman with her back to them, the scent of death and decay wafting off her.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was a rollercoaster for me. I wrote it a dozen times, with various levels of dramatics. Do you think she made the right choice?
Warden Dryden

Chapter Summary

Her hopes dashed, Hera still has a mission to complete- and she's just found what they've been looking for.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Step no further, Warden,” the woman commands, her voice deep and echoing. She turns, and Hera’s repulsed by her rotting, sagging skin and milk-white eyes. “This one would speak with you.”

“Who- or what- are you?” Hera demands, putting her hands on her hips.

“This one is the Dryden,” it explains, and Hera can hear a second voice, deeper and malevolent, under hers. “Commander. Sophia. All these things,” it laughs. The sound is all wrong, as if they’re hearing the sound of laughter backward.

“G-Grandmother?” Levi asks, choking on the word.

Sophia Dryden ignores him, keeping its eyes on Hera. “You have slain many of the demon ilk to get here. This one would propose a deal.”

“Levi, I’m afraid your great-great-great grandmother seems to be possessed,” Hera says flatly.

“That, or she’s really let herself go,” he jokes lamely, trying to hide his discomfort behind false mirth. “My great-great-great grandmother is dead. I don’t know what that is,” he declares, lifting his crossbow and gesturing to her with it.

“Fair enough. Is there anything of the real Sophia left inside you?” she asks the demon. “Or are you just another spirit playing puppetmaster?”

“This one has tasted her memories, seen her thoughts and hidden places,” it answers. “But she is
Food for this one, no more, no less.”

Food, and not a way out of the Fade like Connor was. Hera nods as if she’s hearing something new and innovative, curious as to what the rotting creature can tell her, and what cost it will demand. “And, why, exactly, should I trust a demon?” she asks, feigning interest. “Surely you have something to offer me. Riches, beauty, eternity,” she suggests, ticking them off on her fingers. “And something you’ll want in return.”

“You are worse than a cat with a mouse,” Morrigan says behind her. “Let us kill it and be done with it.”

“What is one woman-child compared to your might?” it asks, and Hera gets the feeling that this demon knows she isn’t the human she pretends to be. “Strike me down if my terms offend. A fool this one would be to betray the Warden, even if she is the wrong one.”

What can she possibly see or know about me? Hera raises an eyebrow. “Tell me about this ‘deal.’”

“The Soldier’s Peak traps me.” The possessed body shudders with suppressed rage at its own words. “This one sees so many tantalizing places in the Dryden’s memories. This one would see the world for herself. For me to be free, into the old mage tower you must go and destroy. In return, this one seals the Veil. No more demons, no more enemies. Your Peak would be safe. Just let this one go into the world.”

“What exactly will you do if I free you?”

“This one will roam,” it says, the hunger for freedom so intense it drips from the very words. “This one will see. This one will feed.”

Ah, Hera thinks, gnawing her bottom lip in thought. Feeding. I know that desire well.

“Feed?” Alistair squeaks. “On... people?”

“But without me, the Veil will weaken,” the demon says confidently. “More demons. More misery. You choose- just one of my kind, or many.”
“Why the tower?” Morrigan asks. “What’s in it that traps you?”

The demon shakes its head and lifts Sophia Dryden’s hands in helpless confusion. “Something inside keeps my kind locked away. Destroy everything in the tower.”


“The mages tore it themselves,” the demon says. “On purpose. The Dryden ordered them to do it during their rebellion. The Wardens created their own problem. Will you release me?”

“Interesting. I’m trapped here, myself,” she says in an easy, conversational tone. “I wouldn’t mind finding a way out, either.”

“What?” Alistair snaps. “You’re joking!”

“So you will release this one?” the demon asks, the hollow voice echoing with something not quite hope.

Hera nearly agrees, but her own trapped state and blunder with the mirror moments before have put her in a mercurial mood. It gets the better of her, and she draws her sword. “No.”

“Fool!” the demon shouts, and attacks. “Die!”

Three more undead corpses are summoned, appearing to come from the very shadows of the room, and the demon attacks Hera. She fights recklessly, throwing impossible blows against the demon and feeling them skitter off her armor. It comes down to the two of them, both fueled by disappointed expectations and rage at their own circumstances. Zevran lets out a shout of encouragement and Hera steps forward, putting herself directly into the commander’s reach. Before the fatal blow can fall, however, she sweeps her own sword across the neck of the creature, severing its head.

“Back to hell,” she spits, kicking the head away from her.

“That was reckless,” Zevran chides her. “Glorious, but foolish as well. You should never put
yourself so close to your enemy’s blade on purpose.”

“I don’t care,” she mutters, crouching down. “Help me take this armor off her. I want it.”

“You can’t be serious,” Morrigan sneers. “It’s covered in rot.”

“I can wash it. Look at it, it’s beautiful,” she argues. “And it looks like it’ll fit Alistair with some new straps.”

“Lovely,” Alistair drawls, wiping his sword blade on an old curtain. “A pretty new set of armor, fresh off the ancient rotted corpse.”

Zevran chortles and helps her remove it. “Shall we leave it here for the way back?”

“I think so,” Hera agrees. “She said the Veil is weakened here; that must be the mirror’s doing. Morrigan, can you fix it?”

“Not me,” she says. “I am not powerful enough, nor do I know that kind of magic. But perhaps there is something in the tower she loathed so well that will help.”

Hera leads the way outside and across a stone bridge, the wind so strong it threatens to blow them onto the jagged rocks below. She pauses for a moment, the gusts whipping stray locks out of her braid and against her face, making her cheek sting. *Of all the sights I’ve seen, this must be one of the most breathtaking*, she thinks, enchanted by the view of the Peak. It’s cold and dangerous, but at the same time, it sparkles with untouched beauty and raw wonder.

*If I do have to stay in this world...I think I’d like to stay here. The Peak and I might be a good fit.*

“With all the fires and lamps lit, there has to be someone alive here,” Alistair points out.

“But how?” Levi asks. “There’s been no one here for years. They would have no food or supplies.”

“Perhaps they do not need food,” Morrigan interjects, sliding her gaze to Hera.
“Well, I’ve never met any such person,” Hera laughs. “Let’s go introduce ourselves.”

At the tower, they enter a room that looks very much like a library, complete with a full set of undead. After dispatching them, they poke around, and Hera finds a journal written by a mage Avernus. “The same Avernus from the journal’s page we found earlier?” Levi asks.

“It seems so,” Hera murmurs, reading. Her eyes grow wide as she rereads a page, not quite believing what she’s seeing. Blood magic and cruelty, she realizes as the journal details things to make a dhampir shudder. “By the Powers!”

“What is it?” Alistair asks, coming closer.

“This...man...he was experimenting on his fellow Wardens!” she says, pointing out the entries that detail it. “Blood magic, and quite a lot of it.”

“It is my understanding that the Grey Wardens do not turn away power or assistance, no matter the ethical questions,” Morrigan points out. “Perhaps this Arvernus was only following orders.”

“No, Morrigan, read this…” Hera hands the book to her. “He enjoyed it. He got a thrill out of it.”

“Hera.”

She turns toward Alistair. He stands at the desk, holding a bottle made of dark glass. “It’s labeled Number Eighty-Two.”

She takes it from him, and suddenly her mouth waters, dhampir instincts demanding the blood inside. Why now? she thinks miserably. My thirst has been under control for months. And yet...damn me to seven hells, I want it. “It’s blood,” she says, holding it slightly away from her, disgusted with herself for wanting it so badly. “Oh damn me, it’s his blood experiment. It could change everything we know about the taint.”

Alistair frowns, touching her cheek gently. “Are you all right? You look sick.”
Shaking her head and covering her mouth, she hurries outside with the bottle. *Don’t drink it,* she pleads with herself and sucking freezing air into her lungs. The thirst is strong, not having been slaked since before she came to Ferelden, and the magic in this blood is tempting. *I will not drink it. This is repulsive even to one who dines on blood.*

*Oh gods, I want it.***

“Hera?”

*I need it.*

“Alistair,” she gasps in relief, trembling. “This is blood magic. If one of us drinks it…” She shakes her head again. “Alistair throw it away.”

She can see his concern, and she takes great gulps of breath, hoping he’ll think her reaction is disgust with the mage and not a terrible thirst that could put her very life in danger. *They would only see a monster, bloodthirsty and horrible, no better than darkspawn.*

“Sure,” he says carefully, taking it from her. He has to force her hand open, and she looks away as he throws it as hard and far as he can away from the bridge. Even so, she can hear the glass shatter, and blesses whatever god made the wind blow the scent of it away from them- she’d have gone mad for it if she’d had to smell it, too. “Are you...are you all right?”

“I will be,” she promises, calmer now. She takes slower breaths, regaining control of herself. “I’m fine. I just...that mage. He deserved to be punished for what he did to those poor people.”

*What was that? Blood has never tempted me so powerfully before. Is it the magic in it? Is it the blood of this world? Or is my thirst simply becoming too much to ignore?***

“You need to see this,” he adds, gesturing to the door.

Chapter End Notes

Ugh. That blood really did something to her, didn't it? What do you think would have happened if she had a second chance at it?
Bloody Warden

Chapter Summary

There's someone else in the tower who may hold the key to someday curing the Grey Wardens of the taint, but can Hera allow him to live long enough to find it?

She follows them into the mage’s laboratory and stops abruptly when she sees an ancient mage standing with his back to them. His robes look so delicate with age they might fall apart, and his head is completely without hair- and by the look of his smooth scalp without so much as a whisker, she assumes what hair he'd once had fallen out some time ago. Scattered through the room are long tables stained dark with blood, some with straps to hold down its occupant, other with long gouges around weathered hand-holds.

Hera shudders to see carefully labeled vials and bottles with stacks of papers beside them, and knots her fingers together even as her mouth waters. It's obvious what's inside them, and she nearly swoons with want and thirst. *Powers preserve me,* she prays desperately. *This is not the moment to explain what a dhampir is. Please, please don’t let any of those bottles break or be opened.*

“I hear you,” croaks the mage. “Don’t disrupt my concentration.”

Hera looks at Alistair, who shrugs, and they advance as one. The mage finally turns, looking down at them from the height of his workspace.

“Even now the demons seek to replenish their numbers,” he tells them, coming closer. “Are you to thank for this welcome- but temporary- imbalance?”

“The old Warden mage?” Hera gasps. “You’re still alive?”

“Only just,” he laughs. “I have only a short time left. Why are you here? What is your intent?”

She narrows her eyes at him. “I’ve seen your experiments. Your hands are so bloody I can smell the rot from here.”

“They were necessary,” he says, reciting words he’s clearly told himself a thousand times before.
“Any tool, any iota of information that could defeat the foul demons was justified.” He looks at her with a wolfish expression. “As a Warden, you should know that.”

“Necessary?” Alistair sneers. “Having to relieve yourself after an eight-hour ride is necessary. But there’s no excuse for summoning demons.”

“Aw,” the mage sweetly coos. “Charming.”

“Soldier’s Peak must be rid of its plague of demons,” Hera tells him.

“Agreed. This must be the first priority. The only priority. I assume you’ve come to recover the base for the other Wardens?”

“Yes,” Alistair answers. “You knew someone would come eventually.”

“Hmm, an admirable goal,” he says haughtily. “But in order to achieve this, the demons must be cut off forever.”

Hera has to stop herself from rolling her eyes. In all her adventures, she’d never talked so much before a fight as she did in Ferelden. Zeus was the talker she tended to run in hell-for-leather and kill things once he was finished. She finds it annoying and makes a mental note to thank her brother for his service in this manner. “You had to know that summoning so many demons was foolhardy,” she points out. “Even if your Grand Rebellion was worth it.”

“Perhaps,” he concedes, pride in his voice and color growing in his withered cheeks. “But it was survival. For months, I prepared the summoning circles, researched the darkest depths of the Fade. That moment was a triumph of demonic lore. Dozens of demons called by my hand. But...with so many variables I suppose calculation errors were inevitable. I was so close!”

“You’re to blame for all this,” she spits. “Some things you just don’t do.”

“And who draws this line?” he asks carefully. “Of what is safe, proper, or moral? The chantry? Corrupt, mundane, pathetic little men? You?” His voice holds the echo of a chuckle, as if the idea almost amuses him. “Embrace the core tenet of the Wardens: by any means necessary to win.”
“What was the purpose of your experiments?” she asks. “Did you mean to build better Wardens, some kind of superior soldier?”

“The darkspawn taint,” he says darkly. He clasps his hands behind his back and begins to pace like a professor in a lecture hall. “The Wardens use it only to sense the darkspawn, but my research has discovered so much more, hinted at even greater heights. With it, the Wardens could grow even more powerful.”

“Could it cure the darkspawn taint?” Alistair asks hesitantly. ”The wasting sickness that comes from the Blight?” Vaguely she wonders if the prospect would indeed validate the man’s crimes.

“Would you allow me to continue research if I said yes?” Avernus asks, amused. “I would say possibly, if so.”

“Is that what you think?” Hera questions. “Could it?”

“I…” he hesitates. “I do not know. There is power there, and with it, the Wardens could aspire to be the most powerful soldiers in the world. But to cure it? I cannot say.”

“Then the time for questions is over,” Hera says sharply.

The mage bows his head for a moment. “So be it. My only request is if justice or vengeance drive you, stay your hand until the demons are dealt with.”

Hera nods. “Until the demons are dead, we are allies.”

“Then we must go to the Great Hall- there I will repair the damage I caused so long ago. There will be peril,” he warns, “the demons will fight us every step of the way. Come.”

They follow Avernus back across the bridge and to the Great Hall. “So these are summoning circles,” Morrigan says, her interest apparent. “Tell me, was it difficult?”

“It took much research and time,” he says vaguely, watching Hera for her reaction. “Greater skill than you have now.”
“You do not know what skill I have, old man,” Morrigan snaps.

He ignores her and turns to the Grey Wardens. “We must act quickly, the demons are clawing on the gates. The Veil must be closed.”

Weapons come out, and Hera glances around at her friends. “I’m ready when you are,” she says, her mouth set in a grim line.

“I will unravel the summoning circles I drew so long ago,” he tells them. “Waves of spirits and demons may come through- dispatch them. I will begin.”

“Morrigan, stay back,” Hera orders, walking to the center of the space. Behind them she can hear Avernus begin chanting, his voice quivering at first, unused to such volume and use, before growing stronger. “Alistair, my left, Zev, the right. Levi, you still have that crossbow?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Good, stay with Morrigan.”

Avernus turns to the mirror. “First, I must summon the magical energies. I feel them,” he says in a hollow voice giving to his age. “They’re coming!”

Instantly three rage demons appear, and Morrigan freezes two in place, giving them all a chance to react. Hera shakes off the ice and helps Zevran with his as Alistair takes out the two disabled ones, bolts whizzing past their ears and landing in the demons with a loud thunk. They have just enough time to inhale before shades appear, and even less when ash wraiths and more rage demons come through the circles.

It’s chaos, and more than once she has to dodge blades from her own people, but Hera feels alive with magic in this place. Every inch of her feels as if she’s receiving a series of small shocks and her power pulses, pressing against her skin in rolling waves, desperate to be free. She has little doubt that if she were to unleash it she could dissolve all the demons here with little more than a thought, but it would probably also tear the Veil past repair. Once again, she finds herself envying Morrigan, who has full use of her magic but seems to take no joy in it.
Amidst the madness, Avernus runs from one gear-like summoning circle to the next, unraveling the magic trapped there. Finally, a desire demon steps through, her movements slow and sinuous. Morrigan freezes her in place, but Hera still hears the soft voice in her head.

I can give you everything... Let me free...I will be yours...

Shaking her head against the demon’s call, Hera plunges her sword into it, falling back on her ass as Zevran shouts and spins his sword, taking its head off.

“Well that was unexpected,” Hera laughs as the demon's body falls, spraying her with blood.

“Apologies, my Warden,” he says charmingly, offering her a hand up. “May I say red is your color?”

“Disgusting,” Morrigan sneers.

“It’s over,” the ancient one says, approaching slowly and ending their chatter. “The Veil is strong now. Stronger, at least. So what of me? Will you leave me to experiment in peace?”

“No more dark research,” Hera decides. “Find humane ways to help the Wardens.”

“You would hinder me so!” he cries, insulted. “I am so close to a breakthrough!”

“It’s that, or I kill you now,” she offers, lifting her dagger meaningfully.

He sighs in resignation, shoulders drooping. “Very well. I will share anything I learn with the Wardens, and with you.” Without another word, he turns and makes his slow way back to the tower.

Hera sits back on the floor, putting a hand to her leg and coming away with blood she was certain hadn’t come from the demon. Her stitches had burst, and now that the fight was over, the pain was shooting along the length. “Damn,” she mutters. “Is anyone hurt?”
“Aside from a few scrapes and bruises,” Zevran says, “no, amora. Do you need help?”

“No, I’ll be fine.”

“Stop me if you heard this one,” Alistair says, grabbing his pack from the corner. “But you’re not fine.”

“Of course not,” Morrigan says, handing her a skin of water. “She’s covered in demon blood.”

“Her stitches busted,” Alistair sneers, digging in his bag. “Or can’t you tell?”

Hera thanks her and pours it on the clean bandage Alistair hands her, wiping off her face and hands. “I think this will hold until we get back to camp,” she says, gesturing to her leg. “That is if no one minds going a little slower?”

“Wait here, Hera,” Zevran offers. “Alistair and I will retrieve the Dryden’s armor for you.”

She nods, and Morrigan sits near her, ripping open her pants leg again. “You need a bandage at least, you fool,” her friend mutters, and Hera makes appropriately pained noises as a new bandage is wrapped and tied. “I cannot stitch flesh, but I know how to knot a bandage.”


“What- no,” he says, coming closer. “Blood makes me a bit nervous is all. But you’ve done it, Warden, Soldier’s Peak is safe again. That old geezer Avernus deserves the gallows if you ask me, but people will do queer things to survive. There was no proof to redeem my family,” he adds sadly. “The Drydens remain shamed.”

Hera takes his hand and squeezes it, looking up at him. “The past doesn’t offer redemption very often, Levi,” she says in an experienced tone. “Try the future instead. Your grandmother may not have been, but you’re a good man. Perhaps you’re the balance to the scale.”

“Well...I...uh...thanks Warden,” he says, blushing. “For so long I was focused on the past, on answers. I think I would have been better off had I stayed at home.” He gives himself a little shake,
drawing back his shoulders. “Enough of that, though. I find myself at a loss- you’ve got a whole fortress now, and I suppose I should start plying my trade again.”

“You know... the Peak will liven up before long,” Hera says absently. “We’ll need a steward, someone to clean the place up, bring in tradesmen. I don’t suppose you know an ancient, noble, trustworthy family who might be willing to live and work here?”

Levi brightens. “I suppose I might at that. Nice place to store trade goods- you, of course, will get a sizable discount.”

“And access to some of the best products and smithing in the country?” she wheedles as Alistair and Zevran return.

“I suppose we can help each other,” he says brightly. “I’d be happy to stay on and bring my family here as well. Come back in a few weeks, I’ll have this place in top shape.”

“Looks like we’re done here,” Alistair says. “A demonic invasion thwarted, a Warden’s base safely rescued- we do good work.”

“Yes, yes,” Morrigan sighs as she stands. “We’re just a jolly bunch of do-gooders.”

Hera takes Zevran’s hand to follow suit, smiling at her friend. “Morrigan, if you didn’t like it, you’d have left long ago.”

“I hate you. So much,” she tells Alistair.

“Me? I didn’t do anything!” he argues as Hera laughs.

“Just reminding you.”
Morrigan asks Hera just how easy it would have been for her to walk away from Thedas and its troubles should the chance appear.

**Announcement**

I will be taking a short hiatus starting June 6th and will return to my regular posting schedule on June 20th. But keep an eye out on my works page, as I might get bored and start posting other, random things for you to enjoy.

“I had no idea you felt so strongly about blood magic,” Morrigan says, approaching Hera by the fire later that night. “Your reaction to Avernus and his experiments- especially the vial of blood- was...unusual.”

“You don't have watch tonight,” Hera says darkly, studying her new chain mail shirt and mentally mapping how to alter it to fit her.

“And you’ve stood one watch already,” she points out. “Wynne and I have erected barriers, the darkspawn will not find us tonight. Tell me, what disturbed you so much today? You have always struck me as a woman whose ends justifies her means.”

“I apologize if my scene upset you.” Hera doesn't look up, but her eyebrows draw together and she scowls at the mail in front of her. "It won't happen again."

Morrigan busies herself by lifting the kettle and pouring a cup of coffee. “I understand about the mirror- you thought you had found your way home. Anyone would have responded as you did. But I have a different question: would you have truly left and not come back?”

Hera sips her coffee, giving herself a moment to think about her answer. “I don't know,” she says slowly. “But that wasn't the way, so it doesn't matter.”
“I think it does.”

There’s an unusual warmth in her voice, so unlike the witch that Hera looks up, her eyes wide with surprise. “Why would you say that?”

“The mere sight of it was enough to upset you,” Morrigan says simply. “And you long to return to your world, as well you should. But would you?” she repeats. “If the glass had opened up and allowed you to return to the proper time and place, would you have walked away and left us to the Blight?”

“I...I don’t know,” she admits. After a moment, she bows her head and releases a heavy sigh. “Yes. I would have had to.”

Morrigan smiles and nods as if she expected no less. “And Alistair? Would you have left him so easily?”

“Do you think it would have been easy to leave any of you in the middle of this nightmare?” she asks, her voice soft with guilt. “I would not have enjoyed it.”

“It is I who asked you about him.”

Hera sighs. “No, it would not have been easy. But I would have done it, even though I would miss him terribly.” She’s quiet a moment, moving her gaze from Morrigan’s face to the stars. “I’d have come back if I could. With help.”

Morrigan makes an amused sound and stands. “You would have brought us an army to wage war for love,” she teases. “What a romantic you are. It’s surprising.”

Hera watches her walk off to her distant camp. So? I’ve made my living selling the illusion of romance. It was bound to rub off eventually.

Chapter End Notes

What do you think? Would Hera have been able to break away from Ferelden and the things she’s feeling for Alistair?
Making Chains

Chapter Summary

Hera's deepening feelings for Alistair trouble her, but can she really keep herself distant from someone who makes her feel like a girl again?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Alistair stumbles out of his tent and plops down beside Hera while she curses and struggles to remove rings from her chainmail. “Trying to make it smaller?” he yawns.

Hera nods and pops a link out, reaching out to catch it in mid-air before it can bounce away. “Damn chainmail. It’s always too big. I should be a master armorer by now. Why are you awake?”

“Yes, thank you,” she mumbles, focused on picking out the right links so she can remove the excess and recreate the new ‘seam’ all at once. “I should just start wearing chainmail over my gowns. Or as a gown. I could start a new fashion.”

Alistair frowns, confused. “Does this happen often, getting pulled out of your world and into war?”

Realizing what she may have let slip, she glances up at him. “You’d be surprised- there!” She stands and pulls the metal shirt over her head, wiggling to help it slither down her body. “That’s better,” she says happily, running her hands over it. “Yo men are tall enough but too broad.”

“Well there aren’t many women in the Grey Wardens,” he reminds her.

“Right- too smart for you,” she laughs, pulling it off and putting it with her gear.

“Not that we couldn’t use the view,” he quips, watching her bend over her pack. “So...all this time we've spent together,” he begins, looking up at her face when she turns. “You know: the tragedy,
the brushes with death, the constant battles with the whole Blight looming over us... will you miss it once it's over? When you find a way home?”

Hera gathers her pliers up and starts fashioning the extra mail into a coif. “It makes me tear up just thinking about it,” she teases, putting the length of chain on top of his head and making note of how big to make it.

“Oh me too,” he chuckles, pulling her hands away from his head.

She laughs, twisting her hands out his grip and adjusting the mail on his head. “Stay still, will you?”

With another chuckle, he dutifully sits still, watching her with a silly grin. “Hera, I wanted to tell you...I’m glad I met you. You’re one hell of a fighter, and I’m glad you’re here. With me. I...I like you, a lot.”

Hera’s heart flutters a little when he looks at her, and she’s glad her hands have something to do, otherwise they’d shake or do something equally foolish. “I like you a lot too,” she tells him with a smile.

“Hera...are you blushing?” he teases, his eyes wide.

“Who, me?” she laughs, taking the chain mail from his head and resisting the urge to touch her cheeks like a silly girl. “Nonsense. I’m a worldly courtesan, nothing makes me blush anymore,” she declares, tossing her hair over her shoulder.

He squints slightly, still smiling. “What a shame. It’s very pretty.”

He gets up and goes to his tent, humming to himself. Hera is left sitting alone by the fire, wondering at the change Alistair brings about in her. If it were only desire causing her discomfort, she would simply follow him and take what she wanted. But this was different.

*He makes me feel...better than beautiful. Like a part of me has been waiting for him all these years. No one had ever inspired such emotion from me- not even Anatoly.*
And yet...

Mother once said that my father made her feel that way. Is that love, then? She scowls, laying her hands in her lap and staring into the fire. What foolishness...I can't be in love with him. I sell love as a service. It's an illusion for those that it, for as long as they will pay. I'm not so stupid as to actually fall for my own tricks.

...Can I? Absolutely not. This is lust only. I'll prove it.

Setting aside her work, she follows him, pausing at the entrance. “Alistair?”

“Yes? What do you need?” he asks, coming out.

Hera smiles seductively. “Want to join me in my tent once my watch is over?” she asks softly. Alistair blinks, staring at her dumbly, his mouth opening and closing like a fish. “Alistair?”

He shakes his head as if to clear it and coughs. “I know most guys would probably leap at the chance to be with you, but I don’t know if I’m ready for that. For me, it’s a...big step.” He groans. “I guess that makes me sound like an idiot. I mean...turn down an incredible woman like you? I’d have to be.”

He’s saying no...again...has anyone ever said no more than once? I think I’d agree with him on the idiot stance. Could he be a paladin and simply...not know it? “I understand,” she says slowly. “I think.”

“I guess I was just raised not to take this sort of thing lightly,” he says softly. “I’m sorry.”

“He wants it to mean something, not an illusion that will fade with the light of day. Warmth curls around the pit of her stomach, and she smiles. How strange...I suddenly don’t mind that he’s saying no. “Don’t be,” she says, tilting her head slightly. “I understand.”

“Oh Maker,” he groans. “Hera, I do like you- you know that. And I’ve thought about it...I just...I wanted to court you a little- like we talked!” he adds quickly, hanging his head. “Are...are you upset?” he asks, raising his eyes to meet her gaze.
“No,” she laughs. “Although I’m not used to rejection. I appreciate your honesty, Hero.”

“Please don't tell me that’s what everyone calls me behind my back?” he asks with self-deprecating laugh. “I don’t mind when you do it, but if Morrigan starts I might have to kill myself.”

“Only me,” she giggles. “I do want you to know that I enjoy your company, and if you change your mind...let me know.”

“I kind of want to change it now,” he laughs, then his face turns a bit serious. “Thank you, Hera. For understanding. Goodnight.” He starts to turn away but looks back at the last second. “Get some rest, you look tired.”

“Oh. I will.” Hera watches him go back inside, troubled by the warmth creeping through her. She goes outside the circle of firelight, looking out into the darkness and hugging herself tightly.

Oh, Hera...what game are you playing? This is dangerous; it’s madness.

I’m a courtesan of the highest regard, not some giggling girl in her first bloom. I don’t even believe in love anymore. Not for myself.

And he is a Grey Warden. Loyal to his duty and order. And royalty- that’s a whole other matter entirely.

Anything between us will come to an end, and sooner rather than later. But I will let him court me as he wishes. I will teach him whatever it is he wants to know, and enjoy myself in the process. She glances back at the tent, wanting nothing more than to slip inside and bask in his irrepresible warmth again. But I shouldn’t allow myself to feel anything more than a passing fondness. I can’t allow it.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to all of my wonderful, faithful readers! Just a reminder, I will be taking a short break from Warden to work on other projects and give myself a well-deserved break- I've been working on this for more than a year! June 4th will be my last chapter update until June 18th or so.
Don't hold me to those dates, I might decide to post early, or later, but Hera and friends WILL be back before the end of June!

In the meantime, take a look at some of my other works, like Cold Hands, Warm Heart, which features a different Warden and Alistair all together, or The Cost of A Life, for you Hawke/Anders and Cullen/Quiz lovers (you might see more than one familiar face in that one!).
Sten takes on a personal mission to train Alistair, and later, Leliana and Alistair take a moment to discuss two of their favorite companions.

It takes two days to get back to the North Road and back on the way to Denerim. Hera watches Alistair get nervous and unsure of himself as they travel. The second time he directs them down a path that ends in an old goat trail, she takes the map and decides against any of this so-called shortcuts.

To distract him from the anticipation of meeting his sister, Hera teaches him the best way to cover distance on foot by having them run a short distance, then walk twice that. Sten and Leliana take to it easily, and Zevran would have simply run most of the day if she had let him. Morrigan, showing great disdain for the practice, would simply turn herself into a bird and fly ahead, using the time to look for places to camp for the night.

It’s Alistair and Wynne who concern Hera. Wynne is near sixty and tires faster than the others; poor Alistair is good for short distances but has little endurance. Sten makes Alistair his special project, often running behind him barking orders and yelling insults to keep him going.

Once, walking far behind the two, Wynne laughs softly, watching them. “He is a good lad.”

“Alistair?” Leliana asks.

“Sten,” the mage laughs. “Hera, you are a good leader, and we could ask for none better, but Sten is building him up in a way you cannot. You are a rogue at heart, with your cunning and finesse. Sten will have him ready to unleash power and control when the time comes. It is good for him.”

Hera nods, smiling when they see the two stop running. Zevran starts to sing and jog circles around Alistair as he bends over, hands on knees, gasping for breath. Ares, thinking it’s a game, happily barks and tries to play. “I agree. Zevran can go all day if he wishes, but he is small and light. Sten will help him build endurance.”

“Or kill him,” Leliana snickers. “He looks like he’s going to throw up.”
Wynne tilts her head, watching him carefully. “He just might,” she chuckles. "But he’ll sleep well, that’s for certain.”

Hera looks up, watching the cloudy sky for a sign of Morrigan’s hawk form. “It’s going to rain soon. I hope she finds a good spot.”

As if summoned, a hawk swoops down to land in the middle of the road, and suddenly Morrigan stands before them. “I have, deep into the forest. It is near a hot spring. Denerim is closer than we thought; you can be there midday tomorrow.”

“Good,” Hera says cheerfully. “Are you still determined to stay at camp?” she asks. “Is there anything you would like from the market?”

“Only the peace I will have once you take Alistair with you.”

They get close enough to hear Alistair’s ragged breathing and Sten’s disappointment. “You Grey Wardens grew soft with your griffins,” he says flatly.


“I know,” Sten interrupts. “It was hundreds of years ago and you still have not recovered. Look at the elf, he mocks you. He will steal your women and trick you out of your gold.”

“He is probably right, my friend,” Zevran says cheerfully, still jogging in circles around him and going back to singing a bawdy little tune fit for the dirtiest of brothels. “I put my hand upon her toe, yo ho, yo ho…”

Alistair falls to the ground, laying on his back. “I don’t care.”

“Is that so?” Hera teases, approaching. “In that case, I suggest we all play cards later. I have a few tricks you haven't seen yet.”
”Might I suggest a game where one wagers their clothing?” Zevran suggests, circling them again.

“I mean-” he takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly. “I give up.”

Hera offers her hand to help him up. “Come on, Morrigan’s found us a campsite. You can give up in an hour.”

She hauls him to his feet and follows Morrigan into the forest. They set up camp quickly, thunder rolling above their heads. To avoid standing watch in a storm, Wynne and Morrigan erect barriers around the camp- they won't be able to get out, but nothing- including darkspawn- can get in, either.

“Warden, let’s spar while we wait for the rain,” Zevran suggests, watching Sten and Wynne go to their tents in anticipation of the downpour. “I do not fear getting wet.”

“The wetter the better.” Hera jumps up. “You’re on.”

“Shall we do it like men, in only our shirts?” he challenges cheerfully.

Hera looks down at her own shirt, almost ragged and the worst of the ones she owns. “I only have a few, so you have to promise you won’t cut it up.”

“Oh Warden, I am afraid I cannot promise that,” he says with a slow grin. “Shall we strip to our chests, then?”

Pushing her hair over her shoulder, she nods. “Fine with me.” Dropping her things, she pulls her shirt over her head, leaving the binding her only covering.

Zevran puts a hand to his chest and falls over. “Maker take me,” he says loudly. “I have seen all the beauty of the world.”

With a smug grin, she puts a foot on his chest triumphantly. “I win.”
“Maker’s breath,” Alistair whispers in annoyance, watching them laugh and move into a better spot to spar. He’s never seen a woman so quickly unclothed. Except for when Hera was in the infirmary in Ostagar and at camp after the tower, but she’d been covered at least. Now, in snug trousers and only her binder, he can hardly breathe for wanting her. Shifting uncomfortably, Alistair watches them grab their weapons and scratches Ares behind the ear, trying not to drool.

“She’s incredible, isn’t she?” Leliana asks, sitting beside the dog. “Both of them, really. They’ve been running all day and still have energy to spare. And gorgeous, too.”

Alistair grimaces, his legs twitching at the thought of running again. “I hate them.”

She snickers. “It isn’t so bad; you just have to keep running and it will get easier. As for the rest… Well, not everyone can be Antivan, I suppose.”

Alistair snorts, watching Hera toy with Zevran. Her movements are quick and light, striking him with the flat of her blade and a giggle, hair flowing behind her as she moves around him. She looks like she’s dancing. Her skin gleams under the dim light like a pearl, contrasting sharply with Zevran’s own golden tone.

“It almost isn’t fair,” he murmurs.

“She’s so beautiful,” Leliana agrees. “And there’s such joy there.”

Alistair raises his eyebrows at her. “Joy?”

She nods, gesturing to the pair. “Look, she’s smiling and giggling, she practically glows. It must be distracting to him. With the way she uses her beauty against him, I am quite glad she’s an ally,” she giggles. "I wonder if Loghain will be able to deny her anything."

He studies Hera and realizes Leliana is right. Zevran banter with her, making suggestive comments and keeping a light conversation as they fight, same as always. Hera laughs and flirts with him, sometimes taking a risk to make it look flashy. But mostly she just looks happy. “I don't suppose court life gives her a chance to adventure much,” he suggests.

“Court life? I thought she was a courtesan?” she asks, quirking an eyebrow.
“She is,” he explains. “But when she and her twin went to Ravenloft, they decided to stay.”

“I see.” Leliana draws the words out as if there is more to the story. “What does she do there?”

He shrugs. “Serve the queen, I guess.”

They’re startled by a clap of thunder so loud it rumbles the earth, and half a second later the clouds burst. Leliana squeals and runs for the tent she shares with Wynne, leaving him alone. Holding his shield over his head, Alistair stays where he is, watching Hera throw her head back and let the rain wash over her. Even Zevran bolts for his tent, disappearing into its depths.

“You’ll catch your death,” he calls to her.

She looks over at him with the purest smile. “It’ll have to catch me,” she laughs, holding her arms out and spinning around.

He climbs to his feet and heads for his own tent but watches her from the entrance. Thinking she’s alone, her expression changes and she looks a little lost and sad. Alistair almost goes to her, wanting to know what could come to mind to erase the happiness of the afternoon when Ares barks, snapping her out of it. Her expression shifts, her face as changeable as the sea, and she laughs at the mabari and follows him into her tent, scratching his head.

*Well at least the dog has enough sense to get out of the rain,* he thinks.
Morning Nerves

Chapter Summary

Alistair's nervous about meeting his sister, so Hera gives him some advice and comfort.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When they wake, the sky is clear and the air cool, making it truly feel like autumn. Hera stands in front of the fire sipping coffee and letting the others sleep. “Denerim today,” she sighs to herself, watching the steam rise from her tin cup. “And then what? Time is slipping away so fast.”

“Or not fast enough.”

She looks over her shoulder at Alistair as he walks up. “I thought I’d let everyone sleep in today,” she says, offering him her cup. “Why are you up?”

He drains it and hands it back with a nervous smile. “I couldn’t sleep.”

“Really? I would have thought you’d sleep like the dead after how Sten ran you yesterday.”

“Me too, but I guess the cold just made me stiff and sore.”

“I can help,” she offers. “Sit by the fire and take off your shirt.”

“And put my modesty in danger?” he gasps gleefully.

“Or you can stay in pain,” she decides, kneeling down to pour more coffee.

“No, please! Help me,” he says pitifully, pulling his shirt over his head and sitting on a nearby stump.
Hera cracks her knuckles and stands behind him. “We traveled with this giant man once; he called himself a Viking,” she tells him, putting her hands on his shoulders and rubbing lightly to relax him. “I never did find out what exactly a Viking was, but he was very proud of being one. Swung around an ax as big as Ares. But he used to get great pains in his back after cold nights, this would always help. Don’t scream.”

“What-”

In a swift movement, she grabs his elbows, pulling them back and putting a knee in the middle of his back, forcing him to arch drastically. He lets out a high-pitched scream as his back pops from the base of his neck all the way down, and Zevran rolls out of the tent, naked, armed, and ready.

“What is...Hera...what are you doing?” he asks, lowering his daggers.

“I was stretching his back,” she explains, putting her foot down and releasing his arms. “You weren’t supposed to scream,” she chides Alistair.

Gasping for breath, Alistair leans forward and gags. “You weren’t supposed to hurt me! Why is he naked?”

“Hush, you’re going to wake everyone. If you’re good, Zev and I will tell them it was a rabbit dying in the woods,” she offers, rubbing his back in soothing circles. She gives Zevran an appraising look and nods approvingly. “Nice,” she adds, raising her eyebrows at his arousal. “Every morning?”

Looking down at his fully erect manhood, he shrugs. "Usually. Isn't that the way?"

“The lake did you no favors, my friend.”

Zevran sticks his lower lip out into a full pout. “It was cold. Do not hold it against me, amora.”

Alistair looks over his shoulder, his look of pain quickly morphing into one of horror. “What are you- Maker’s breath! Put that away, man!”
“My daggers?” Zevran asks, swinging his hips back and forth with a grin. “I’m afraid I do not have any sheaths on me, my friend,” he says with an amused look to Hera. “Only blades.”

“And what fine blades they are,” Hera laughs.

“Zevran!”

“I will hold this moment close to my heart forever,” Zevran promises, putting a hand over his heart.

“Would you put on pants?” Alistair asks in growing agitation. “Why are you always naked?”

“Is something wrong with me?” he asks, running his hands over his own chest. “I am as the Maker made me, are you offended by nudity, my friend?”

“Maker, yes!”

“Prude.” Zevran laughs and goes back into his tent. “Very well, I shall not grace your vision with my physical beauty.”

Hera laughs and pats Alistair’s shoulders. “Well I guess he’s the only one who heard you,” she teases. “But you feel better, don’t you?”

Alistair swings his arms and rolls his shoulders, looking pleasantly surprised. “Actually…I do. Thank you. I guess I’m a little anxious…”

“Because you’re going to meet your sister today?” she asks, offering him his own cup of coffee. “I thought you were looking forward to it.”

He nods and reaches for the cup. “I am,” he says. “But…what if I’m not…I don’t know, a good brother? What if I’m a burden to her?”
She crouches in front of him, looking up at him. “I happen to have a brother, and he is equal parts blessing and burden, depending on his mood that day,” she explains with a smile. “You’ll be a wonderful brother, just like you’re a wonderful friend.”

Some of the tension fades from around his eyes, and he gives her a relieved smile. “I hope she’s there.”

“If she is, we’ll find her,” she promises, standing and adding more wood to the fire so she can make breakfast. “Do you want to go alone? We need some supplies, but you can go to her house alone if you want.”

“Oh. Uh...n-no,” he stammers. “I don’t think I want to be alone. With her. Not because-!” He spills his coffee on his thigh, cursing at himself and jumping to his feet to pace. “But...but maybe you and I can go to Denerim? Alone?”

“If no one else wants to go, sure.”

He lets out a deep breath. “All right. I know Sten doesn’t want to go, he said so yesterday. So it’s really just Leliana, Wynne or him,” he says, jerking his chin to the Antivan’s tent.

“We could always send them for supplies,” she suggests. “And go to your sister’s on our own.”

“I like that idea.”

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoy the chapter! Today marks the beginning of my hiatus, but I’ll be back in the middle of June! Keep an eye out, because I intend to work on other series and projects over the break!
A Sister's Love

Chapter Summary

Hera and Alistair finally meet his long-lost sister, but things don't go as planned.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.


“Yes, it is very nice,” Zevran comments absently, his eyes darting around and taking in everything at once. “I have been here before.”

“Me too,” Leliana adds. “It’s almost as nice as the cities in Orlais.”

“It is...very little like Antiva City,” Zevran admits. “Hera, is it anything like your home?”

“Ravenloft has no cities,” she says, looking around as they walk into the market. It is like many cities she’s seen before: a market square, homes stacked one atop the other until they lean over the street, rivers and piles of midden discreetly- and sometimes no so discreetly- tucked into alleys and corners. And yet the scent of street food and the bustle of the market reminds her of Sigil, making her homesick for the City of Doors. “Not like this, anyway. Villages and a town a little like Redcliffe near the castle. But I lived in Sigil for quite a long time, and there is nothing like it anywhere.”

“Oh?” Leliana asks. “What do you mean?”

“Sigil is hard to explain,” she starts, thinking of the only city in the planes where one can look up and see not the sky, but another city street full of patrons going about their day. “It is...an infinite city, like a ring. My neighborhood, the Lady’s Ward, could hold Denerim.” She laughs and looks around at the busy market. “My courtyard could probably hold this market.”

“My you are wealthy!” Zevran says approvingly. “The business of pleasure must be good.”
She winks and gives him a wicked smile. “There’s never an off-season.”

“Well, it’s only part of the market,” Alistair says a little defensively, ignoring the talk of her profession. “The Royal Palace is here, and a lot of the nobility have estates here, too.”

“Like the Arl of Redcliffe’s, right over there,” Leliana points out, nodding toward a heavy gate.

“You’ve been to the estate before?” Alistair asks. “I haven’t been there since I was a child.”

“Uh...No, I haven’t been there,” she says uneasily. “But it was pointed out to me once.”

“Is everything all right, Leliana?” Zevran asks, putting a hand on her shoulder. “Does the city make you nervous?”

Hera watches her fake a laugh, raising an eyebrow as she titters some empty answer. Interesting. She’s clearly been here before. Mischief, perhaps, or has something from her past followed her here?

They pass the chantry, and Hera laughs to hear an old priestess reciting something about ham instead of the Chant she was getting used to hearing anytime they came within earshot of the lovely little chapels filled with stained glass. It lends an amusing, and somewhat comforting, levity to the day as if Denerim is the only place in the world where darkspawn have never been seen or feared. Just before they plunge into the market, Alistair stops in his tracks, staring at a door with a laundress’ sign. “That’s my sister’s house!” he says excitedly. “I’m almost sure of it- yes, this is the right address!”

“Leliana, you have the shopping list, right?” Hera says quickly, handing her a purse. “Why don’t you and Zev take care of it and we’ll meet you at the tavern for lunch. You know where it is, right, Alistair?”


Leliana nods, taking the purse from Hera. “Good luck, Alistair,” she says softly, and grabs Zevran by the arm and drags him off.
Turning back to Alistair, Hera takes a deep breath. He suddenly looks like a little boy, nervous and excited. “She could be inside,” he says to himself. “Could...could we go and see?”

With a smile, she takes his hand. “Yes, let’s do that.”

“Will she even know who I am? Does she even know I exist? My sister-” He stops, as if the word suddenly feels like another language in his mouth. “That sounds very strange. Sister! Siiiiiister,” he repeats, playing with it like a toy. After a moment he catches himself, flushing a bit and clearing his throat. “Hm, oh now I’m babbling; maybe we should go. Let’s- let’s go. Let’s just go.”

Hera laughs and squeezes his hand. *How wonderful it would be to see my own sibling again,* she thinks, his excitement infecting her. *I miss Zeus terribly. Oh, I hope your Maker is smiling at you today, Hero. You deserve someone as wonderful as my own twin.*

He pauses at the door again, his face a mixture of hope and fear of rejection. “She’s a laundress,” he says softly, touching the carved wooden sign. “My sister is a laundress. How...how incredibly normal. To think she’s just been here, living this normal life, the whole time.”

“And you’ve been having adventures and are on a quest to save the world. Not everyone gets to be a hero. Some people just have to do the laundry,” she says, opening the door for him. “Come on, Hero,” she adds when he hesitates.

The room inside is dim and overly warm, piles of bundled laundry on one side and neatly folded stacks on the other. The entryway is small, and Hera can smell the sharp scent of lye soap in the damp air.

“Uh...hello?” he calls, nervously glancing at Hera.

“Aye?” a voice calls, and a plain, red-headed woman in a green dress appears from the next room. Once, she might have been pretty, but her hands are red and cracked from the work, and she has the perpetually tired look of one who never has enough of anything. “You have linens to wash? I charge three bits on a bundle, you won’t find better.” The woman evaluates them quickly, and Hera feels as if she’s making some kind of decision about them. “And don’t trust what that Natalia woman tells ya,” she adds, jerking her chin toward the door. “She’s foreign and she’ll rob you blind.”

*Oh, lovely,* Hera thinks, trying not to roll her eyes. *She hates foreigners. She doesn’t look much like*
him, though, she realizes, glancing from his sharp, angled features to her softer, rounded ones.

“I’m not here to have any wash done,” Alistair stammers, trying to smile. “My name’s Alistair. I’m...well, this may sound sort of strange but are you Goldanna? If so, I suppose I’m your brother!”

Goldanna’s face twists into suspicion. “My what?” she sneers. “I am Goldanna, yes. How do you know my name?”

It’s on the door... Hera thinks, giving in to the eyeroll and adding a sigh for good measure. “You’re name’s outside,” she reminds her. “On the sign.”

She stares at Hera through narrow, slitted eyes. “What kind of tomfoolery are you folk up to?” she demands.

Alistair looks panicked and looks to Hera for help. “Are you sure your information was correct, Alistair?” she asks softly.

“Yes,” he says confidently. “I think so. I’m sure of it, in fact. Look, our mother, she worked as a servant in Redcliffe Castle a long time ago, before she died. Did you know about that? She-”

“You!” she screeches, Goldanna’s eyes flying open wide. “They told me you was dead! They told me the babe was dead along with my mother, but I knew they were lying!” She jabs the air with her finger angrily.

“They told you I was dead?” he asks, stunned. “Who? Who told you that?”

“Them’s at the castle! I told them the babe was the king’s, and they said he was dead. Gave me a coin to shut my mouth and sent me on my way! I knew it!” she shouts, slapping a bundle of laundry that Hera’s almost certain wears Alistair’s face in her mind.

“I’m sorry,” he apologizes, looking down at his feet. “I...didn’t know that. The babe didn’t die. I’m him; I’m...your brother.”

“For all the good it does me,” she scoffs. “You killed Mother, you did, and I’ve had to scrape by all
this time. That coin didn’t last long, and when I went back they ran me off!”

“I don’t think this was a good idea,” Hera murmurs softly, touching his shoulder. *No one can truly believe that a child is responsible for his mother’s death.* “Goldanna, he only came to—”

Goldanna turns her gaze to Hera. “And who in the Maker’s name are you?” she demands with a sneer. “Some tart, following after his riches, I expect?”

*She’s half right.* Hera laughs. “Actually, I’m—”

“Hey!” Alistair cuts her off. “Don’t speak to her that way! She’s my friend and a Grey Warden! Just like me!”

Goldanna’s sneer turns into mocking adoration. “Oooh, I see. A *prince* and a *Grey Warden* too. Well, who am I to think poorly of someone so high and mighty compared to me? I don’t know you, boy,” she says acidly. “Your royal father forced himself on my mother and took her away from me, and what do I got to show for it? Nothing,” she spits. “They tricked me good, and I should have told everyone!” She points to the room behind her. “I got five mouths to feed, and unless you can help with that, I got less than no use for you.”

Alistair hangs his head. “I...I’m sorry,” he says, his voice heavy with defeat. “I don’t know what to say.”

Hera shoots Goldanna a dagger-filled look and has to ball her fists to keep herself from flinging a spell at her and setting the woman’s hair on fire. *How dare you, you wretched little beast? How dare you look at this sweet boy and fling such words at him. Oh, I’d love to show you how the Raven Queen would punish you for this.* “It looks like all she wants is your money,” she says with quiet rage.

“Yes, it really seems that way, doesn’t it?” he answers, his voice tinged with sorrow. “I wasn’t expecting my sister to be so...I’m starting to wonder why I came.”

“I don’t know why you came either,” Goldanna snaps. “Or what you expected to find. But it isn’t here; now get out of my house, both of you!”

“Let’s leave,” Hera suggests, her violet eyes burning with anger. “Now.”
“I agree,” he says, looking up at her with eyes as hollow as his voice. “Let’s…” He looks up at his scowling sister once more, hope written all over his face. The woman only sneers and crosses her arms. “Let’s get out of here.” The misery in his voice deepens, his shoulders sagging.

He turns to the door, eager to get away, while Hera stays where she is and stares at Goldanna longer than necessary, making her fidget under a steady gaze. *I would destroy you,* she thinks, reaching for the purse on her belt. “You’re quite lucky,” she says, her words so sweet they drip with sincerity.

“Oh am I? With a useless wretch of a brother and a houseful of mouths to see to? I’m the bloody Queen of Ferelden.”

“You are,” Hera insists, opening the purse. With slow deliberation, she counts out five gold sovereigns and places them beside the folded laundry. “Were we alone, this would have gone quite differently.” She jerks her chin toward the money in a haughty, cold gesture of superiority. “One for each of your mouths. See that you spend it wisely, for there’ll be no more,” she says, her words like stone, before following him out the door.

Outside, he takes a deep breath, and Hera prepares for his reaction. “Well, that was...not what I expected,” he says with false cheer. “To put it lightly. This is the family I’ve been wondering about all my life?” The facade falls away, leaving only a young man hurt by the one person who should have accepted him. “That shrew is my sister? I can’t believe it. I…” he sighs and lifts his hands in a helpless gesture. “I guess I was expecting her to accept me without question. Isn’t that what family is supposed to do? I...I feel like a complete idiot.”

Seething, she looks as if a glance could burn down Goldanna’s house. *That woman...she’s no better than Anatoly was,* she thinks. *Why do we offer so much to those who give so little?* “Everyone is out for themselves,” she informs him, her mind’s eye filled with visions of Zeus fleeing with her in the dark. “You should learn that.”

“Yes,” he agrees, clenching his jaw and turning his back on the little house. “I suppose you’re right. I should.”

She looks back at him in surprise. “Alistair, that’s-”

“Let’s just go. I don’t want to talk about this anymore.”
She nods, watching him pick up the heavy pack of things they need to sell. *I'm sorry, Hero. I wanted so much more for you*, she thinks, following him into the smith’s shop.

When they meet up with Leliana and Zevran an hour later, she gives them a quick shake of her head to stop any questions before they start, and orders them all a whiskey before their food arrives.

Chapter End Notes

I'm back! It was great getting a chance to work on my Zev/Tabris fic, *Birds of a Feather* and a special Father's Day short story for Alistair! Thank you all for being so patient while I took a little break.
Finding Brother Genitivi

Chapter Summary

While searching for Brother Genitivi, Alistair makes a decision about his future.

After lunch, they finish selling off their excess equipment and purchase the last few items on the list they’d needed. Alistair remains gloomy and taciturn, and Hera leaves him to himself, knowing that his sister hurt him deeply with her show of greed and carelessness. They decide to rent a room at the Gnawed Noble for a few hours to store their things in safety before they go to see Brother Genetiivi, and he catches her alone there, setting a small barrel of ale gently on the table.

“You know, I’ve been thinking,” he begins, glancing over his shoulder to make sure no one is listening.

“I was about to ask if you were feeling sick,” she tells him, going for the joke in hopes of lightening his mood.


Hera catches the slight lift at the corners of his mouth and leans against the wall, crossing her arms. “I’m all ears, Hero.”

“Back when we left Goldanna’s, you told me I needed to look out for myself more than I do,” he begins, his expression serious. “I’m beginning to think you were right. I need to stop letting everyone else make my decisions for me. I need to take a stand and think for myself for a change, or I’m never going to be happy.”

Hera watches him carefully. *That isn’t what I meant, but he’s right,* she thinks. *He’ll throw his life away in the service of others, thinking that’s what he’s supposed to do, and never know any joy for himself.* “Don’t let me influence you, Alistair,” she says softly. “But I think it’s about time.”

He nods at her approval. “Then from this point on, I’ll be looking out for myself more. I should have done this a long time ago. I just wanted to say thank you,” he adds. “Meeting you...is the one bright spot out of everything that’s happened.”
Hera’s heart twists in her chest in agreement. “I feel the same way,” she tells him.

“You’re a good friend Hera,” he says, shoving his hands into his pockets. “Thank you. Now, why don’t we go on, before we forget what we’re here to do?”

“Yes,” she agrees. “Brother Genitivi. I bet the bartender can tell us where to find him.”

They head over to the bar to find Leliana and Zevran already speaking with him, shaking hands and nodding as if they’ve concluded some sort of deal. “When I have them, I will send them along,” Zevran tells him, and turns away. “Well, ready to be off? It seems this Genitivi fellow is just across the way.”

“Really?” Hera asks, giving the bartender a curious look as they leave. “What was that about?”

“Oh, just a little side-job,” Leliana explains. “Someone’s looking for toxin samples; we agreed to deliver them if we come across some.”

“Does it pay well?”

Leliana nods. “Two gold for a dozen. We come across enough spiders for that, easily.” She points to a door as they walk. “This one, right Zev?”

“You are correct, my dear.”

“Just be careful with those toxins,” Hera warns. “My fingers were numb all day last time.”

“That was not my fault,” Zevran argues, knocking on the door.

They’re greeted by a young, dark-haired man, dressed in plain, but well-made, clothes. “Yes? What are you doing here?” he asks, looking around outside before inviting them in.
“I’m looking for Brother Genitivi,” Hera explains.

“That makes two of us,” the young man says, twisting his hands until she can hear the knuckles pop. “My name is Weylon. I’m Brother Genitivi’s assistant. I haven’t seen him in weeks; he’s sent no word, and it’s so unlike him. I’m afraid something has happened,” he confesses. “Genitivi’s research into the Urn of Sacred Ashes may have lead him into danger.”

“And you think he’s in trouble because of the Urn?” she leads, raising her eyebrows.

“Perhaps the Urn has been lost for a reason.” His voice takes on a hard edge, and he starts to pace, throwing his arms out as he continues to speak. “I pray for Brother Genitivi’s safety, but hope dwindles with each passing day. I tried to send help, but some knights came from Redcliffe not long ago. I sent them off to Genitivi and they, too, have disappeared!”

Something’s...not right here, she thinks, watching his hands wave about nervously as he talks. “I will succeed where they have failed,” she says lightly, watching for his reaction, “and bring him back safely. I must find the Urn.”

“No,” he says quickly, coming closer and folding his hands in a helpless plea. “Don’t ask me where they went. You’ll only go after them, and what if ill luck should befall you, too? This search is a curse on all of us. Some things are not meant to be found, I know that now. I cannot allow anyone else to be hurt because of this folly.”

“I need to obtain the Ashes, or Arl Eamon will die,” she persuades. “Weylon you must tell me.”

He sighs deeply, then gives up too easily for her taste. “So be it. All he said before he left was that he would be staying at an inn near Lake Calenhad, investigating something in that area. The Bratty Princess, or something.”

“The Spoiled Princess? I know it,” Hera hides her suspicion beneath a dazzling smile. Something’s not right. “Good, I’ll head for the inn immediately.”

“Good luck,” he says dismally. “May you find the answers you seek.”

“Thank you,” she replies and follows the others outside.
“Stop me if I’m wrong,” Alistair says as they return to the Gnawed Noble for their things, “but weren’t we just there?”

“That was more than two weeks ago,” Leliana reminds him. “It’s very possible Weylon is poor at keeping his calendar.”

“We were also rather distracted,” Hera adds. “We’ll find him.” I’m just not so sure that we’ll find him at the lake, she thinks, glancing over her shoulder at the door. Something wasn’t right with him.

“With any luck, Morrigan will decide to join the Circle while we’re there,” he mutters.

“It’s unlikely,” Zevran tells him. “But, considering how much she dislikes you my friend, not impossible.”

“Well, that gives me hope.”

Hera grins and turns an eye to the sky as they leave the city. Dark clouds are rolling in quickly, and now and again the wind picks up, blowing dust and leaves through the air. “Let’s hope the weather holds until we get to camp.”
A Bard's Tale

Chapter Summary

The four friends make their way from Denerim back to camp, but when Zevran starts getting too curious about Leliana's past, Hera pulls her aside for a private talk.

Chapter Notes

Huge, huge thanks to PinkSundays for doing a beta at the (literal) 11th hour! This chapter came to me quite suddenly and she jumped to help me pull it off in time for posting today. If you aren't following her fic The Baker of Kirkwall, you should absolutely check it out!

“Leliana, I’ve heard a great many things about Orlesian spies,” Zevran says as they make their way back to camp.

*Orlesian spies? Could that be why she seemed a bit nervous when we entered Denerim?* Hera watches her carefully, but Leliana doesn’t give anything away as she shrugs carelessly. *If I were going to hire a spy, she is exactly what I’d want.*

“There are many rumors about spies- Orlesian or otherwise. What are you referring to, exactly?” she asks, turning her face away to rifle through a bag resting on her hip. “Did we get enough salt?”

Zevran lets loose a lustful chuckle. “The female ones who use their powers of seduction to get what they want.”

Leliana and Hera both laugh. “I see what you’re getting at,” Leliana says, waving a hand as if to scatter his illusions to the wind. “You may as well ask Hera about that.”

“I could tell you tales that would make your toes curl,” Hera purrs.

“For such a tale I would let you curl anything you wanted, *amora,* ” he promises. “But I was asking pretty Leliana.”
“Honestly?” Leliana says, pausing. “Yes. Why shouldn’t I use my looks and wiles to get what I want? Violence is not the only solution.”

“Or the best,” Hera adds with a little shrug.

“Zevran, people respond eagerly to those they believe understand them,” Leliana explains. “They seek approval, friendship, sometimes love. These things can all be exploited.”

Hera glances over at Alistair, catching him watching her in turn. “Not you,” she whispers, lacing her fingers through his. “Not this.”

He gives her hand a little squeeze, and she hears a soft chuckle. “Good to know,” he whispers back.

“I am sure they didn’t mind being exploited by either of you,” Zevran says in a husky voice.


“So you’re admitting to being a spy?” Alistair asks, curiosity coloring his voice like a boy.

*He’s sharper than he gives himself credit for. Even for a chantry-educated brother.* Hera hears Leliana’s short intake of breath before she starts to speak again. *He’s called you out, Leliana, what will you do now?*

“Not all minstrels are spies, most are just singers and storytellers,” she amends quickly, two red spots appearing on her cheeks. “But some are also bards. Some say there is a bard order, but I don’t think that’s true. I’ve been paid for rumors and such- any performer worth their salt has been- but I am a musician,” she insists, her voice shaking slightly. “A singer. At least I was before I entered the chantry.”

*Wait.* Hera watches as Leliana seems to shrink before their eyes, her confidence draining away and her eyes on her feet. *There seems to be more to her story- something painful, I’d wager.*
“And a better companion than we deserve,” Hera says, cutting Zevran off as he opens his mouth to say more. “Leliana, why don’t we let the boys handle all this? You and I can take our bows and shoot for tonight’s pot.”

Leliana agrees, handing her share of the new supplies to Zevran.

“Hera, what are you doing?” Alistair whispers, taking her pack.

“Hunting,” she says lightly. “We’ll be at camp before the storm hits. Take my sword,” she adds, unbelting it and strapping it to his back. “With my bow and dagger, I won’t need the added weight.”

Alistair grunts, staggering exaggeratedly under the heavy pack and weapon. “Be careful,” he warns.

She tosses him a brilliant smile and follows Leliana off the road into the surrounding woods. “Always, Hero,” she says, her words trailing behind her like perfume.

Following Leliana silently, Hera keeps an arrow notched and listens for the fluttering heartbeat of small prey. “You don’t have to worry about Zevran,” she says after a while. “Or Alistair. They wouldn’t say or do anything to cause you harm.”

“I have revealed too much, it seems,” Leliana answers softly, hanging back so that Hera can come up beside her. “But it doesn’t matter what I used to be. Did you already know?” she asks.

Hera shakes her head, meeting Leliana’s gaze. Such fear in those pretty blue eyes, she thinks sadly. And she’s trying so hard to hide it. “No. You’ve kept yourself well hidden in the chantry, but your enthusiasm for adventure is what kept poking holes in your story.”

Leliana stares at her for a moment before she starts walking again. “You never said anything. Not even to Alistair?”

“Why should I? I myself didn’t know until just now,” she explains. “Leliana, your life is your own, as are your secrets. If you wanted to keep them to yourself, that was your business.” She pauses.
when a nearby clump of bushes tremble with the rush of wings, followed by a soft, bird-like drumming. “There,” she whispers, raising her bow.

Leliana picks up a stick and throws it into the greenery, startling a pair of grouse into short flight. Hera allows herself a moment to show off, her dhampir speed enabling her to shoot twice as fast and take down both birds.

“That was so fast!” Leliana exclaims. “You were like a blur! Is that what being a Grey Warden is like?”

“Sometimes,” Hera says vaguely, putting her bow over her shoulder and walking over to the dead birds. “These are pretty big. The grouse I’m used to is usually smaller,” she adds, pulling her arrows free.

“And what pretty feathers!” the younger woman says softly. “I can use them as fletching.”

“And we will have a tasty dinner tonight as well,” Hera says proudly, wrapping a bit of twine around their legs and putting them over our shoulder.

“So long as Alistair doesn’t cook,” Leliana quips.

They stay in the shelter of the trees as thunder rumbles in the distance, keeping just in sight of the road. The wind cool, rushing ahead of the storm to make the leaves whisper in the dying light. As the hours pass, Hera tries to stay in the moment, to enjoy this world and its beauty and not be reminded of times spent in forests with her brother and far-away companions.

“Hera.”

“Hmm?” she asks, looking over her at her friend. “We aren’t far from camp; is something wrong?”

“I like to say the Maker brought me here,” she starts slowly, twisting her fingers together. “I...found myself in Ferelden and sheltered from bad weather in the chantry. When the storm passed...I did not want to leave.”
With a small nod, Hera puts a hand on her shoulder. “I know what it is to run from your past,” she says softly.

Leliana bows her head, blinking rapidly. “What happened to me...maybe it will affect us, maybe not, but you should know.” She takes a deep breath and lifts her head, clenching her jaw. “I came to Ferelden and the chantry because I was being hunted in Orlais.”


“I was framed,” she says quickly, her voice thick with emotion. “Betrayed by someone I thought I knew and could trust. Marjolaine- she was my mentor...and my friend. She taught me the bardic arts- how to enchant with words and song, how to carry myself as a high-born lady, to blend in as a servant… Those skills I used to serve her, my bard-master, because I loved her and I enjoyed what I did.”

“Oh Leliana,” Hera sighs, brushing her hair back. “I know what it is to misplace your heart. How did she betray you?”

“You can say it was my fault,” she says bitterly. “There was a man I was sent to kill; I was to bring Marjolaine everything he carried. I don’t know who this man was. She gave me a name and a description, and I hunted him down. I found documents on his body- sealed documents.”

“Important ones, I presume?”

“Yes. My curiosity got the better of me. Something told me I needed to know what was in those letters.” Leliana looks away as the first tear rolls down her cheek. “Marjolaine had been selling information about Orlais to other countries,” she says as her voice starts to tremble. “It was treason. I had always assumed Marjolaine had operated only in Orlais. This was an...unhappy surprise. I was afraid her life would be in danger if she were caught. Orlais has been at war with so many countries, it takes a harsh view of such things. As I learned.”

Quietly, Hera takes Leliana’s bow and quiver, setting them and her own down and leading her to sit on a fallen log. “Sweet girl,” she says as Leliana begins to cry. “I’m sorry, Leliana.”

Something in Leliana breaks, and Hera holds her while she sobs. Poor girl, she thinks, rubbing a hand over her shuddering shoulders. She’s young now, how long ago was this?
When Leliana’s tears start to subside, she raises her head and wipes her face. “I believed her when she said she was innocent, that she was trying to destroy the documents that framed her. I kept believing, up till the moment I saw the documents for myself, altered by her hand to make me look like the traitor.”

“What a bitch!” Hera snarls, her eyes narrow slits of cold fury. “What a foul, worthless maggot!”

Leliana gives her a grim smile. “Yes, I agree. The guards captured me and...” She shivers, her eyes locked on some far-away point, clearly seeing the past and not the forest around them. “They did terrible things to me, to make me confess and reveal my conspirators. It was a traitor’s punishment I endured.”

Was it so long ago that I myself sat on a throne and ordered the death and torture of traitors? Hera shys away from the idea that they, too, might have been innocent. No, I had proof of their treachery, confessions from their own mouths, long before the first cry of pain.

“Leliana...have you never sought revenge?”

Leliana shakes her head, her single braid swinging. “No. Survival was my only concern at the time. I used the skills she taught me to break free, and I have not sought her out. I was tempted, but what good would that have done? She would have had me captured once again. I fled, to the chantry and the Maker.” She takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly as if it could cleanse her of the pain of her past. “Ferelden has protected my person, and the Maker has saved my soul. Oh, Hera, I am sorry for having lied to you,” she says, throwing her arms around Hera’s neck. “Surely you can see my reason?”

“Yes, of course,” Hera says, glad that Leliana can’t see the guilt on her face.

She feels Leliana’s relieved sigh and squeezes her tightly. “No more lies and secrets between us,” Leliana says, pulling away. She looks as if the truth has been weighing on her, and now that it’s been spoken aloud, she might truly heal from it and move on. “In this, at least.”

Hera nods, watching her get to her feet and pick up her things once again. What would happen if I told her my own secret? She wonders, standing. Would they treat me differently, knowing I’m the queen I claim to serve? They don’t treat Alistair any differently, but he’s not a king. I could never tell them I’m dhampir, they wouldn’t understand something born from both the living and the dead.
I suppose it doesn’t matter. I will die, probably before this is all over, and my secrets will stay mine.
Respect

Chapter Summary

When misfortune strikes, Hera and Alistair spend an unexpected night together.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hera jolts awake the second the first drop touches her head. “Blast,” she hisses, sitting up and scanning the roof of the tent. Another drop, as frigid as the last, hits her near an eye, making her flinch. “Ares, did you do that?” she asks, giving the mabari a sharp look.

In response, the dog’s tongue lolls out of his mouth, and he buries himself deeper into his nest.

The drip becomes a stream as the tear becomes wider under the pounding rain. It looks like a dog bite, and another drip begins from a similar hole in the canvas. Hera glares at the oiled fabric, annoyed with herself for allowing Ares to carry the tent on his back.

“You beast,” she mutters, “you put a hole in our tent with your games. Are you happy with yourself?”

Ares grumbles and rolls his eyes, tongue flopping out of his mouth in a sleepy grin.

A clap of thunder makes her nearly leap out of her skin and she has to stop herself from crying out. Well, that’s silly, she scolds herself. It’s only thunder. No different than at home. Calm down. As if finally realizing he’s done something wrong, Ares lifts his head and whines, shuffling closer to her.

“It’s just a little tear,” she assures him, scratching behind his ear. “We’ll be fine. I just wish I hadn’t promised to limit my magic,” she sighs, moving her flat pillow. “It’s pretty foolish, isn’t it? Forcing myself to live like this when a simple spell would just…”

She waves a hand lazily, and the holes repair themselves. “See? Isn’t that better?” she asks Ares, and he makes a soft yip in reply but stays snuggled close to her.
The storm rages on, and she lies back down, flipping her pillow over to the drier side. The early autumn night had been cold before the storm rolled through, driving everyone to their tents, and the rain has only made it colder. The thunder is so loud Hera can feel the earth tremble, followed by another bright green bolt, lighting up the tent. Glaring at the canvas above her, she rolls over, wrapping her blanket tightly around her.

After a while, the passion of the storm becomes familiar and almost soothing, reminding her of Ravenloft’s spring storms, and she settles into a peace-filled doze before the world is torn asunder.

Lightning cracks, striking a nearby tree. Hera sits up with a shriek just as a branch crashes through her tent, ripping the canvas. Wrapped in her blanket and smothered by wet canvas, her cry is lost in another crash of thunder, and Ares makes a run for it, leaping through the gaping hole and abandoning her. She struggles free to run after him, instantly drenched, and tries to get him to come back, but the mabari huddles under Bodahn's wagon and won’t come out. "Coward," she accuses, tugging on his harness. "Come along, we'll find somewhere to sleep." When he digs in and refuses, she decides to leave him be, not wanting a muddy, stinking dog sleeping beside her anyway.

Rain falls in heavy sheets, as cold as ice, and by the time Hera returns to her tent, everything is soaked and her tent is beyond repair. She shivers, wrapping her arms around herself and looks around for a safe harbor.

I can't go to Leliana’s tent, she thinks. She’s sharing with Wynne. Sten is out of the question- he barely fits in it alone, and won’t get another. And Zev...well, he and I know exactly what will happen if I ask to sleep there. Not that I’d mind, but I’m almost certain someone else would...

Shivering so hard her teeth chatter, she heads for Alistair’s tent. “A-Alistair?” she whispers. “Alistair…”

She hears a snort, a confused mumbled question, and a small scuffle before he pulls back a tent flap, a candle stub in one hand offering a weak, flickering light on his bare chest. “Hera? What's wrong?”

“C-Can I sleep here?” She tries to smile, succeeding in a grimace as she shivers. “My tent has new ventilation,” she explains. “A branch tore through it.”

“Maker’s breath,” he says, untying the flaps and letting her in. “You’re soaked through!”
“I am.” She ducks inside, dripping and rubbing her hands together. “C-Can I b-borrow a shirt?”

“What?” he asks, staring at her. She’s wearing nothing but a long shirt of her own, and it’s currently plastered to her skin. Under other circumstances, she’d use the wet linen clinging to her every curve to her advantage, but at the moment all she wants is to be dry and warm.

“A shirt?”

“Oh of course,” he says, handing her a towel before digging into his pack. “I think this one’s clean. And, um, some...er...trousers,” he stammers, face and neck turning red.

“At this p-point, I don’t c-care if it's c-clean,” she laughs, taking the towel from him.

“I’ll- um- not look,” he offers, turning around.

“You could,” she says softly, peeling her shirt off. “You’d only be seeing what others before you have paid well for. It wouldn’t be...It wouldn’t be important. I’m nice to look at,” she adds, her light, casual tone belying anything she might think or feel, “I wouldn’t mind.”

There’s a stretch of silence while she towels off. It’s true, she thinks, squeezing water from her hair. Warmth pools in her stomach before traveling through her limbs, and she can feel magic rising in her blood like a tide, rushing through her with a roar as loud as her desire. A glance is nothing compared to what I want from him.

“I know,” he says quietly, back still turned. The candlelight glows against his bare shoulders, making his skin look bronze. “But it’s important that you know…”

“Yes?” she whispers beneath the thunder. Hera clutches his clothes to her chest, otherwise totally naked. No one has ever denied himself the pleasure of seeing her in the flesh- especially not for free - and to know that this man would do so makes her stomach clench.

“I respect you,” he says, shrugging and keeping his back turned. “No matter your profession. I’m not going to pay for you like you’re an object, or treat you the way those others have, because I’m not like the others.”
“I know you aren’t.” She slips into his shirt and trousers, still shaking. *I'm not certain I know exactly what to think of that,* she thinks with an arched brow. *I don't know if anyone's ever paid me such a thing as respect. Not that I've ever begrudged them, it is simply the way of things. Although... he is so earnest about it.*

“I- I hope you aren’t upset?”

She bites her lip against a smile. “When you say it like that, how could anyone be upset? You can turn around now.”

Alistair glances over his shoulder through squinting eyes first, making sure it’s safe. Catching sight of her buttoning the top of his shirt, he lets out a held breath and turns. *She looks... utterly adorable,* he thinks, grinning at how his clothes hang off her. He doesn’t understand it, but he likes seeing her in his things. “I doubt the storm will pass by morning,” he says, lying down. “Let’s get some sleep.”

Hera leaves her wet shirt in the corner and lingers on the other side of the tent. “I’ll just sleep over here,” she offers.

He raises up on an elbow and stares at her with a frown. “You don’t have a blanket. And my cloak is wet, too.”

“I’ll be fine.” She sits as close to the tent wall as she can, pulling her knees to her chest.

Alistair doesn’t know which he craves more: the space she offers, or the intimacy they both desire. *Both? Can I want both?* “Or a pillow,” he says and clears his throat. *Maker’s breath. It's both.*

“I don’t need one.”

*What a stubborn woman.* Alistair laughs and makes room for her on his bedroll. “Get over here. I’m sure my virtue can stand it for a night.”

*Can I? Andraste preserve me.*

She slips beneath his blanket, laying her head beside his, but Alistair is as nervous as a cat. He shifts and twitches, trying not to disturb her as he struggles to find sleep with Hera so close. He
settles on his back- just as he’d started- and gets still, listening to her even breathing. Once he’s still, she moves, curling up against him for warmth. It feels so natural, his arm moves without thought, tucking her closer and moving her head to his shoulder.

He falls asleep wondering if he’s been blessed or cursed to have her here. In the morning, he wakes alone to the sound of rain beating against his tent. Was it a dream? He feels a strange pang of disappointment at the thought, just before the tent flap opens and she comes rushing in, bringing rain and cold air with her like some playful spirit.

“Three days before I can get another tent,” she tells him, hanging his cloak on a pole by the entrance. “Bodhan said he’ll have to get to the next village and back, but Wynne said I can squeeze in with them until then.”

She’s dressed in a pair of her own pants and his shirt, her boots and backpack in hand. “Thankfully not everything is ruined,” she goes on, lifting the boots. “Mostly just wet- I have a habit of leaving as much as possible in my pack. Easier to get up and go that way. As soon as the rain lets up I can start drying everything out.”

“Oh. Good,” he says dumbly.

“Are you all right?” she asks, sitting across from him and drying her feet. “I didn't kick all night, did I?”

“No,” he says, rubbing his face vigorously. “I just woke up.”

“Well it seems like we’re stuck here at least for the day,” she says apologetically. “The clearing is a lake of its own. I’ll just get over to Leliana’s, maybe Wynne can dry my clothes once I get there. I should never have promised to keep my magic secret. It’s far too useful, especially in times like this.”

“You don't have to,” he says quickly. “Stay with them, I mean. You can stay here. I have cards.”

"And my things?" she asks, a mischievous sparkle in her eyes.

He considers the dripping pack and its contents. It's safer for her to keep it secret. I doubt even Morrigan would understand the nature of her power. I don't even understand it, and she's tried to
explain it. "Oh look," he says, kneeling to dig into his pack. "My head is down and I can't see anything behind me."

He sneaks a look as she performs a hasty spell. Hera's whole being brightens at the simple joy of her magic, and Alistair feels like he’s been punched in the gut at how lovely she looks. He swallows hard, pulling out the cards and a wineskin, and they spend the day playing cards until he catches her cheating. She laughs and offers to teach him.

For Alistair, it’s an easy day spent with a girl he likes. He doesn't feel any pressure from her to move their relationship forward, and it helps him be less awkward. They've talked a little about courtship, and he’s almost certain he wants to wait until the Blight is over and they’ve made it out alive before doing anything. For now, he’s content to make her laugh.

For Hera, it’s a rare chance to spend time with someone who wants only her time. She’s very aware that he needs her to lead them through the Blight, and that means that the support and outfitting of everyone falls to her, but this is different. He wants to spend time with her, playing cards and making jokes, not trying to charm her out of her clothes or haggle with her for the cost of an evening. It’s an unusual thing, realizing who she is without her twin, and the more time she spends with Alistair, the more she comes to know herself.

“Hey, you’re cheating again-”

Alistair stops as Zevran bursts into the tent, shaking cold rain off himself and splattering them with it. “Amora,” he says dramatically, falling to his knees beside Hera. “I have only now heard of the misfortune of your tent. Please, allow me to offer my own bed, I swear you will find only comfort, warmth, and myself in it.”

Hera laughs as he lays his head in her lap. “I will be perfectly fine,” she assures him. “Alistair was a perfect gentleman.”

“If you would allow, I promise to be an im perfect gentleman,” Zevran offers, looking up at her. “I know a wonderful style of Antivan massage I would be happy to teach you.”

Hera plays her next card, combing through his hair with her fingers. “That’s very generous of you,” she says, winking at Alistair. “But Alistair promised to show me the Ferelden massage later tonight.”
“I did?” Alistair chokes, dropping his cards.

“Don't you remember?” she leads. “Alistair, you promised.”

“Well, if it was a promise, I suppose I can wait until tomorrow night,” Zevran mumbles. He plays the rejected suitor but gives Alistair a curious look. “Ferelden massage, you say? Could I perhaps learn this technique as well?”

“Sorry, Zev,” Alistair says, raising an eyebrow at her. “It may take a few days to get right. I need to practice on someone before I can teach you.”

“You’re lying!” Zevran exclaims, sitting up suddenly and scattering cards everywhere.

Hera laughs and cups his face in her hands. “Oh my darling,” she says dramatically. “If only I was available…” she says, looking deep into Zevran’s amber eyes. “But I daresay I would fall madly in love with you, and when I found my way home, would be inconsolable without you.”

Zevran’s slow, seductive smile stretches across his face. “So all the more reason to enjoy the moment, bella.”

Alistair clears his throat awkwardly. Hera looks past Zevran at him and raises an eyebrow. If you want to lay claim, you should do it yourself, she thinks, tempted to kiss Zevran just for spite. Instead, she takes a page from her brother’s book and releases a sigh from deep within. “It is best not to tempt fate,” she tells him gravely. “When the women of my family finally fall in love, it always leads to their death.”

“Amora, am I expected to believe that?” Zevran laughs.

“It’s very true,” she says, her demeanor changing from playful to grim. “My mother, Mina, died of a broken heart. If her love could have stayed with her, perhaps he could have saved her, or granted her peace in her final days.”

“Amora,” Zevran whispers, brushing a thumb over her cheek.
“I am sorry,” Alistair says softly.

She sucks in a breath and blinks, surprised she would be so open with these strange men. “It is in the past,” she says with a lightness she doesn’t feel. “Let’s play cards. Zevran, will you deal?”

***

Hours later, Hera braves the storm to check on Sten, Leliana, and Wynne. Ares found his way into Sten’s tent, and the qunari offers to keep him, as they ‘understand one another as warriors.’ Hera shrugs, glad that the mabari found a dry place to stay, and gives him what rations she brought for the dog.

Hera looks in on Morrigan, soaked to the bone by the time she reaches the distant campsite. “What on earth are you doing?” Morrigan demands, standing in the shelter of her lean-to. “I know very well we aren’t traveling in this weather, you foolish woman.”

“I just wanted to check on you,” Hera explains, shaking the rain from Alistair’s cloak as she steps under the roof. “Everything’s fine?”

“Oh course it is,” Morrigan says, making a clucking noise with her tongue. “Are you trying to catch a cold?”

“No, I was just looking in on everyone,” Hera defends.

“I see. And you think we’re all so helpless that we cannot manage a day without our leader holding our hands?”

“Damn you, Morrigan! I just wanted to make sure you were fine!” Hera snaps. “Why can’t you just let people be nice to you?”

The witch’s haughty expression disappears, leaving her shame-faced. “I...I am sorry, Hera,” she says slowly. “I did not mean-”

“Yes you did,” Hera interrupts. “Otherwise you wouldn’t have said it. I’m not Flemeth, and I’m not
acting like her. I wanted to check on you because you’re a friend, and it’s been a violent storm that’s already destroyed one tent. I’ll go now,” she finished, slinging water as she whips Alistair’s cloak over her shoulders.

“Who lost their tent?”

Hera pauses in the rain and turns to her. “I did.” She doesn’t wait for a response, turning on her heel and splashing across the open field between camps. Since she’s already soaked, Hera meanders through the surrounding forest, trying to calm the sudden temper before going back to Alistair. Alone, she closes her eyes, listening to the rain in the leaves and feeling the water seep into her shoes. You’re only afraid of the future, she tells herself. There’s no need to punish Morrigan or anyone else for the mess you’re in. After a time, she lets out a deep breath as the last of her anger slips away.

They’d been keeping off the main roads, certain that Zevran wasn’t the only one looking for them. It left them stumbling through forests, following old roads that run alongside rivers and use distant mountains as their compass needle. It was a lovely country, full of idyllic villages and towns that, under less dire conditions, would have been charming and welcoming. It left an impression on Hera, making her feel as if life would be simple and carefree here. She knows it isn’t true, no life and no world could ever be so ideal, but all the same, she can’t help but wonder what it would be like to stay and see Ferelden at peace.

Ferelden was colder than the location suggested- the sun shone, the trees had been green and the flowers had bloomed all summer, but she couldn’t say it ever got hotter than was comfortable. Still, it was lovely, like paintings she’d seen of peaceful countryside. It made the cities with their deplorable alienages easily forgotten, and she wonders if this was part of the problem.

Even on a dark and wet night, she can see the difference the new autumn makes. Hera counts backward, tracking the days against the Ravenloft calendar. It had been mid-autumn in Ravenloft when she left, and she had arrived into late spring. If she is right, and time didn't move faster or slower in Ferelden, then it should be about mid-spring there now. She still had half a year.

Half a year. I can do a lot in half a year.

The storm seems to take a deep breath, releasing it in a rush of thunder and lightning, the leaves whirling around Hera with renewed vigor. She laughs, throwing her head back and using magic to tease the wind into more of a frenzy as she spins with her arms stretched out. She rarely gets such opportunities to release the tension inside, and she can feel it fill the air until it crackles along her skin.
“What are you doing out here?”

She barely hears the shout over the storm and turns her head to see Alistair standing there, his shirt plastered to his chest, lit only by the flashing of light from above. Succumbing to the passion of the storm, she walks over to him, ready to make love to him here, in the middle of the tempest, until she sees his eyes.

They’re full of concern and so much warmth it gives her pause, reining in the passion and power that courses through her. The feelings he inspires are so strong they set her off balance, and she wavers until he reaches for her arm to steady her.

_Powers help me_, she thinks, staring up at him as the intensity of the moment passes.

“I saw you come out here,” he shouts over the noise. “I was worried Morrigan had done something to upset you.”

“No,” she shouts back, pushing her heavy hair back. “I just thought it would be calmer here under the trees.”

He laughs, sweeping his hair flat against his head. “You were right, it’s much calmer here. Let’s get back,” he suggests, huddling under the cloak with her.

They race through the rain, slipping and clutching one another to keep from falling, their laughter ringing through the deluge. Once in his tent, they face one another, standing close and dripping, and desire flares between them again. The tension between them is palpable, and Hera realizes just how much she’s wanted him. Holding her breath, she raises up on the balls of her feet and leans in, kissing his cheek softly. At the same moment, they’re instantly dry, and he jumps in surprise.

“Better than catching a cold,” she says softly, turning away and crouching near her backpack.

Alistair’s heart races, and he’s glad she speaks first. He closes his eyes and focuses on breathing, trying to calm the panic inside him whenever she’s near. His whole life has been focused on the chantry, being told horrible things would happen should he give in to his base instincts and desires. _Oh, Maker...I want_ ... What? Hera? Freedom from the last chains the chantry has on him?

“I have some dice in here, I think,” she says, digging through her things. “I’ll teach you how to
cheat with them.”

Chapter End Notes

This is one of those chapters that went through rewrites, multiple betas, and quite a lot of editing. I needed it to be perfect and sweet but also progress their relationship. I hope you enjoyed it, and thank you for reading.
Comfort in the Dark

Chapter Summary

Ever since her experience in the Fade, nightmares have plagued Hera in the small hours of the night. Sharing a tent, Alistair sees her in a new light.

Late that night, Alistair wakes to sounds of distress. Confused, he opens his eyes to see Hera a few feet away, weeping into her pillow. He sits up and lights a candle, prepared to offer what comfort he can, and realizes that she’s still asleep.

“She’s still asleep,” he thinks, reaching out to touch her shoulder, but she doesn’t respond. Oh, Hera...what is it? Is it the darkspawn? He wonders, pitying her. The sound of her sorrow is almost too much to bear, and he nudges her again. He had the feeling it wasn’t the tainted dreams they shared; his own dreams had been of Duncan in the days before Ostagar.

“Hera, wake up.”

She responds this time, her eyes opening slowly as she takes a shuddering breath. In the flickering light, he sees her take in her surroundings slowly, grief carving deep lines into her lovely face, and then close her eyes again, turning into her pillow, shoulders shuddering with the force of her dream.

“I hate dreams,” she whimpers. “I wish I’d never seen the Fade.”

Alistair aches for her and blows out the candle, then gathers her in his arms. Her tears don’t stop when he pulls her into his lap and lays her head against his bare chest. The dam truly bursts then, and she sobs openly, clinging to him and burying her face in his neck. Alistair just closes his eyes and rocks back and forth, not caring how long it takes. This storm too will pass, he thinks, running his hand over her hair.
Eventually, violent sobbing gives way to simple tears, and her gasps calm into even breaths. “Are you all right?” he asks finally, deciding not to look at her.

“Yes.” The word is small and soft, as if she’s ashamed of having been vulnerable for any length of time.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

She’s quiet for so long he thinks she might have fallen asleep. “My mother’s name was Mina,” she says softly, resting her cheek over his heart. “She was so beautiful it hurts to remember, pure white hair and eyes so blue they were nearly black. Like my brother. She had the voice of an angel and was terribly clever. Zeus is just like her, he can play any instrument he lays his eyes on.”

“Are you like your father? You said you knew a little about him.”

“I…I don’t know,” she says honestly. “I look a little like him, I suppose. I’ve seen paintings, but that’s it, and only recently. I…I hope I’m like him, my Uncle says he was well-loved.”

“You’re at the very least well-liked,” he chuckles.

She shrugs, keeping her head down. “She died when we were eighteen. A wasting sickness. A cancer. Heartache. Something. We watched her fade slowly…” Her voice trembles and he feels her take a deep breath. “Sometimes I dream about the night she died. You’d be surprised how many nightmares wait to ambush you when you can suddenly have them. I’m sorry I woke you.”

“Don’t be. You never said a word after Ostagar.”

“That was different. The pain was fresh for you.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but that seemed pretty fresh. Even if it was a memory.” He raises his brows and tilts his head, wondering. “How old are you, anyway?”
“About a hundred,” she says tiredly.

“Sometimes I feel that way, too,” he chuckles.

“Would you mind if we stayed like this?” she asks timidly. “Just for a little while?”

Seeing this shy, vulnerable woman in place of his confident, flirtatious friend makes it easy to give her what she wishes. “Not at all, raven,” he says gently, pulling his blanket around them.

“Alistair?”

“Hmm?”

“Tell me about the Grey Wardens. I don't know anything about them.”

“I can change that,” he says and starts talking, his voice low and soothing.

The sound rumbles in his chest, rolling over her and filling the tent, and before long, Hera’s asleep again. Not wanting to disturb her, Alistair hunches over, laying his head on her shoulder, and follows.
Zeus' search for his twin becomes desperate as more and more of his friends come up with nothing. When Hera's old flame appears with a bitter accusation, Zeus is forced to realize that she might have left on her own accord.

Chapter Notes

BONUS CHAPTER! That's fun, right?

I literally wrote most of this chapter on post-it notes this morning at work, so HUGE thanks to PadawanHilary for doing a beta read on short notice for me. If you haven't checked out Monster on her profile, you absolutely should.

Zeus paces the study- his sister’s study, a room so full of her that it both eases and salts the wound of her absence. Historical texts sit side-by-side popular novels, erotic poetry nestled between centuries-old scrolls in the myriad of languages she had so loved learning. Magical curios she had created were placed randomly around the warm, luxurious room; it had never mattered to her that some of them were spectacular failures, while others were achingly beautiful. She always takes such joy in her magic… He thinks sadly, picking up a glass sphere filled with a cool, flickering purple fire within. If the glass were to break, it would explode in a roaring fire, as hot as the heart of the Abyss itself, but contained by both magic and glass made by a master alchemist, it was little more than a pretty light source.

His additions to the room were few: a large table spilling over with maps of various worlds and planes, chairs for the planeswalkers he’d enlisted, and stacks of drawings of his sister as he had seen her last.

“The Duchess of Fandemire knew nothing?” he asks desperately when the door opens.

A small half-elf enters and shakes her head sadly, long black hair rippling. Her skin is dark like a desert-dweller, dusted with gold by whatever goddess she worshipped that had changed her fate from a human existence to the longevity of the elves, a direct contrast to the two men beside her. One is a tiefling necromancer, his skin as white as snow, one eye black and the other a mottled gray, usually covered by scraggly hair parting over large black horns. The other, an elf named Gath, has more of a conventional look to him, not as pale as his master, but with the same dark hair.
“No,” Aara says softly, setting her bag by the door and coming closer. The necromancer Goddard throws himself into a chair, his man Gath heading to the cupboard for wine. “Hera is known there, but the Duchess said that if she had passed through her realm, Hera did not approach her for aid.”

Zeus nods and puts both hands on the long table, leaning over the map of doors. “All the touts in Sigil are keeping an eye out for her,” Goddard adds, his tone helpful. “And there’s a rumor of a sorceress in the Plane of Shadows. There isn’t much known about her, beyond that she is beautiful and terrifying.”

The Regent of Ravenloft raises his head, sapphire eyes haunted with hope. *Could it be? Can I dare hope?* He tries to speak, but the words catch in his tight throat.

Aara comes over and embraces him. “We’re looking, Zeus,” she assures him, turning as the door opens again.

Zeus sneers at Jami and his enormous brother stagger in. “Nothing in the Beastlands,” the skinny fire wizard says, coughing smoke and smacking at a small flame catching on his elbow.

Zeus sighs and makes a mark on his map. “And Krynne and Two have sent word that there’s nothing of her in Arborea. They’re meeting Tallyn and Gill in Elysium next.” He rubs his chest, trying to calm the torment of worry and sense of loss ever since she disappeared. It’s like losing his right hand or having his heart ripped from his chest.

“She can’t have just...left,” he whispers, hanging his head and letting straight white hair fall around his face.

The room is quiet until Jami coughs, another puff of smoke coming out of him. “Maybe...Maybe she did,” he says, flinching at his own words. “She *was* pretty miserable.”

Zeus looks up at him, more fire in his eyes than Jami could ever conjure. “She was *not* miserable,” he snaps.

Jami draws his thin body to its full height and gives him a fierce look in return. “What do you know?” the wizard demands with a snarl. “Being queen changed her!”
Low chuckling fills the otherwise silent room, Zeus’ shoulders shaking with it. “Me?” he laughs, pushing off the table and walking around to stand before Jami. “I know everything about my sister. What would you know about it?” he asks, poking him in the chest. “She sent you away days after she was crowned.”

The touch was too much, and flames spring up along the wizard’s hands. “I know I snuck in and saw her a couple times!” he shouts. “If you’d pay more attention to her instead of your whoring and drinking maybe you’d’ve seen it too!”

Zeus pauses and looks over at the group assembled carefully. *Could he be telling the truth? Did she keep so much from me? But why? We’ve shared everything.* “Aara, is this true?” he asks quietly, looking to her friend. “You, Krynne, and my sister have shared so much. Has she kept such misery from me?”

Aara nods sadly. “Her letters became fewer, more subdued,” she explains. “I offered to come to visit- Krynne and I both would come, but she refused.”

“Being a queen made Bits respectable,” Jami spat. “And she hated it. You should have left her to her whoring.”

The words hit him like a hammer to the chest, and Zeus stumbles back. *She hated it.* “Oh gods,” he whispers, his face turning ashen. He grips the back of a nearby chair as the weight of Jami’s words settle on him. *She tried to show me, he thinks, gasping for breath. She wanted us to rule together, and I wouldn’t have it.* “Damn me,” he moans.

He’s so wrapped in grief that he doesn’t hear the soft steps of his friends leaving the room and closing the door. Tears burn and he sinks into the chair, resting his head in his hands. *She told me as much, the night we crowned her. And I didn’t listen.*

*Oh gods, was she so unhappy that she simply left?*
Leliana asks Hera about how she and Alistair spent the time alone in his tent.

Hey everyone! I had to take a small break from posting. I have a new beta, and they needed to catch up on the story, so if you've seen some small edits, that's what's going on. This is a short chapter, but things should pick back up by next week. Thanks for being patient in the meantime!

“What do you mean?” Hera asks. She and Leliana are scouting ahead, using old trail signs to lead the others down the right path. Bending a twig, she sticks it in the ground and looks up at her friend.

“Are you really going to tell me that you spent that much time alone in his tent and nothing happened?”

“Does everyone think I’m a slut pretending her fame and expense?” she asks, rising. “I take my art very seriously; I know very well when a man is ready to be seduced, and when you only have to crook your finger. Alistair and I are friends, and I’m perfectly capable of controlling my wanton ways around a man.”

“No, I don’t think you’re pretending,” Leliana stammers. “I just can’t believe he didn’t try anything.”

“The chantry may have brought you peace and beautiful women, but it gave him a fear of intimacy and a lot of loneliness,” Hera chides her gently. “If he doesn’t want a physical relationship, I wouldn’t press for one.”

“But you’d like one,” Leliana giggles. “I’ve seen the way you stare whenever he takes his shirt off.”

“Is it really so casual there?”

“It really is,” Hera responds. “There are dramatics, of course, but mostly it’s simply pleasure between people. Unless the whole thing is handled badly, no one makes a fuss.”

“That’s how it is in Orlais,” Leliana says. “And Antiva, if Zevran is to be believed.”

Hera sets another marker at a fork in the road. “The chantry has people under a spell of piety,” she says bitterly. “Chastity will save their souls. Bunch of prudes.”

“That’s not true,” Leliana argues.

“Isn’t it? Mages cannot breed, nor can they hold a title or even go outside unobserved. They yoke those with power so they can control it. They’ve taught the templars that only a life of chastity will save them, and take them to their Maker’s side.”

"Templars don't have to take a vow of chastity-

Hera's sharp look cuts her off. "And even without one, look at what chantry vows did to that poor man in the mage tower. Did chastity or faith save him or his friends?" she asks. "No. Instead, his brothers-in-arms were willing to abandon them all. Faith should comfort and care for people, not govern those they fear."

“I...I suppose you're right,” Leliana says, looking at the ground. “I just can’t imagine someone not having the same experience in the chantry that I have.”

"Alistair is looking for something beyond a night's delight," Hera explains gently, squeezing Leliana’s arm. "And he knows this will all end one day. I can wait if that's what he wants." Hera lifts her chin, a wicked grin stealing across her lips. “But I will say that if he weren’t such a prude...something would have happened.”
Leliana’s eyes brighten with glee. “Why? What makes you think so?”

Hera’s grin gets a fraction wider. “I know how and when to seduce a man,” she repeats, “and when to let a man stew in his own thoughts.”
The Spoiled Princess

Chapter Summary

After following Weylon's advice, the heroes walk into a trap.

The weather continues to be bad, pouring rain for days, leaving the companions to work through roads and paths reduced to mud that sucked at their feet with every step or find ways through and around streams and rivers that flood their banks. In the evenings, when possible, everyone pulls off their socks and strings them between two sticks over a second, smoored fire so they can dry, and leaving their boots as close to the campfire as they dare. More than once Alistair comes to her tent, a handful of damp socks in hand and a sheepish look on his face. Without question, Hera cleans and dries them, being careful that no one sees her do so.

If she’s honest with herself, she likes this shared secret. It lends a mischievous air to their growing flirtation, giving them brief moments of privacy that leave the others with questioning looks and no answers.

Even though it gives her the small pleasures of seeing Leliana, Zevran, and Alistair with their clothing plastered to their skins, the weather turns a twelve-day trip into a miserable three-week-long struggle. Hera does her best to keep them moving, at times promising that once they get to Lake Calenhad they can stay at the inn long enough for all their gear to dry out and be cleaned and at others cursing and forcing them to move. She doesn’t like the sullen looks and curses thrown back at her, but she knows if she lets them take too long the arl will die.

The rain stops the day they reach the lake, and they stumble and slide down the steep hill to the Spoiled Princess Inn. They pause on the porch to pull off their boots and bundle them into wet cloaks and go inside.

“Hello again,” Hera says to the innkeeper. “Ares, stay outside,” she orders the mabari, who’s simply happy to be out of the rain.

“Good to see you again, my lady,” the innkeeper says, his eyes darting around. “Welcome back to the Spoiled Princess. Rooms for all?”

“If you have enough,” she says gratefully. “We can double or triple bunk if we need to.”
“I’m sure I can accommodate you,” he says, still looking around nervously. “Is there anything else you need?”

“A bath,” Leliana and Wynne say in unison.

“A drink,” Zevran groans, easing himself into a chair.

“A hot meal,” Morrigan adds in tiredly.

“Laundry?” Alistair asks, lifting his eyebrows hopefully.

Hera looks over at Sten. “Sten? Anything you’d like?”

He thinks a moment, his stern countenance deepening. “I would like some cookies,” he decides.

The innkeeper laughs in spite of his apparent nervousness. “I can do all that and more,” he tells them.

“Before you go,” Hera says, catching him before he can go to the back. “Is there a Brother Genitivi here?”

“Brother Gen- no,” he stammers. “N-no, of course not. I’ve never heard of him.”

“Are you sure?” she asks.

He nods. “I- I know everyone staying at my inn, and I’ve never heard of this person.”

“Leliana,” Hera says over her shoulder. “I know you’re tired, but could you give us a song? I don’t like haggling in a quiet room, it’s unseemly.”

“Yes, of course, Hera.”
Hera waits until Leliana plays her lute while she and Alistair sing a drinking song loudly, with Zevran and Wynne coming in on the chorus. “Sounds like you’re not telling me everything,” she says softly, leaning on the counter casually.

“Nonsense!” he gasps. “Why would I lie to you? Listen, the person you’re looking for, isn’t here,” he says slowly, his eyes darting to the door again. “You should be on your way as soon as possible.”

“Are you in some kind of trouble?” she asks, lowering her eyes and smiling. “You can trust me,” she adds, looking back up so she appears to be flirting with him.

“No I am not in any kind of trouble,” he snaps. “If you want ale, wine, or a warm bed for the night, I can help you. If not, I have nothing else to offer.”

“Very well,” she says sharply, straightening. “We’ll just be on our way.”

“Wait,” he murmurs under the music. “They have my family,” he explains. “It’s a trap; they’ve been here for a while now, looking for those knights who came looking for Genitivi. If you go outside they’ll attack you. They’ve been watching the whole time.”

Hera nods and gives him a sultry smile. “Thank you. Please, have our baths ready soon, and perhaps a meal. We’ll be back soon. Come along, everyone,” she calls cheerfully.

“What? We’re leaving?” Alistair asks, jumping to his feet. “Our boots are even dry yet!”

“We’re just going to go across the lake,” she lies. “I want to see Irving before we turn in for the night.”

“The tower?” Morrigan demands. “I will not go back.”

“Come along, Morrigan,” Hera orders. “You will not be disappointed. Now, be ready.”
Sure enough, the moment they near the door, she can hear Ares growling. Hera loosens her blades in their sheaths as she goes outside and directly into the ambush. Half a dozen men attack from all sides, and the others rush to join her in the muddy fray. As soon as the fight starts, the templar at the dock joins in, taking out one on his own as they dispatch the rest. It’s a slippery fight, and the blood mixes with the mud to make it worse. With Ares they’re almost evenly matched; it makes for a quick battle, but the curious thing was the men’s war cry.

“For blessed Andraste?” Hera asks, pulling her dagger out of the throat of the last one. “What did he mean?”

“Do you think he killed Brother Genitivi out of some desire to protect the Urn?” Alistair suggests as they go back inside, barefoot and much dirtier than when they did so the first time.

“I suppose it is possible,” Leliana says. “The chantry believes that the Urn holds great power. It would be in their interest to keep it secret if the location is known. But those were not chantry brothers,” she says uncertainly.

Hera shakes her head and tiredly returns to the innkeeper. “So that’s handled,” she sighs, leaning against the bar. “I don’t think they’ll be troubling you.”

“Oh thank you!” he cries. “Stay as long as you like, free of charge,” he adds.

She thanks him, and turns to the others. “Let’s all clean up and discuss our next move over dinner,” she suggests.
Braids

Chapter Summary

Alistair's obsession with his hair leads him to desperate measures with a dagger, but Hera comes in to save his growing locks.

“Alistair, do get your hair out of your face,” Wynne chides. “It’s going to get in your food.”

He pushes his damp hair out of the way, only for it to fall forward again. Alistair snorts in frustration and picks his knife off the table. “I’m just going to cut it off,” he growls. “I know I said I had a minor obsession, but I lied. It’s a regular sort of obsession, and it has to be cut now.”


“I agree,” Morrigan teases. “You should leave it.”

He scowls at the witch, his voice suspicious. “Morrigan, you don’t even like me. Why do you even have an opinion?”

“Because it makes you uncomfortable, and that I do enjoy.”

“I hate you.”

Laughing, Hera puts down her cup and comes closer, approaching him slowly as if he were a wild animal. Now that she’s had a hot bath and meal, her temper- and that of everyone else- has eased, and the promise of a few days’ rest improves it even more. Except Alistair, whose hair has gotten long enough to fall into his eyes and irritate him.

“Now now, Alistair,” she chuckles. “Put the knife away.”

“Will you cut it?”
Hera shakes her head. “Absolutely not, Leliana is right, it’s very nice. But I will get it out of your eyes.”

Alistair looks at the three of them harshly, lowering the knife. “Fine. Just...I liked it the way it was. Short. Easy to handle.”

“But this is more...gallant,” Leliana insists.

“Rakish,” Hera corrects, leaning forward to brush it out of his eyes. “Like a young, blonde Duncan.”

He cheers up a little at that. “Like Duncan? Do you mean that?”

“I promise. Keep it, and let me handle it for you.”

“Oh yes,” Morrigan snides. “Keep it. The fleas need somewhere to live since Hera put that oil on Ares.”

Leliana throws her head back laughing, and Alistair looks like he’d enjoy murdering the witch. Biting her lip, Hera quickly gets behind him and starts combing his hair, picking out the tangles with nimble fingers. “Hush,” she commands gently. “We’re in a proper inn, not out in the woods. Do you want to look like you were raised in a barn?”

“It was a stable, actually.”

No one had really noticed how long it had gotten; he had a habit of sweeping it back into his helmet. At least, until today, when Zevran told him that no matter how long his hair got, it would never be so fine as his. Alistair had decided right then to wash and cut his earlobe-length hair as soon as possible.

“You aren’t going to give me braids like Sten’s are you?” he asks nervously as the girls lower their voices.
“Oh no, sweet thing,” she assures him. “Do you remember the Viking I told you about? His people were fierce warriors and they wear braids in their hair, but they’re different than Sten’s.”

“It’s not long enough to braid, really,” Leliana interrupts.

“The way they do it, it is,” Hera explains, and starts at his temple, deftly braiding the short hair along the side of his head, following the curve of his skull and gathering bits from the top. Past his ear, she leaves it loose. “See? This will keep it off your face, and when it’s long enough we’ll slick it back into a tail like Duncan’s.”

Alistair carefully pats the braid while she works on the other side. “That...that feels nice,” he says, surprised. “I think I like that. Thank you.”

Hera tortures herself with an absent stroke along his ear, covered by the act of braiding. “It’s nothing,” she says, watching him draw a sharp breath at her touch. “My pleasure.”

“My you do look fierce,” Morrigan quips. “The darkspawn will flee at the sight of you. Hera, why not see if the innkeeper has any ribbons for it?”

“Go die,” Alistair snarls.

Grinning mischievously, Morrigan shrugs and rises, bidding everyone goodnight. Sten had already gone up to his room, and Zevran was playing cards with a few locals in the corner. With a deep sigh, Wynne gets to her feet as well.

“These old bones need their rest too,” she says, patting Leliana on the shoulder as she passes. “It looks quite nice, Alistair,” she adds, “goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Wynne,” Hera says as she goes.

“It doesn’t look stupid, does it Leliana?” Alistair asks shyly. “I mean, not like Zevran’s?”

“Nothing like,” she assures him, giggling.
Hera grins as she works, keeping the braid close to his scalp, then drawing more hair in as she brings both braids to meet in the back, forming one. “There, how do you like that?” she asks, brushing her fingertips across the nape of his neck, delighting in his small shiver. “Better?”

“Much,” he agrees, shaking his head to test. “Thank you.”

“Good, now to bed with you,” she orders, patting his shoulders. “You too, Lil,” she adds sternly. “Don’t think I haven’t heard your cough lately.”
Hera doesn’t bother to knock this time and boldly walks into Genitivi’s house to confront Weylon. It’s been a long ten-day trek back to Denerim, and it’s been fueled by sheer rage the whole way. Weylon looks up from tending the fire, surprise fleeting across his face.

“You’re- you’re back,” he says, rising.

“Surprised?” she demands, getting too close to him for comfort. It gives her the chance to smell something rotten on him, but her anger is too strong to question the unusual smell on him. “Expected me to be dead?”

“I’m glad you are alive, of course,” he says quickly.

“That inn was an ambush,” she says, her words clipped and sharp enough to cut. She burns with anger and has to keep a tight grip on the magic heating her blood.

Behind her, Alistair watches, just as angry. The whole way back he’s watched her barely rein in her feelings about the ambush, and now she looks as if she’d skin him alive and eat him for breakfast. He can’t decide if she’s glorious or terrifying.

“If you live, then my fellows have failed,” Weylon says simply. A change comes over him, and his gaze becomes cold and steely. “I can see their deaths in your eyes; I knew them well. My brothers died in the service of Andraste. May she draw their souls to her and cast yours into oblivion! For Andraste!”

He runs for a door at the back of the room, throwing a spell behind him, but Hera is faster. Dodging the spell, she tackles him, sticking her knee into his groin. He yelps in pain and wrestles with her, throwing a few good punches as soon as he manages to get on top. But then it’s over, as Zevran bolts forward and smoothly decapitates him. Blood spills, hot and fragrant, all over her face and chest, and his body falls forward on top of her.

Hera’s thirst slams into her like a kick to the gut, and she has to bite her split lip to stop herself from just opening her mouth and letting it flow in. She turns her face away as Alistair and Zevran move him off her, and Leliana offers her a hand up.
“Why am I always getting covered in blood?” she asks, looking down at her clothing. “Your Maker knows I don’t have that many clothes, doesn’t He?”

“Forgive me, amora,” Zevran says. “I only wanted him to keep him from hurting you more.”

She touches her nose gingerly to see if it’s broken, and sighs. “Lil, I didn’t bring any clothes with me- they’re all at camp- did you? Perhaps Genitivi has a bath upstairs.”

“No, I’m sorry,” Leliana says, shrugging. “I can go buy you something, though.”

Hera nods. “Please. Something warm,” she adds as the redhead goes out. “Alistair, you and Zev should grab some water and rags, we don’t need to leave it like this. I’ll see what I can do about cleaning up.”

Upstairs, she finds a bath in the main bedroom and blesses whatever brilliant engineers that brought water pumps and heating to Thedas. It had been the first true addition she had made to Castle Ravenloft when she took over. She pauses before beginning the process of cleaning her clothing, wondering if she shouldn’t take advantage of the rapidly cooling blood. Slowly, she raises her sleeve to her nose and takes a sniff; it smells metallic and old already. “Disgusting,” she scoffs, surprised at herself. “I don’t even like it cold.”

She pulls off her clothes before they can stick to her, and throws them in the water. Naked, with blood flaking off her, she scrubs her blue studded gambeson, the only thing she’s really concerned with, as it’s warm and comfortable. Most of the blood comes out, and she hangs it in the bedroom near the fire to dry.

An hour later, she emerges in new clothes, stuffing her damp ones in a sack and tossing them onto the table in the main room. “Looks good,” she says, nodding to the floor where she and Weylon had fought.

Zevran hisses and touches her cheek gently. “You don’t look good,” he tells her. “Did he break your nose?”

“No, but it hurts like seven hells,” she mutters.

“Seven hells?” Leliana asks. “What does that mean?”
“Oh, it’s something a friend of mine says,” she laughs. “Her faith has...there’s a lot of punishment,” she says. “It’s confusing, I’m still not sure I understand, and I’ve known her a long time.”

“Your friends sound interesting,” Leliana says.

“They are,” she agrees. “I just wish I could see them often. Let’s see what we find out, and I’ll tell you about them later.”

“Oh, we’ve already found everything there is,” Alistair tells her, opening the door at the end of the room. “Come take a look. Cover your nose,” he warns.

She follows him into a back room- a shabby little study, it seems, where Weylon’s body lies covered with a sheet. But beside it is another, older body, beginning to smell. “Oh heavens,” she gags, realizing she's found the source of the smell on Weylon. “Who is that?”

“The real Weylon,” he tells her. “Zev, did you get the lime?”

He nods, handing him a sack. “The Wonders of Thedas had plenty.”

Hera watches them sprinkle the limestone powder over the bodies to take care of the smell, looking through the books on the desk. “His journal?” she asks, lifting it. Leliana nods and explains that Genitivi had actually been planning to go to a village called Haven, not Lake Calenhad at all.

“Something must have happened to him there,” Hera muses. “And whoever is in Haven sent the imposter to put anyone looking for him on the wrong path. Which explains the trap at Lake Calenhad.”

“So, to Haven then?” Leliana asks. “The journal says it’s not far from Redcliff, actually. Up in the mountains.”

Hera nods. “Haven it is. Let’s get back to camp so we can map out our path. I want to go by Soldier’s Peak and check on Levi, too. Until his family arrives, he’ll be totally alone.”
“Still staying off the main roads?” Alistair asks as they follow Leliana and Zevran across the market to the city gates. “Are you really that worried?”

Hera nods. “Zevran explained just how expensive it was to hire the Crows for us,” she tells him. “If Loghain was willing to empty the coffers while waging civil war, I don’t trust him not to try again somehow. And it seems there’s someone else who doesn’t want the arl to be cured,” she adds, lifting the journal. “I’d like to stay off the main ways as much as possible. I know it’s harder travel, but for the best.”

“Hera, shouldn’t we alert the guard?” Leliana asks, gesturing widely to the blood and bodies. “We don’t want to be branded murderers.”

Hera pauses, realizing that in most of her adventures, they’d simply hidden or left bodies where they lay. Very rarely was there even a guard to alert. “Of course,” she says, not able to hide her discomfort at the idea of admitting to such a thing. “Of course we should. I’m just...eager to get a move on. Let’s go do that before we leave.”
Alistair frowns as Hera haggles with Mikhail Dryden, one of the many family members that arrived at Soldier’s Peak long before they did. The moment she heard he found the schematics to make Grey Warden armor, she had tracked him down on the keep’s property and locked him into negotiation. Now he watches as Mikhail fits Zevran, Wynne, and Leliana for new gear. It’s lightweight, tough, and very good, but he wonders at the cost of outfitting everyone all over again. Their company purse is dwindling quickly, and she seems uncharacteristically open-handed with this particular purchase.

Not that he should complain, he realizes with a stab of guilt. He’s wearing the Warden-Commander’s armor they’d found in the keep when they took it back over a month ago. It was heavy plate, and fit him well. Hera had spent hours cleaning, polishing, and replacing buckles and straps for him. Sten had a set of plate as well, purchased for a handful of silver off a stranded merchant after they helped mend his broken wagon wheel. In fact, Morrigan is the only one of their little party that isn’t being fit for a whole kit. She had refused adamantly about wearing anything beyond her own clothing and agreed to only a few pieces of hardened leather for her shoulders, boots, and gloves.

But his concern isn’t for the hard-hearted witch. Hera herself still wears the first set she’d been issued at Ostagar. They hadn’t expected someone her size- taller than most Ferelden women, but slender as an elf- so she’d had to wear a collection of old, cast-off scout armor. It has served her well till now, silent and light, but it had been rough and a little battered to start. Now it was in worse shape than ever- the gambeson had torn and been repaired numerous times, the metal plates over her chest and hips were dented and broken in some places, and he couldn’t count how many times she’d had to repair her scale tunic. Her boots, especially, needed to be heavily repaired.

_I wonder how much it would cost to outfit her?_ He digs in his backpack and pulls out his purse. Hera is unstinting with her generosity- she shares the money they make freely, keeping half for the company’s needs and splitting the rest between them- but he doesn’t think she keeps any money for herself. Pouring the purse into his hands, he does a quick count- five gold sovereigns, eighteen silver, and twelve copper.

_Probably not enough_, he thinks and sits down to dig through his pack. He comes up with a few bits
he could sell- a random gem, some lyrium, and a couple odd daggers- and heads over to Levi.

“Hey Levi, what would you give me for this?” he asks, holding out his offering.

“Well...that gem is quite nice, and lyrium is always good to have on hand...four sovereigns, all told?”

_Better than I’ll get anywhere else. But not enough._ “Great,” Alistair says, making the exchange. _Maybe I can talk Mikhail into a discount._

He waits until she’s done with Mikhail before approaching. It takes a while, but Mikhail is grateful to have to the Keep’s large forge to work in and plenty of room for his family to live, and agrees to a bargain. Alistair agrees to pay him half in coin and have Hera turn in what she has in the morning.

They decide to stay in the keep for the night instead of making camp in the snow. Soldier’s Peak was a few days out of the way, but Hera was more than willing to spare the time to look in on the Drydens before leaving the area since they didn’t know when they’d be back. Levi’s family has been busy; there are clean rooms and beds available for everyone, and a hot meal in the main hall for dinner. They go their separate ways for a while- mostly to rest and bathe- and meet up again at dinner.

“I must admit, Hera,” Wynne says as they come into the hall. “You surprised me, giving me such a luxurious soap today. I appreciate your thoughtfulness.”

“Yes, thank you,” Leliana adds. “It’s nice to smell like a woman now and again.”

Hera answers, but Alistair is so entranced he doesn’t hear her response. Dressed simply in snug trousers, a grey shirt, and her studded blue gambeson and belt, Hera looks like she always does in camp. Tonight she has her hair in a loose braid down her back, still damp from washing, but he wishes she had it loose. He holds his breath at the sudden image of what she must look like naked in a bathtub and feels his face flush.

“Alistair?” Zevran asks. “Are you all right, my friend?”

“Huh? Oh, yes,” he stammers. “I’m fine. I just...need to ask Wynne something.”
“Well, I am here,” she says as he approaches. “What can I do for you?”

“Yes. It’s a personal question,” he says quickly. “Can you come with me?”

“You’re acting strange,” Hera notes as she sits beside Zevran and gives him a bewildered look.

“No, I’m not,” Alistair says, drawing Wynne away. “I have...something...for Hera,” he whispers. “But I need you to put it with her things.”

Wynne frowns. “If you have a gift for her, you should give it yourself.”

“I...I can’t. It’s...It would be weird.”

Wynne sighs and shakes her head. “Alistair, if you have feelings for her- and it’s clear you do- you should give her a chance to acknowledge them. Giving gifts is common practice among sweethearts. I had thought the two of you were past this awkwardness by now.”

“How am I supposed to say ‘you bought everyone else new armor and ignored yourself so here you go now don’t die’?” he questions.

Wynne’s eyes shine, and she smiles softly at him. “You bought her armor? That’s very sweet of you.”

“Well hers is falling apart,” he mumbles, looking at his boots. “And we ran out of money before she could get equipped.”

Wynne nods. “I noticed that as well. It’s a thoughtful gift, and one she’ll appreciate.”

“She never takes money for herself,” he goes on. “Even though we all get a few bits for ourselves.”

“Very true. Well, I would like to applaud your efforts. How much was the armor?”
“Seven sovereigns and he wants her old pieces—except the gambeson,” he adds. “Mikhail said that was too damaged to be used.”

Wynne nods. “She does wear it often,” she chuckles. “She must find it very warm. Very well,” she says, reaching into her pocket. “I have two gold pieces here—”

“No, Wynne,” he says, pushing her hand away. “I’m not asking for money. I wanted to do this for her. I just…”

“You have no idea how to give it to her,” she finishes for him.

“Not a one,” he laughs.

“After dinner, take her for one of your walks, and give it to her,” Wynne suggests. “There doesn’t have to be artistry to it, Alistair. You’ve done a sweet thing,” she adds with a smile. “Now, you wouldn’t keep an old woman from a hot meal she doesn’t have to cook, would you?” she asks playfully.

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Hera and Alistair walk side by side in silence for a while, content to simply walk together. Alistair tries not to show his nervousness, but he knows she can see it. She sees everything. In each of them, she sees whatever they need and provides, whether it’s friendship, silence, or something they’ve been without.

“It’s cold,” she says a while, wrapping her arms around herself.

“Maker’s breath,” he curses and shrugs out of his new quilted surcoat. “I’m sorry, I didn’t think,” he apologizes, settling it on her shoulders and putting an arm around her. “Soldier’s Peak stays snowy almost all year. It’s the mountains,” he adds lamely.

He looks down, watching Hera draw it close, tugging her braid to drape over one shoulder. “It’s all right,” she says, and he feels lightheaded at her smile. “What’s on your mind?”
He grins at the familiar phrase. At least half their conversations start that way. He’d left the armor on a bench along the fortress wall, covered in a heavy wool cloak, ready for her. “I wanted to show you something,” he says nervously, gesturing to the horizon and leading her toward the wall. “It’s rare we don’t have to make camp or have watch, I wanted to show you the view.”

She gives him a confused look, but follows. “Soldier’s Keep has a lovely vista,” she agrees, looking out over the mountains sparkling in the moonlight.

“You’re lovelier,” he says, ignoring the view and looking down at her. He reaches out and caresses her cheek with the back of his hand. Hera closes her eyes, turning into his touch, and he feels a warmth spread through him.

“Thank you,” she whispers, opening her eyes and looking up at him.

Maker, she’s beautiful. Alistair can’t breathe with those eyes on him. So unusual, a deep purple like the center of a violet, with a pale blue ring around the pupil. Her gaze goes right through him, and he feels an urge to kiss her, but stops himself. So far, she’s let him set the boundaries of their relationship, never asking for more than he can give in the moment. He’s just...so afraid of losing her when this is all over and she goes back home. He finally takes a deep breath, the cold air like knives in his lungs.

“There’s...um, something for you,” he says, stepping away quickly. “Over on the bench.”

Hera gives him a strange look before looking where he points. “What is this?” she asks, walking over to it and picking up the cloak.

“It’s new armor,” he explains. “Better armor. For you.”

He watches her pick up the new gambeson, a little longer and thicker than the one she’s wearing, sparkling with steel studs instead of iron. She doesn’t speak, just runs her fingers over it and looks up at him curiously.

“You outfitted everyone else,” he explains. “And I wanted to...protect you.”
She tilts her head, not understanding him. “But how…?” she asks. “There’s no way you could afford it. We’re broke.” Her voice is small, and he knows her well enough now to know she’s trying to control whatever she’s feeling.

*I wish she would lose some of that control.* “I made a deal with Mikhail,” he explains. “He wants to keep your old iron pieces. Said he wants to use them for molds.”

She nods, looking down at the carefully arranged armor. The steel shines in the torchlight, bright and new. When she doesn’t smile, Alistair’s afraid he’s done something wrong and takes a step toward her with one arm out. “If you don’t want-”

He’s cut off when she wraps her arms around him, her forehead against his shoulder. He smiles, nervousness ebbing away, and embraces her. She doesn’t throw herself at him like this often. In fact, she’s careful to give him his distance. Hugs are reserved for times of distress or relief that they’re both alive, so this moment is special to him. “Thank you.” Her words are muffled between them, her breath warming his chest.

“You’re welcome, raven,” he says, resting his cheek against her hair. *Maker help me,* he thinks, *one day I’m going to have to say that I’m in love with her,* he thinks, closing his eyes and breathing in the scent of roses. *She’s going to think I’m a fool. We haven’t even kissed yet.*

Chapter End Notes

Their kiss is getting closer and closer!
Zevran and Hera pit the skills against one another to see who is truly a master of seduction.

“So when are you going to tell him?”

“Tell who what, Zev?” she asks, raising an eyebrow at him. She and Zevran were scouting ahead through a wooded area known for bandits, but were coming up with nothing thus far. They were being extra careful making their way through Ferelden, doing their best to avoid traps and soldiers as they move south. They’d made good time once they’d left the Peak and it’s snow, moving through the planes of the Bannorn, but Hera fretted all the same. Autumn would arrive soon; the nights and mornings already growing cooler and the days shorter.

“Tell Alistair that you’re in love with him,” he clarifies with a grin. “I’ve seen the way you look at him when you think no one’s watching.”

“Oh?” she asks. “How is that?”

“Like this.” He touches her arm to stop her from moving away, then relaxes his face into an expression of softness and desire.

“I do not,” she laughs nervously. Do I?

“Yes, you do,” he argues. “And he looks at you like you’re the last bottle of Antivan brandy in existence.”

“That’s just desire,” she insists, shrugging it off. “Yes, I want him. I’m a courtesan, I’m used to having who I want. But this isn't the time for me to sow oats in a strange world.” She gives him a flirty wink. “Hopefully there’ll be time for that after we deal with the Blight.”
He laughs at her, clutching his stomach. “I know desire, Hera,” he tells her, leaning on a tree to catch his breath. “I grew up amongst whores also. But what you are feeling isn't 'just desire.'”

“You're mad,” she scoffs, feigning more indignation than she really feels. If anyone in Ferelden reminded her of Zeus, it was Zevran. He was slightly shorter than her, but he had the same sort of sharp features and high cheekbones as her twin. They both loved to drink, gamble, and fight and shared a strange sense of honor amongst scoundrels. And, like Zeus, he had the annoying ability to see right through her.

“Bella,” he says patiently. “You're keeping things from all of us. Even Alistair. I respect that everyone is entitled to their secrets. But if you're in love with the boy, you should say something to him.”

“Zevran, I'm not in love with him.”

“He makes you blush.”

“He does not.”

“You act differently around him.”

“We're Wardens. Professionalism is important.”

“Kissing can be professional.”

“True,” she agrees. “But I'm not practicing my profession at the moment.”

“Do you mean to tell me if he kissed you right now you wouldn't go weak in the knees?”

Hera shoots him a bored look, then rolls her eyes. “Zev, no one makes me go weak in the knees.”

“We'll see about that- may I?” At her nod, Zevran comes closer and kisses her, sliding his arms around her and molding her body to his. Hera had been curious to see if his body was as muscular
as it looks, and his embrace satisfies that and more. It is a good kiss, by one who has done his share and more, and she enjoys it the way she might enjoy a fine wine. When he pulls away, he grins up at her smugly.

“Well?” he asks, pleased with himself.

Hera considers it for a moment, replaying the moment. “It was a good kiss,” she tells him. “Not too wet or dry. Not overpowering but clearly in control. From a technical standpoint, perfect. Would you like to try again?”

Zevran repeats his kiss, putting more effort into it. When he pulls away, he grins arrogantly at her. “Careful you do not sink to the ground in a puddle of desire this time.”

Hera lifts her leg and stamps the ground. “Solid as stone, I’m afraid, Zev.” Watching him go from smug to stunned is a beautiful thing.

“W-What?” he stammers.

“I imagine that’s what kissing my brother would feel like,” she muses.

“I don’t believe you,” he huffs. “That kiss has romanced men and women all over Antiva.”

“Very lucky for you I’ve never been there.”

“You think you can do better?”

Hera nods. “Yes, actually,” she says matter of factly.

Zevran opens his arms in invitation, and suddenly Hera’s entire demeanor changes. She’s dressed in leather and iron, but it could have been the thinnest silk for all anyone knew. She slinks toward him, running a fingernail up his arm, making the fine hairs stand on end. The other hand she puts on his chest, adjusting her position so that he feels tall and strong, as if he were her protector. Her gaze travels from his eyes down to his mouth, lingering before moving to the pulse in his throat. The hand on his arm makes its way to the back of his head, and she draws him to her, kissing him
deeply and thoroughly, pressing her body closer in maddening degrees. It feels good, using all her art and skill on one who will appreciate it, and she nips his bottom lip lightly before they part.

This time when they part, he reaches for a tree to steady himself, breathing heavily and shaking his head to clear it. Hera stands back, arms folded, and watches him collect himself.

“Well?” she asks.

“That is- I’ve never-” He stutters. “I believe I need a moment.”

Hera nods and turns to go back to the others. “And that’s just a kiss. Stay here, we’ll come to you.”

“Hera?”

“Yes?” She looks over her shoulder at him, her smug smile still in place.

“Do you always keep your eyes open when you kiss?” he asks.

Her smile fades away and she nods. “Yes. Ever since-” she pauses, biting her lip. “Yes.”

She leaves him to catch his breath, going back down the path. Before she finds the others, she encounters Alistair, looking agitated and pacing. “Alistair? Is something wrong?”

“Let me ask you something,” he says. “A personal question.”

“Go on,” she prompts.

“You and Zevran,” he says, frowning. “You’ve gotten close.”

“I suppose we have,” she agrees, grinning at the memory of his face as she’d pulled away from him. “Why?”
“I...um...I saw…” he waves vaguely down to the path and shuffles his feet. Eyes down and hands shoved into his pockets, he kicks at a stone in agitation. “Look, if you’ve picked Zevran, that’s-fine, but-”

“Saw that little display of ego, did you?” she asks, chuckling.

He looks up at her, frowning. “That...what?”

She smiles warmly and comes closer. “Zevran was teasing me, so I taught him a lesson.”

“What was he teasing you about?” he asks.

Emboldened by her success with Zevran, she moves a fraction closer, putting a hand on his forearm. “You know what I am.” He nods, making a small sound in his throat, and she continues. “He said something stupid about my being weak in the knees, and I told him that no one makes me that way. So he gave it his best shot,” she says with a shrug, her fingers rubbing small circles on the inside of his arm.

“And did you...liked it?” he asks, looking a little disgusted.

“It was perfectly nice,” she admits with a little nod. “But it didn’t move me.”

“No?” His tone is hopeful, and Hera feels her powers surge in answer. *What is it about this man that makes me want to use magic? His damn smile can pull the tides of power. I bet he could learn magic so easily, were he not Ferelden. His abilities and strength would be incredible.*

“No,” she says softly, biting her lip and looking deeply into his eyes. “To be honest, Alistair, my feelings about Zev remind me an awful lot of my brother.”

His grin is so bright she nearly squints. “Really? That idiot reminds you of your brother? Well. What a- uh, marvelous relationship to have!”

The change in him is so quick and complete that Hera laughs, tossing her head back. “Yes, I
suppose it is,” she agrees. “But he isn’t-”

“What’s taking so long?” Morrigan demands, appearing on the path. “I swear, Hera, you spend more time gossiping with those two than you do anything else.”

Hera knows a broken moment when she sees one, so she settles for lifting her eyebrows at him and turning to her friend. “Someone has to, since you won’t.”

“I am not some simpering fool to fall for your charms, girl.”

The rest of the party comes up right behind Morrigan, and Alistair steps back quickly, blushing. Unembarrassed at being caught mid-seduction, Hera gestures for them to precede her, tilting her head at the strange look Wynne gives her.

Chapter End Notes

OH GOD FINALLY!
This is absolutely one of the best things I've ever written. I love it to pieces and I hope you did too!
Wynne's Concern

Chapter Summary

Wynne questions Hera about her relationship with Alistair.

Alistair acts strangely and avoids her for the rest of the day. When they make camp later, he doesn’t volunteer to get water like he usually does, instead digging both the fire pit and the latrine alone. And it doesn’t change after dinner; he volunteers to take first watch with Leliana, and everyone else quickly fills up the other two, giving Hera a rare night off. Until now, she’s been careful to take watch almost every night, rotating through the group for partners. But now, with the night at her disposal and Alistair avoiding her, she feels a little lost.

“Hera, walk with me a bit,” Wynne calls. “I find Morrigan’s stew a little spicy, and the exercise will help.”

“It’s all that bland food in your tower,” Morrigan sneers. “They don't want you experiencing anything delightful.”

“That’s not true, is it?” Hera asks as they walk away. “Is it really as bad as she says? As the blood mages said?”

“It is...different. You have very little contact with the world, and most mages come as small children. It can be lonely, or it can become another family.”

Hera nods, wondering how she’d fare in the Circle’s tower. They walk in silence a while, getting well away from the campfire before Wynne speaks again.

“You aren’t from Thedas, are you?”

“No, I told you, Wynne, I came to this world quite by accident.”

Wynne nods like an instructor hearing just what she expects. “That does explain a lot. You seem...older. Like an old woman who’s suddenly found herself in a new body.”
“This world makes me feel that way sometimes,” Hera laughs. *She isn’t all wrong, either.*
“Fereldens and their ways are so strange to me.”

“There are, I think, a few things that never change, no matter where you are,” Wynne leads.
“Things such as men?”

Hera laughs again, purposefully ignoring her meaning. “No, men are always the same, no matter where I find them.”

“Hera, let me be plain,” Wynne begins. “You’re a nice girl.”

*Oh, I see where this is going,* Hera thinks with a sigh. “Thank you,” she says, knowing exactly what’s coming next.

“Alistair is a good lad, but it’s clear he’s-”

“You can stop,” she cuts in flatly. “I know the speech, I’ve heard it from every parent with good intentions- no matter how much they paid to send me their sweet son or daughter. He’s a good soft-hearted lad and I’m a wicked whore with no heart at all. I must be *careful* with him.” Bitterness creeps into her voice, but she doesn’t care.

Wynne’s mouth falls open, gaping before she can find anything to say. “I would never-”

Hera makes a cutting gesture with her hands. “But it’s what you mean. No matter how you word it, this is the ‘don’t hurt my darling boy’ speech,” Hera tells her plainly. “You’re afraid that I’m going to string him along and leave him brokenhearted when all is said and done.”

Closing her mouth with a sharp *click*, Wynne pulls her shoulders back. “We don't know what will happen in the Blight. One or both of you might die before this flirtation comes to anything.”

*That truth hasn’t been lost on me,* she thinks, pressing her lips into a thin line. “Wynne, will it make a difference to you if I say that this time it might be real?” she asks. “That all my life, every relationship I’ve had- man or woman- has been an illusion, and *this* time, it isn’t?”
“It does gladden me to know you will not charge him for his affection,” Wynne says haughtily. “I would be disappointed to find that you give him a bill once he’s king.”

“Not that it’s any of your business,” Hera snaps. “There is no contract between us. No promise of money or favors. He knows what I am, that I’ve used the illusion of love to get my way. But he trusts me not to do that to him.”

“I just don’t want to see him get hurt.”

“And what about me?” Hera laughs, the mirthless sound as heavy between them as stone. “For the first time in my life it’s only me; no frills and trappings, not even a regular bath! I’ve always had an arsenal at my disposal, and now it’s...just me,” she repeats. And what if that isn’t enough?

Wynne pats her arm, offering her a sad smile. “Oh, Hera, I don’t mean to upset you so much; I don't want you to be hurt, either. But you…” She shrugs. “You’re a woman of wealth and know how these things go. You would endure, and get through the loss of him. He would never move past you.”

Hera blinks in shock. “Was...was that a compliment?”

Wynne chuckles. “For both of you, yes. And for what it’s worth, I’m sorry,” she adds, sobering quickly. “I suppose I’m just a meddlesome old woman, doing what meddlesome old women do.”

Hera watches her walk back toward the camp before speaking. “Wynne,” she says and waits for her to turn around. “I think I’m in love with him.”

Deep sadness comes over the elder woman’s expression. “I am sorry, Hera.”
Zevran confronts Hera about her feelings for Alistair and challenges her to confess them to her fellow Grey Warden.

Alistair continues to be quiet and avoid her the next couple of days, staying alongside Wynne and Leliana, talking softly with them. Hera, having dared to voice that she might actually be in love with him, pretends not to be upset by his distance and stays with Zevran and Morrigan, scouting ahead as often as possible. The third day, she and Zevran get into a scrape with a small band of outlaws soon after they pause for lunch. There are only four, and far enough ahead of the party that they can handle it themselves.

“Well, bella, ” Zevran chuckles, wiping off his blade on a dead man’s shirt. “That was fun. Now if I had a beautiful woman to wrap her legs around me, the day would be perfect.”

“I know the feeling,” she says in wistful agreement. “A good fight always makes me want a hard, sweaty man.”

Zevran comes closer, fingering an errant tendril curling against her throat. “You and I,” he says in a sultry voice, “we are alike. Artists with blade and body. We make a good team, as Alistair says. I wonder what it would be like if we were to…”

_Naturally, this offer has come too late._ “Zev...I really shouldn't,” she tells him, stepping back. “Alistair…”

Zevran waves his hand, dismissing his opposition. “He has made no claim, has he? Why can you not enjoy yourself until he does?”

“There’s an understanding between us.”

“Is there?” he asks, leaning against a large stone. “He has been avoiding you for days. What kind of understanding is this?”
Hera picks up her dropped dagger and sheaths it. “The kind that’s really none of your business.”

Zevran laughs, the sound echoing off the walls of the small gully they stand in. “Amora, understanding or no, you and he are not sleeping together, and barely speaking. And you don’t like it- and that bothers you as well.”

“No I don’t,” she agrees. “But that doesn't change anything. I’m not some unscrupulous wanton incapable of keeping her skirts down.”

Zevran laughs as if she’s told him the funniest joke. “All right, Hera,” he says, still amused. “I apologize for being so ungentlemanly. It will never happen again. Will you forgive me?”

Hera tries to glare at him, but a reluctant grin comes through. “You remind me too much of my brother not to,” she says finally.

“I hope that’s a good thing.”

She smiles and shrugs. “I guess you’ll have to wait and see.”

“Why don’t I go back to the others and send Alistair to you?” he offers. “It seems you and he need to talk.”

Hera crosses her arms and leans against the stone beside him. “I suppose so,” she mutters.

Zevran throws his head back and laughs harder than before. “Amora, you are so funny. Do not pout so. It makes me want to take you in my arms and give you something to smile about,” he says, tweaking her cheek. “Wait here, I will send him ahead.”

Hera putters about, turning over a body or two with the toe of her boot. She’s singing softly to herself, swaying to the tune, when she hears a delighted chortle behind her.

“You’re so bizarre,” Alistair says.
“Oh yes,” she agrees sarcastically, not looking at him. She feels a rather childlike urge to punish him for avoiding her lately. “What a pretty picture, standing amid a bunch of dead bandits.”

“With the sun shining on your hair, picking out the blue in it.” He walks over and gives her a shy smile. “A pretty girl, a pretty smile, a pretty day. The bodies don't make it less so.”

Hera raises a brow, finally looking up at him. “Who can argue with that logic?”

“Zevran said you wanted to talk to me.”

“Oh. Yes,” she says absently. “I-”

“Can I ask you something first?” he interrupts. “Would you- could I- damn,” he mutters. “I don't know how to do this.”

“Do what?” she asks as a feeling of impending disappointment comes over her.

He groans and looks like he'd rather the ground swallow him whole than say whatever he has to say.

_Oh no… She thinks. He’s going to break it off between us before anything has even begun._

“Alistair, whatever it is, you can say it. I won't be upset.”

“I was wondering if you wouldn't mind if I…” He trails off, looking at everything except her.

“If you…” she prompts.

“If maybe I _didn't_ wait until after the Blight is over to court you? Officially, I mean?”

Hera smiles, the knot in her stomach slowly loosening. “I’m almost certain I wouldn't mind,” she says with relief. “When were you thinking of making this official?”
“I don't really know,” he confesses. “But...soon.”

“While we’re on the subject, I have my own question.”

“What’s on your mind?”

She hears voices, Leliana laughing at something Sten has said, and shrugs. “It can wait,” she says as the group comes into view.

Alistair holds a hand up to them, stopping their approach before they come into hearing range. “Something's wrong?” he asks.

“No, Alistair, it’s not important,” she assures him, pulling his arm down and waving them forward. “We’ll talk later, at camp.”

“You’re sure?”

“Absolutely. Let’s get these bodies stripped.”
chapter summary

After behaving strangely all day, Hera confides in the one person who might understand.

“Hera, is something wrong?”

Hera starts at the sound of Leliana’s voice. “Oh, no,” she says. “Why?”

The pretty Orlesian looks concerned. “You’ve been awfully quiet since we stopped for lunch, and you’re lagging behind,” she points out, nodding to their companions ahead of her. “You just seem out of sorts.”

Hera scowls. “I suppose I am. A bit.”

“Is there anything you’d like to talk about?”

She sighs. Hera would love to talk about her growing feelings for Alistair and how they disturb her, but she’d rather confide in her brother Zeus, who understands her like no one else, instead of someone she’s only met a short time ago. “Not...right now,” she says. “Perhaps later?”

Leliana smiles brightly. “Yes, we can talk at camp tonight.”

Hera nods, and they pick up their speed to join the others.

Later that evening, Hera is still preoccupied with her thoughts. The idea of anything more than a casual flirtation is preposterous; she’ll either be dead or going home within the year. She doesn’t eat dinner and takes first watch, moving out of the lit area to scan the perimeter.

I have responsibilities elsewhere.
I'm cursed.

I cannot afford chains of affection or love.

No one would understand.

Alistair won't understand.

“She?”

She looks over at Zevran. “Yes?”

“Bella, is something wrong?” he asks, surprising her with how genuine he sounds.

Two of them have said something, she thinks, that means they've all noticed. And Zevran is still pretty new, so it’s obvious. “I don't really want to talk about it, Zev.”

“And you are able to say so,” he says quickly. “But something is weighing on you, and if you are so distracted you can’t lead...well, we are all in danger.”

Hera looks over her shoulder. Leliana is playing the lute, and Wynne, Sten, and Alistair are gathered around to watch. He is so beautiful, she thinks, watching how easy he is with them, reclining against his pack with Ares’ head in his lap.

“If you want him, why not have him?” Zevran asks, following her gaze. “He is a handsome man and is clearly interested.”

“He’s just a boy,” she whispers, turning back to the dark horizon. “And he’s turned me down. Twice,” she sighs.

Zevran laughs. “Is that what this is about? Come to me tonight, amora, I will sate your needs.” When Hera is silent, he touches her arm. “Hera, it isn't just sex, is it?” he asks softly.

“I don't think so,” she says flatly.
“And yet you do not seem a woman in love.”

“I’m not in love,” she protests. “I don’t fall in love. Ever. But...” She scowls at Zevran. "He wants to court me, Zev! Me! A- a whore! This is- I’m just- it’s foolishness.”

Zevran chuckles. “Oh, I believe you,” he laughs. “You refuse to fall into love; you aren’t going down without a fight. You are lovesick for him, yes?”

Hera pushes him, knocking him off balance. “Go away before I fight you,” she laughs.

“It’s going to rain again,” he says, looking up at the cloudy sky. “Lovely Ferelden autumn. Full of rotting vegetation and cold rain. Take care you do not get caught in it.”

She looks up at the cloudy night sky. So this is love. I honestly never thought it would happen again- and it only took several decades. It feels...different...this time. Glancing back at the fire, she feels a smile spread across her face as she watches Alistair. Foolish, but there it is.

Now how do I tell him that?
To the party's amusement, Sten opens up a little.

“Were you really in that cage for twenty days?” Alistair asks Sten as they walk. The weather has held better as they pass through the foothills of the Frostback Mountain range, though it grows chillier each day. Hera hopes the next town or village they come to has a heavier cloak she can buy as she shivers in her gambeson.

“It might have been closer to thirty,” Sten answers, “I stopped counting after a while.”

Morrigan sighs, shaking her head and turning into a hawk. “Don’t go too far,” Hera tells her as she takes to the air. “We’ll be stopping for the night soon.” In reply, she gets a shrill bird call as the shapeshifter disappears.

“What did you do?” Alistair continues. “I mean, twenty days is a long time to sit in one place and do nothing.”

“On good days, I posed riddles to the passers-by, offering them treasures in exchange for correct answers.”

Behind them, Hera bites her lip against laughing out loud. She’s sent Zevran and Leliana ahead to scout for the day so she could stay with the rest, and so far it’s been a pleasant, if chilly, day. For once, her anxiety about the passing time is silent, and she’s able to simply enjoy a colorful autumn day on the road.

“Really?” Alistair asks, awed.

Sten waits a moment before answering. “No,” he says, looking at Alistair as if he’s a simpleton.

“Aww, too bad,” Alistair says, his disappointment genuine. “That’s got serious potential.”
Wynne can’t help herself and bursts out laughing, leading Ares to give a happy bark along with her. Hera chuckles at the exhausted look Sten gives her. To save him from Alistair, she moves between them and looks up at him. “What were you doing in Lothering, anyway?”

“Sitting.”

“Sounds like a lot of fun. Did you whittle or sing to yourself?”

“Pashaara,” he grumbles, making Hera wonder if it’s a curse of some kind. “I will not engage in idle chatter. Leave me alone.”

“You’re like two children sometimes,” Wynne chides as Alistair and Hera laugh together.

“I’m sorry, Sten,” Hera says sincerely, fighting back a grin. “I really am. It’s just so hard to get you to answer questions about yourself.”

“I answer what you ask,” he says a little sulkily. “I do not understand why you question so much. I am a simple creature. I like swords, I follow orders. There is nothing else to know about me.”

“Somehow I doubt that,” Hera replies. “I think your depths have been left unplumbed for far too long.”

Sten huffs and lifts his chin arrogantly. “You’re not as callow as I thought.”

She stops and faces him, stunned. “Callow? You thought I was callow?”

“You sound surprised. You must have heard this before.”

Thorougly offended, Hera opens her mouth to respond, but stops herself. Yes, I’m nearly a hundred years old, but they think I’m a pretty adornment who happens to be handy with a sword. They must think I’m so young; they have no idea what I really am. “I...I’ve never been so insulted,” she says instead, raising her pitch to sound haughty.
“You’ll get over it,” Sten assures her. “Eventually.”

“You did I let you out of that cage again?” she mutters.

“I have wondered that myself,” he admits. “It is one of the many things I find puzzling about your behavior.”

“Do I even want to know what those other things are?” she asks, full of regret for teasing him.

“No.”

Alistair has to stop walking and lean on a fence post to laugh, clutching his sides. “Oh Hera, he’s got you pinned,” he howls.

“I imagine no one wants to know what Sten thinks of them,” Wynne says pointedly. “Especially a young man who teases too much.”

“No, you do not,” Sten agrees flatly.

Hera laughs at the way Alistair’s expression falls. “If I’m pinned, you’re right there with me, Hero.”
Bastard

Chapter Summary

Alistair has always worn the label of "bastard" as a mark of shame and constant reminder of what he's never had. But watching Hera wear it like jewelry leaves him pensive.

Bastard.

It was always something that had haunted him. The word had been thrown at him since he was small, and he’d hated how it had shaped his life. Forced into a stable as a child; then hidden from prying eyes in the chantry. Always an insult. Always a way to make him feel less than everyone else.

Until she said the same words: I’m a bastard.

She’d said them easily, with no more weight and meaning than if she’d said I have black hair and violet eyes. Later, he’d realized that she and her twin brother had relished their fatherless lives; they hadn’t felt anything for their missing parent, only expressed enthusiasm for the romantic story about him and their mother.

He smiles, imagining her lifting her chin regally and meeting the stares of anyone who had dared to condemn her for being what she is. It’s easy to see her as a jewel of court, she dances and sings, she’s charming and brilliant. She wears the label of “bastard” like a flower in her hair- something there, about her, but not all of her, not the important parts. He just wishes his birthright could be just as unimportant- illegitimate or not, being the son of a king had always been a problem for him.

Her dismissive attitude and gentle teasing had made it easy to tell her in Redcliffe. He had been afraid that she’d start treating him like some god-awful prince- which he absolutely is not - but instead, she just...treats like him an equal. More than before, in fact. Sharing that with her had brought them closer together, more like friends and confidants than just the last Grey Wardens.

He likes it, he realizes, watching her bargain good-naturedly with the dwarf Bodahn over their supplies. Bodahn had told them earlier that he wasn’t going any further into the mountains with them, so she made a point to overstock on what she could and have any armor repaired that needed it.
“Alistair, if you’re going to play with the spoon, at least stir the pot,” Leliana giggles, breaking into his thoughts.

“Oh, right,” he mumbles and starts stirring the stew for dinner, suddenly realizing how warm it is right by the fire.

“What’s gotten into you?” she asks, nudging him with her foot. “You’ve been dreamy ever since we stopped for the day.”

“Oh, just thinking.”

“Oh no,” Morrigan crows. “You’ve been thinking. Are you ill, Alistair?”

“No,” he grumbles, hanging the spoon on the spit and stomping off. He’s headed for the nearby stream when he realizes Hera’s struggling with several sacks of equipment and runs over.
Chapter Summary

For the first time since she was a girl, Hera's knees turn to jelly.

Chapter Notes

This is the very first scene I wrote for Warden, over a year ago! When I did it, I just wanted to see how Hera would react and never expected it to turn into the enormous monster Warden has become.

I hope you enjoy it, because I am so, so thrilled to finally be sharing this moment.

Hera concludes her business with the dwarf merchant and returns to camp to start making potions with Wynne and Morrigan, dragging all the sacks behind her. Sten sees her wrestle with them and lifts one easily in one hand.

“You are small but strong,” he says in his usual unimpressed tone. “Why can you not lift this sack?”

“There’s over two hundred elf roots in there,” she gasps. “And I’ve got repaired armor, arrows, food, and-”

“Fine,” he grunts and takes another sack from her. “You should carry them and make yourself stronger.”

“Gee thanks,” she mutters, dragging the last three bags toward camp while he walks off. Alistair realizes what’s going on, and runs over to her, taking two sacks.

“Sorry!” he says, throwing them over his shoulder. “I didn't realize you were coming back with so much!”

Hera smiles up at him. “I didn't either, but Bodahn had our armor ready, and Sandal was done with
the enchantments. I don’t want to get to Haven and not have anything handy.”

“Really? That’s fast.”

They make it back to camp and distribute arms and armor. “Hera, can I talk to you a moment?”

“Sure,” she says happily. “What's on your mind?”

“I wanted to show you something,” he says. “Over there, maybe?”

Hera follows, turning her head and laughing when Zevran makes a move to follow and Wynne’s sharp tone stops him in his tracks. “What’s on your mind?” she repeats once they’re away from the light of the fire. *Now why do you want me alone?* She wonders, keeping a smile hidden. *Have you decided to make your first move, sweet Hero?*

He pulls something from his belt pouch, unwrapping the scrap of oilcloth it’s wrapped in. “Do you know what this is?”

Hera smiles down at the deep red velvet petals. “Unless Ferelden is so very different from Ravenloft, that’s a rose,” she says, looking up at him with a grin. “I thought flower picking was best left to little girls and old ladies,” she teases, reminding him of when they first went into the Wilds.

He laughs and shuffles his feet. “Usually they’re better at it, I doubt they’d be attacked by the whole bush when they reached for it. I, uh...I picked it in Lothering. I remember thinking, ‘how could something so beautiful exist in a place with so much despair and ugliness?’ I probably should have left it alone, but I couldn’t. The darkspawn would come and their taint would just destroy it. So I’ve had it ever since.”

She looks up at him, violet eyes dazzling even in the darkness. “That’s a nice sentiment.”

“I thought that I might... give it to you, actually. In a lot of ways, I think the same thing when I look at you,” he murmurs, handing it to her.
Hera looks down, shielding her eyes from him. Her heart races and her chest hurts and she’s almost certain she’ll faint if he says another word. Clearing her throat, she glances up and tries to smirk. “Feeling a little thorny, are you?” she manages.

He chuckles, shaking his head at her joke. “Wow. ‘She’ll never see through that,’ I told myself. Boy was I wrong.”

Hera laughs softly, lowering her head to sniff the rose. “Thank you, Alistair,” she says, looking up at him through her lashes. “That’s a lovely thought.”

“I’m glad you like it,” he murmurs, brushing her cheek with his knuckles. “I was just thinking… here I am doing all this complaining, and you haven’t exactly been having a good time of it yourself. You’ve had none of the good experience of being a Grey Warden since your Joining, not a word of thanks or congratulations. It’s all been death and fighting and tragedy, and it isn’t even your home.”

“I’m so sorry for your losses,” she says softly. “All I have to worry about is finding a way home.” Which I will, she assures herself, eventually.

“I thought maybe I could say something. Tell you what a rare and wonderful thing you are to find amidst all this… darkness. I’m glad I’ve had a chance to meet you, Hera.”

Hera feels lightheaded and dizzy, and wonders if Zevran drugged her for a laugh. “I...I feel the same way about you, Alistair,” she says softly. Honestly.

His smile is blinding, and her heart swells painfully at the sight of it. “I’m glad you like it. Now… if we could move right on past this awkward, embarrassing stage and get right to the steamy bits, I’d appreciate it,” he chuckles nervously.

“Sounds good,” she says brightly. “Off with the armor then!”

He blushes at being called out. “Bluff called! Damn! She saw right through me!”

“Why must it be a bluff?” she asks, stepping closer and putting a hand on his chest.
“Well, it doesn’t _have_ to be a bluff,” he says, covering her hand with his. “Maybe when we’re here in camp some other night. Alone. You know, in a tent?”

Hera looks over her shoulder when her name is called, then back at Alistair. “Promises, promises.” She raises slightly onto the balls of her feet and kisses his cheek. “Thank you, Alistair. I love it.”

She turns to go back to camp, but he catches her hand, stopping her. “I just...I want you to know that I care a great deal about you,” he blurs out.

Hera turns back to him, her smile soft and her insides quivering. “I feel the same way, Alistair.”

She can see the confidence fill his face as his eyes search hers before finally meeting her gaze. “You do?”

She puts a shaking hand flat against his chest and nods, her throat too dry to speak. Her stomach churns and she feels dizzy. _Is this awful feeling the way love is supposed to be?_ She asks herself, feeling more like a moth drawn to its fiery death than a woman in love. _This is terrible, I feel like I’m drunk or took a head wound. Love is a simple, shallow thing and I should be able to understand it. To recognize it. I’ve sold the illusion of it often enough to know what love is._

_So why don’t I understand what I feel now? By the Powers, all I want is for him to touch me._

“Good,” he mumbles, drawing her against him and wrapping his arms around her. The scent of soap, sharp and clean, wafts off his skin as he leans closer filling her senses as if it were a heady perfume.

Hera’s breath catches in her throat just as he presses his lips to hers.

His kiss is different than she’s used to- shy, hesitant, but enthusiastic. His tongue teases, a cautious flicking, before slipping past her parted lips. A soft moan escapes him as their kiss deepens, one arm wrapping around her waist as she molds her body to his.

Her knees buckle and she clutches his shirt, letting him support her as she gets swept away. She doesn’t want to press him for more, but the way her body fits against his makes her ache with desire.
Too soon, he breaks away, pressing his forehead to hers. Breathing heavily, Hera tries to make her feet support her and fails. Opening her eyes slowly, she bites her bottom lip. *That was... I never close my eyes,* she realizes.

“That wasn’t too soon, was it?” he asks shyly.

Her heart pounds in her chest, so loud she’s surprised he can’t feel it pulsing through her. “No,” she tells him, lifting his chin so she can look into his eyes. *Gods help me,* she thinks. Hera had told Wynne that she thought she was in love with Alistair; now she was afraid it was true. “It wasn’t. I liked it.”

His grin is insecure, but hopeful. “More than Zevran’s?”

She raises an eyebrow at him. “Let’s just say if you let go of me right now, I’m not sure I could stand on my own.”

“Can I tell him that?” he laughs, releasing her slowly.

She wavers, putting a hand on his arm and laughing. “Kiss me like that again and you’ll have a lot more to tell him.” She takes a deep breath, trying to calm her nerves and reminding herself that she’s too experienced in the ways of passion to assume what this kiss means. *If I want to know, I have to ask.* “So it’s official, then?” she asks. “We’re...courting?”

*Andraste’s flaming sword,* she thinks, *that sounds so...I don’t know. It’s not enough of a word. Normal, perhaps.*

Alistair smiles down at her. “Yes, it’s official,” he tells her, grinning. “Although I must say I have no experience, so I’m not sure how well it will go.”

She lifts a hand to his cheek, smiling. “Honestly, I don’t have any either.”

He frowns, raising an eyebrow. “What do you mean? Aren’t you a worldly courtesan who’s had scores of lovers?”
“Contracts,” she reminds him. “Business. Illusion. There’s none of that between us, is there?”

He tilts her chin up so he can kiss her again; his tenderness sends warmth flooding through her. “No,” he murmurs against her lips. “There’s nothing like that between us.”

“All right then,” she says softly. “I should...well, there’s plenty to do.” She walks back to camp in a daze, a dreamy smile on her face. She stumbles over a stone and has to grab Zevran’s shoulder to keep from falling face-first into the fire. “Sorry, Zev,” she laughs, patting his shoulder.

“Hera, you seem to be a little distracted,” Wynne notes absently, eyes on her mending. Hera gets the feeling that Wynne pretends not to see a lot more than she comments on. “Are you feeling well?”

Hera glances down at Zevran, meeting his eyes for just a moment before looking down at the rose in her hands. “Just a little weak in the knees, Wynne. It’ll pass. I’ll be back to start on the potions in a moment.”

She goes to her tent to tuck the flower away, leaving Zevran cursing under his breath in her wake.

Chapter End Notes

That kiss! Finally! It feels like they've been circling each other for years, doesn't it? What did you think?
Alistair starts testing the boundaries of his new relationship with Hera.

“Tell me about the griffins,” Hera asks.

Alistair looks up from the map, trying to find his bearings. “The griffins?”

“You said the Grey Wardens used to ride them into battle,” she reminds him, looking over his arm at the map. “That way?” she guesses, pointing to the left side of the fork in the road. “The others are only half a mile behind us, we need to figure it out.”

“Hmm, I don't know,” he says thoughtfully. “According to Genitivi’s map, we could be there tomorrow evening, so long as we pick the right path. The other will send us rambling through the mountains for weeks. It seems he wasn’t sure which fork to take, either.”

She sighs and sits in the middle of the road. “I don't want to approach at dark,” she says, sitting cross-legged and staring at the fork. “We’ve come across two packs of zealots shouting for Andraste, and those at the inn. I have the feeling I’d rather approach them in daylight.”

“Yes, you’re probably right about that,” he says, crouching in front of her. “Hera, may I kiss you?”

She gives him an amused, if slightly confused, look. “Yes, but you don't have to ask,” she tells him.

He looks bashful and toys with the map. “Zevran said I should,” he explains. “He said I should ask anyone I want to kiss, but especially you.”

“Because he was raised among whores,” she finishes. “He means well. But if you want to kiss me, you don't have to ask.”
“I just...don't want you to feel like...I’m using you,” he says slowly, not looking at her.

Hera’s heart turns over. “Oh Hero,” she says lovingly. “You could never make me feel that way. Even if you did, I’m not sure I would mind,” she teases.

“So...I can just...walk up and kiss you?” he asks, raising an eyebrow. “Anytime I want?”

“If you like.”

“Oh- well-”

“Alistair,” she says, losing patience. “Quit talking and do it!”

His expression turns teasing, and he squints at her. “Fooled you, didn’t I?” he murmurs, sliding a hand to the back of her neck and drawing her close.
A Curious Thing

Chapter Summary

Morrigan is surprised to find herself with a friend.

The others join them quickly, and they decide to make camp there at the fork while Morrigan flies ahead, following the path they think is their best guess. Hera waits anxiously, keeping her eyes on the darkening sky for a hawk to appear.

“You worry too much,” she hears and turns to see Morrigan standing behind her. “I am no child, to be scolded for being out past dark.”

“I was worried,” Hera explains. “Did you find the path?”

“I did. It is the path to the right, not the left, as you thought.”

“The right? Really? It goes the wrong direction.”

“Do not take the word of the one who flew along the paths and actually saw the village,” Morrigan says sarcastically. “Do not believe the one who saw the way the other path twists and turns and leads deeper into the mountains. Oh no, that would be horrible.”

Hera rolls her eyes. “Morrigan, do grow up,” she sighs. “You act like I’ve insulted you so deeply when really you’re just being an ass.”

Morrigan laughs, surprising her. “Oh Hera, I do enjoy our banter.”

“I do my best, my friend,” she replies with a smile.

“Friend?” Morrigan asks, looking bewildered. “Are we friends?”
“Is there any reason we shouldn’t be?” Hera asks, surprise coloring her voice. “I like you, Morrigan, even if you are sharp as brambles.”

“I’ve never had a friend before,” the witch tells her, eyes wide and brows raised high. She looks so amazed by the idea that Hera easily believes it. “A curious thing.”

“I’ll be very happy to tell you if you’re doing badly,” Hera says with a smile. “For now, why don’t you get some dinner? Zevran and Leliana caught some rabbits while you were gone.”

“Yes, thank you,” she says and makes her way to the fire.

As she passes Alistair she hisses, her fingernails transforming into wicked talons. She claws the air at him, sending him sprawling onto his back and making the others laugh. Hera laughs softly, covering her mouth, and watches him get up and make his way over to her.

“Something on your mind, Hero?” she asks.

“Yes,” he says, and pulls her close for a deep kiss.

This kiss is different from the too few they’ve shared so far; where before he had been shy and curious, this one is hungry and aggressive. Heat courses through her as he leans her back, dominating the kiss and Hera finds every inch of herself molded to him. There are catcalls and whistles from the fire, and the sound of Morrigan gagging, and when he releases her, Hera is breathless, her body strumming like a struck cord. *He’s been talking to Zevran. I’d bet my life on it.*

“Good talk,” he says with a grin.

She makes a wordless, agreeable sound as he walks back to the fire. Swallowing, she joins them slowly, catching a hard look from Leliana as she sits between Zevran and Alistair.

*Oh dear,* she thinks, watching Leliana’s eyes throws daggers at her.
Chapter Summary

A jealous Leliana confronts Hera about her definition of "casual."

“You told me casual,” Leliana snaps. “You said you couldn't afford anything else here.”

Hera pulls her arm out of Leliana’s pinching grasp and goes back to making coffee. She’d known the moment she saw Leliana be the first out her tent this morning that this was coming. “Yes, I did; I didn’t lie. And you said you’d rather not start something that would certainly end.”

“Alistair is not casual,” she goes on, ignoring Hera as she paces herself into a full rant. “He is sweet, and kind, and doesn't deserve what you’re going to put him through.”

“Leliana, are you upset about my potentially hurting him, or at my choosing him?” she asks, drawing Leliana away from the fire as Alistair and Sten come out of their tents and stretch. If they’re to have this conversation, she would rather no one else hear it. “This isn’t exactly a new development.”

Leliana’s outrage increases. “Are you saying I’m jealous? I’m not jealous!”

“You didn't answer my question,” Hera cooly reminds her. This isn't the first time she’s had a situation like this on her hands, and jealous patrons are a dime a dozen. She just calmly collects the socks draped over a bush to dry, folding them carefully into pairs. “Is it your ego or your feelings that are hurt? Because if it’s only your ego, I don’t really have time for it, but if you’re genuinely upset, we can talk about it now.”

Leliana looks like she’s just been slapped. “I- I just- what is wrong with you?” she demands. “Did you lie to me, or can I just not afford you and he can?”

Hera ignores the abuse- she’s used to it, and very often by would-be patrons who cannot afford or interest her. That it comes from a friend makes no difference. “No, what I told you is the truth.”

“Then you’re lying to him.”
“I am not. He knows better than anyone that I will be leaving.”

“He- he does?” she asks, stunned.

Hera nods. “Why wouldn’t he? I have not kept that a secret. Leliana, I like him,” she adds. “And he likes me. There’s always been something between me and anyone else- it’s always been business in the end. This time there isn’t, because neither of us have those things- well, not here. He isn’t asking me to craft an illusion of what forever could be like, he just wants to be with me now. What harm is there in it?”

“I suppose I’m…” She pouts and kicks a stone. “I suppose I’m jealous.”

“I’m sorry Leliana,” Hera says gently, touching her cheek. “And I know how unfair this must feel to you. But he knows and wants to take the risk of the pain anyway. Besides, you rejected me when I told you I couldn’t offer more than a casual affair. I was quite put out,” she teases. “It doesn’t happen often where I’m from. You Thedosians are bad for my ego.”

Leliana laughs. “I suppose I will have to be content with that knowledge.”

Hera kisses her quickly on the mouth. “So you shall. Friends?”

Leliana blushes and puts a hand to her lips. “Not if you keep doing that,” she warns.

Hera runs her hand over Leliana’s hair and smiles seductively. “You’re pretty when you blush,” she says playfully and walks back to the fire.

“I saw that,” Alistair chuckles as she settles herself beside him.

“Just a little kiss between friends,” she assures him, smirking. “Don’t worry.”

Alistair chuckles again, taking her hand and pressing it to his chest. “Oh, I don’t.”
Chapter Summary

Trying to distract Wynne from her abysmal knitting skills, Hera asks about her past.

“Hera, you’ve got too much yarn wrapped around your needle,” Wynne tells her. “Just one loop at a time, dear.”

Hera makes a frustrated sound and stumbles over a rut in the road at the same time. “Powers damn it all!” she mutters, picking up her dropped yarn and needles. “This is impossible, how do you do it walking?”

“Well, I’ve been knitting a long time,” Wynne chuckles. “You don’t have to try and learn it now, I could teach you better at camp.”

Hera bites her lip and gets everything sorted again. “No, I like having something to do while we walk. It feels productive.”

“It can be.”

Hera sticks her tongue at Leliana, giggling in front of them. Sten and Alistair are ahead scouting, and Morrigan took wing early that morning to make sure they keep to the right roads. Zevran follows, keeping an eye out for anyone looking to attack from behind. Their plan is to approach Haven the next day, early in the morning, but they’re also being very careful about making camp tonight.

“Do you think we’ll be attacked, Hera?” Leliana asks, dropping back to walk alongside her. “You’ve been rather cautious since we crossed into the mountains.”

“The amount of resistance we’ve come against since Denerim concerns me,” she says. “It’s as if someone doesn’t want us finding Genitivi.”

“We will find him, won’t we?”
Hera nods. “I can feel it in my bones, Lil,” she assures her. “He’s in Haven.”

“I just hope we do not regret discovering his fate,” Wynne adds.

“I’m starting to regret trying to knit,” Hera mutters.

Wynne chuckles and takes the needles and yarn bag from her. “We’ll try again later.”

“Do you have any regrets, Wynne?” Hera asks.

“I try not to dwell too much on the mistakes of my past,” she explains, “of which there are many. I would go quite mad if I did that. But I do have one regret- the greatest mistake of my life, made even more grave because it had dire consequences for someone else.”

“What happened?” she asks. “If you don’t mind telling us, of course.”

“I do not. Years ago, I was assigned as mentor to a lad, Aneirin. He was my first apprentice. Aneirin was an elf, raised in one of the elven alienages, and he was very mistrustful of humans. Especially humans in authority.”

Hera frowns. She’d heard a little of the alienages but had yet to see one for herself. “I don’t understand. Why wouldn’t he trust you?”

“All he knew of humans was what he had seen in the alienage. He was very wary of us.”

“Humans treat the elves very poorly,” Leliana explains. “They were slaves for a long time, and the humans still abuse them greatly.”

“I see.”

“What Aneirin needed was time,” Wynne continues. “Time to get used to his new home, time to come out of his shell so we could build a rapport. I gave him no such time,” she says bitterly. “I was young and arrogant. ‘He is a mage,’ I thought, ‘he needs to grow up and act like one.’ I
expected too much from him, and too quickly. I gave no consideration to his origin or his feelings. And he retreated further from me. All I could think of was how stubborn he was, how he was throwing away his talent and his potential, just to be difficult.”

Hera stares at her. “That just...seems so...unlike you.”

“Oh, age and wisdom have mellowed me. I was quite different back then. More...unforgiving. You cannot plant crops in cold, wintry ground; you cannot teach a student who is closed off and unresponsive. Patience is what I needed, and I learned that too late to help him. Aneirin ran away from the Circle one night. I had berated him over some trivial, ridiculous matter that I no longer remember. I drove him away because of something utterly unimportant. He was a child, fourteen at the time of his leaving. They had his phylactery and they hunted him down…”

“Why didn’t they just bring him back to the tower?” Hera asks. “That’s what it’s for, isn’t it?”

“They called him ‘maleficar,’” she explains sadly. “A mage who practices forbidden magic, deserving of death. He was a child, misunderstood and lost. I begged the templars to tell if he had suffered, if they gave him a quick death. I got no answers from them. I was his mentor and they wouldn’t even tell me what became of him. I should have known better. I had the best mentors; they were kind, compassionate...why didn’t I learn from them? I failed Aneirin. All I had to do was listen to him. He would try to tell me, and I would tell him to concentrate on his spells. He talked about the alienage sometimes...and the Dalish. He always talked about looking for the Dalish elves.”

“Maybe he did find them,” Leliana suggests softly.

Wynne shakes her head. “The templars are well-trained and thorough. That he still lives...it would be a vain hope. The apprentices that came after benefited greatly from the lessons I learned from Aneirin. In a sense, he was my teacher, and I the student.”

Hera looks down the road, thinking of her own actions in the past. Perhaps Ravenloft and Zeus will grow, she thinks hopefully. Then maybe... “Then maybe his sacrifice was worthwhile,” she whispers, mostly to herself.

“And there it is,” Wynne finishes with a deep sigh. “My story, my one great regret.”

“Thank you, Wynne,” Hera says sincerely. “Perhaps one day we’ll meet someone who knew him.”
Wynne only nods, and Hera looks up at a hawk call. “That’s Morrigan.” She whistles sharply, and the animal swoops down toward them, turning into a woman at the last moment.

“Sten and Alistair are on their way back,” she tells them. “Shall I run back for Zevran?”

“No,” Hera says quickly. “I’ll go. Keep walking until you meet them,” she tells Leliana, “Zev and I will meet you on the road.”
Romance begins to blossom between Hera and Alistair. Seeing this, Wynne has some sage advice for him.

Hera does her best not to be amused by his attempts at courtship. In truth, she’s experienced a lot of elaborate courtship rituals from patrons, but after a few days, she finds that she’s touched by his simple sincerity. If he has watch after her, she wakes to find a flower in the ties of her tent flaps or a cup of coffee waiting for her when she rises.

They aren’t able to go about courtship the way most would- there is no family or home for either to call upon, no events to attend. It is simply day after day of walking to their next destination, hoping they arrive in time. Sometimes they hold hands and talk through the day, sometimes one of them scouts ahead and they don’t see one another until they break for a meal or make camp. Often she is distracted by the simple act of keeping everyone alive, and Alistair often does little things like pitching her tent or making sure she eats well to make her days easier.

Lying awake at night, Hera marvels at the experience. She and Zeus had always taken care of one another, but it’s an entirely new thing to be taken care of by a paramour. Her favorite part is the physical nature of their changing relationship- that part she knows and can lead him by the hand through the pleasures of her art. But it’s the everyday things, her hand in his, how closely he sits beside her. She feels comfortable with him, secure in his affection.

The night before they reach Haven, she’s leaning against his shoulder, listening to Leliana sing after dinner, and shivers in spite of her cloak and the fire. Alistair doesn’t say anything; he simply shifts his arm, pulling his cloak around them both and tucking her closer against him. Almost in his lap, she closes her eyes and revels in his warmth, feeling sleepy and safe. She’d taken two watches the night before, and they as they get closer to Haven they walk as long as possible and set up camp by the light of fire and torches.

Half asleep, she distantly hears Alistair and Wynne telling everyone goodnight as they all wander to their tents, and silently tells herself she needs to go to her own bed, but can’t seem to make herself move or open her eyes.

“So, what would you do if someone told you that they loved you?” he asks, his voice rumbling
pleasantly in her ear. It’s the last thing she hears before she slips fully into sleep.

Wynne chuckles. “Check their eyesight first, perhaps. Is there someone I should know about?”

“No, I mean- pretend you’re a woman,” he says.

“I am a woman, Alistair,” the mage chortles. “That shouldn’t be too hard, but I’ll give it a try.”

He groans, slightly disturbed. “That’s- no, that’s not what I meant,” he stammers. “Just- pretend you’re another woman,” he says, pointedly looking down at the one in his arms, “...someone told you that they loved you, how would you react?”

“Well, that depends,” she muses, giving him a teasing grin. “Does this someone just blurt it out? Do I love them back? I need context.”

“I...I don’t know if you love him back,” he says quickly, keeping his voice hushed. “Maybe you do. You’ve spent a lot of time with this person.”

“Perhaps you need to...wait for the right moment,” Wynne suggests. “You could get her alone in camp. Give her a gift, perhaps.”

“Oh! I w-wasn’t talking about me!” he laughs nervously. “Just um...forget I said anything,” he mumbles, embarrassed.

Wynne chuckles. “As you wish.” He sighs, deeply regretting the conversation, and Wynne laughs again. “You should wake her and send her to bed,” she suggests, nodding to Hera asleep against his chest. “She doesn’t get enough sleep.”

“I will,” Alistair says softly, brushing hair off her face. “I just...like having her here.”

“Alistair, she won’t sleep well on cold ground. She must be exhausted.”

“All right,” he sighs, shifting to a squat and gathering her in his arms. “You won’t say anything,
“Will you, Wynne?”

“Of course not,” she assures him.

Alistair carries Hera to her tent, Ares leading the way, and lays her down gently on her pallet. Brushing her hair back, he watches her sigh and settle into sleep. If he were bolder, more confident, he would lie beside her for a moment. But he isn’t, so he presses a kiss to her forehead and goes back to stand watch with Wynne.

“I think you make her very happy,” she says softly when he returns.

“Oh no,” he says, holding his hands up defensively. “I’m ready this time.”

“I just want to say that this is something good,” she insists. “For both of you. Being a Grey Warden isn’t easy, I’m glad you found each other.”

“Oh yes,” he drawls, his words dripping with suspicion. “I bet you are indeed.”

“Cherish this,” she tells him. “These small moments of intimacy and affection. They may not last. I said some things to Hera, and I was wrong. I see now how you are with each other.”

“And?”

“That’s all I had to say,” she says, sounding a little sad.

“Really?” he squeaks, surprised. “No pinching my cheeks? No making me blush?”

“Of course not. I like you, Alistair. You deserve to be happy.”

“Not even pinching my cheeks a little?” he asks disappointedly.

Chapter End Notes
I really love these early days between them, and Hera tries so hard to be good for him.
While searching for Brother Genitivi, Hera stumbles across a disturbing, picturesque hamlet hidden away in the mountains.

“You are too thin,” Sten observes as Hera tightens her belt. “You should eat more.”

Hera gives him a disbelieving look and settles her weapons on her back. “What are you talking about? I eat all the time!”

“Look at your spindly arms,” Sten points. “I do not know how you carry the things you do. You should fall over from the burden.”

“Uh...practice?” she offers. “Sten, I already eat double rations, I can’t eat any more.”

“Yes you could,” Alistair mumbles around his breakfast. “You just won’t.”

“Alistair!”

“You cannot lead if you faint from hunger,” Sten says firmly. “Come. I will cook you a meal worthy of the Beresaad.”

With a defeated sigh, she sits and watches Sten fry sausage and potatoes, then scramble wild eggs he’d found somewhere. Of all her companions, he is the greatest mystery- he likes art and music, he can cook rather well, and yet he is so stern. After a hard look from him, she picks up a piece of bread and refills her coffee cup, making a point to take a big bite.

“Sten, you don’t strike me as the cooking type,” Alistair says, watching the qunari make gravy in the same pan as everything else.

“Why not? I eat. Someone has to be able to cook.”
“No, I mean it’s very good,” Alistair says quickly. “You’re a very good cook. Do you enjoy it?”

“It does not matter if I enjoy it, only so long as it is done well.”

Hera watches Alistair and Sten talk in circles about it, graciously accepting the large bowl of eggs, sausage, and potatoes smothered in gravy. “All right,” she says as everyone begins their own breakfasts—considerably less substantial than her own, she notices. “We need to decide how we want to approach today.”

“On foot, cautiously,” Sten says obviously.

Hera closes her eyes, praying for patience while Leliana and Zevran burst out laughing. “Yes on both counts,” she says with a nod. “We do have a small issue—we’re running low on rations right now, and if we keep that up, we’ll be out of food before we make it to Redcliffe to resupply. Morrigan, I want you in the sky, keeping an eye out for trouble, and you can join us once we reach the village. Wynne, you mentioned last night that you wanted to spend a day making poultices—do you want to do that today?”

“I think that is a good idea,” she says, nodding. “This is one old woman not looking forward to climbing a mountain.”

“As for everyone else…” Hera shrugs. “We need someone to hunt and forage.”

“I will follow you until Haven,” Morrigan offers, “then double back and do some hunting.”

“I will stay,” Leliana says softly, looking disappointed. Hera knows she was anticipating the Urn of Sacred Ashes with all the might of her faithful heart.

“Don’t look like that, Lil,” Alistair tells her. “We’re just going to find Genitivi. We’ll be back before anyone finds the Urn. We probably aren’t even close enough.”

“No, it’s fine,” she insists. “I’m good at hunting. I am quiet and good with a bow.”
“Thank you, Leliana,” Hera says between bites. “Anyone else?”

“I will stay with the ladies,” Zevran offers. “Someone will need to watch their lovely backsides in case of ambush.”

Morrigan gags while Leliana sneers at him. “Maybe you should go,” Leliana says. “Sten can stay.”

“I will stay and guard you, if you like,” Sten says with a nod. “When you are done hunting we will go over your defensive tactics.”

“So that’s it,” Hera decides. “Alistair and Zevran will come with me, and you three and Ares will hunt and gather any edibles you find while Wynne works on the poultices.”

“Then let us be off,” Zevran decides. “I am anxious to see the man who has caused us so much trouble.”

They finish breakfast and gather their things to go. Morrigan flies ahead, calling down from time to time to let them know they’re going the right way. All in all, it is a pleasant enough walk to the village, even if Hera is overfull from everything Sten made for her. It’s when they reach Haven that things change.

The path leads to a set of stairs cut into the side of the mountain and shored up with logs. The road is surrounded by ancient pines on either side, and Hera shivers in their shadow, glad of her heavy cloak.

“Is it just me,” Alistair whispers, “or did it just get even colder?”

Hera opens her mouth to answer but sees a heavily armed guard step into the middle of the path ahead. “What are you doing in Haven?” he demands, holding up a hand to stop them. “There’s nothing for you here.”

“I have business here,” Hera tells him, lifting her chin haughtily in hopes of intimidating him with feigned importance.
“No, you do not,” he says, shaking his head. “I would have been informed if someone had been expecting a visitor.”

“Perhaps you can help me, then,” she responds. “Is there a Brother Genitivi here?”

“Who?” he sneers. “Perhaps Revered Father Imric will know of who you speak. Unfortunately, he’s ministering to the villagers at the moment and cannot be disturbed.” He shifts, crossing his arms over his chest menacingly. “I suggest you seek your brother elsewhere.”

“This place is secreted away; have you heard of the Urn of Sacred Ashes, by chance?”

“The Urn is nothing but a legend.”

“Very well,” she says primly. “Excuse us.”

“You may trade for supplies at the shop if you wish, and then I suggest you and your companions leave.”

“Ahh,” Zevran sighs. “Quiet, insular communities! There is always something nasty going on behind closed doors. I hope it involves chains…” he says wistfully. “I hope they ask me to join in.”

“You and me both,” she mutters as they head into the village.

“He was helpful,” Morrigan quips as she lands and transforms into herself beside them.

“Wasn’t he?” Hera sighs. “Let’s put in an appearance in the shop, then we can pretend to leave and do some sneaking.”

“Uh, I’m no good at sneaking,” Alistair reminds her, rattling his armor.

“That’s all right, you can stay with me,” Hera offers. “I’ll make sure you aren’t seen.”
“Hera, you’ve done this before, haven’t you?” Zevran asks, raising an eyebrow.

“Sneaking into a village and spying on its inhabitants?” Morrigan asks. “Who hasn’t, Zevran?”

Alistair stops and stares at them all with a mixture of horror and confusion. “Uh... me,” he says flatly.

Hera looks over her shoulder at him with a sweet smile. “Stick with me, Hero,” she tells him, “and I’ll have you doing all sorts of immoral deeds.”

He tilts his head and looks at her curiously. “I believe you would, actually.”

“Isn’t it strange how there seems to be no one around?” Morrigan asks as they walk. “If we hadn’t seen the guard, I would think the town deserted.”

“You’re onto something,” Hera muses, heading for the nearest building.

All of the buildings look the same, and the ever-so-helpful guard had offered no directions, so they just enter the first one they come to, thinking it to be the village shop. Instead, they find a fire crackling cheerfully in a one-room cottage, the bed in the corner made and dinner bubbling in a pot.

Hera’s throat goes dry at the instant scent of blood- old, metallic, and quite a lot of it. That’s not the stew. She swallows, her tongue thick in her mouth as she turns to see a large butcher block standing in the corner as some sort of altar. “Seven hells,” she whispers. Damn me. If they’re doing blood rituals, I’m going to have to feed eventually- even if it’s just to keep my thirst under control.

Partially congealed blood oozes down the side of the wood, and beneath the darkening liquid she can see how it’s been stained through the years- a legacy of horror and cruelty. Beneath the heady scent, Hera catches the faint, lingering odors of heated metal and a pungent herb. Looking up, she sees bunches hanging from the ceiling- all of the same dried plant with dark green leaves. It reminds her of a drug that many of the poorer citizens of Sigil chew on to distance themselves from their world.

What would a town like Haven need so potent a drug? She wonders, reaching up to gently grab a crumbling leaf and sniff it. I wish I could detect magic without anyone noticing.
“Used for food preparation, perhaps?” Alistair asks hopefully.

“Not with that much blood,” Hera says. “You’ve killed men, Alistair, you know.”

“I’m just trying to be optimistic,” he says defensively, but even he sounds unconvinced. “The other explanation is slightly more disturbing.”

The approach slowly, horrified at the way blood has pooled and run over the sides of the butcher-block surface. Hera reaches out to touch it but draws her hand back quickly. “This is...unexpected,” she says softly.

“This is human blood,” Morrigan tells him, and Hera agrees.

“Ew,” Alistair squeaks. “How do you know?”

“We just do,” Hera says, offering no more explanation. “No one could lose this much and live.”

“I wonder...” Zevran says slowly. “The Crows often made sacrifices of blood and it gave them uncanny abilities.”

“Did you ever partake?” Hera asks, arching a brow at him.

Zevran’s face is curiously empty as he shakes his head. “Perhaps that is a story for another time, bella.”

“This village isn’t what it appears to be,” Morrigan adds. “Let us discover what plot is afoot.”

They make to leave, but as soon as they step outside, a crowd of villagers comes running toward them, shouting and brandishing weapons.

“Well, this helps,” Hera says, and pulls her sword out. “Try not to kill them.”
A few seconds later Alistair runs a man through. “Hera, they’re definitely trying to kill us!”

“Fine!” she shouts back and changes tactics from defense to aggressive attack. Most of the villagers are using simple tools as weapons, and none are truly trained to fight except the handful of guards that join in with bows and arrows, so it isn’t long before the four companions kneel, panting and bruised but alive.

“I don’t think we’re wanted,” Zevran says with grim humor.

“Now I have to know what’s going on,” Hera says, rising and heading for the next building.

Mostly they find a lot of empty cottages, some with altars like the first, some without, until they come across the village shop. “Zev, get that chest over there, would you?” Hera asks and gets to work on another.

She glances at him from time to time while she picks the lock, noticing how he keeps his body sheltering his hands. Her chest pops open, and she’s about to speak when she hears a disgruntled sound and Zevran attacks the chest, breaking the lock and wrestling it open. They all stare open-mouthed and wide-eyed while he rummages through it as if nothing had just happened.

“Um...Zev? Everything all right over there?” she asks.

“The lock jammed is all,” he explains cheerfully. “Sometimes a little force is necessary to open things up, surely you know this, Hera.”

She chuckles and goes to investigate, grinning at what she finds. There’s a bow inside, made of wood so hard it feels like stone, a locket, and a pair of finely made leather boots. She strokes them before pulling them out, wondering if the soft, supple boots are like the Antivan boots Zevran had spoken of so fondly.

“Morrigan, take this,” she says, handing off the bow. She pockets the locket and turns to Zevran with the boots in hand. “Zev, these look like they’ll fit you.”

He takes them, eyes wide, and presses them to his face, inhaling deeply. “Hmmm, that smell,” he
moans. “This is Antivan leather, isn’t it? I would know that smell anywhere! I don’t know how you’ve done it, but thank you.”

“What are you waiting for?” she asks. “Try them on while we have a moment.”

“But I’m not finished admiring them yet! Can you smell that?” he asks Alistair, putting the boots in his face. “Like rotting flesh, just like back in Antiva City.”

“Oh, no thank you,” Alistair says, making a disgusted face and moving away. “Suddenly I’m not upset at not being given anything.”

Zevran plops onto the floor, tugging off his boots and sliding the new ones on. “And they fit as well!” He cries out, throwing the older pair across the room with joy. “Marvelous!”

“Yes, yes,” Morrigan sighs. “Let’s get a move on, please. I saw a chantry further up, I expect we’ll find some answers- and this Father Imric, as well.”
Joining the Choir

Chapter Summary

Further investigation of Haven leads to more disturbing discoveries.

Further up the mountainside, they encounter more guards, this time better armed and waiting for them. Again, Hera tries not to kill any of them, but they seem determined to die for whatever cause their Andraste was championing.

“There’s the chantry,” Morrigan says, pointing ahead.

“Do you hear it?” Zevran asks, bewildered. “Singing from the chantry. The entire town from the sounds of it.”

“Let’s go join the choir,” Hera suggests, opening the doors with a flourish.

At the far end of the chantry hall is a gray-haired man in splendid robes speaking to the congregation around him. Hera notices the guards on either side of the hall as well and raises an eyebrow as she strides confidently up the length of the room.

“We are blessed beyond measure,” the man is saying, looking pious and self-righteous at the same time. “We are chosen by the Holy and the Beloved to be Her guardians; this sacred duty is given to us alone, rejoice my brethren, and prepare your hearts to receive Her.” He raises his arms, giving himself over to the thrall of religion, and Hera remembers how clerics in Sigil would stand at the street corners and preach for their gods all day long. “Lift up your voice,” he continues, ignoring their approach, “and despair not. For She will raise Her faithful servants to glory when her-”

Hera pushes her way through the crowd and stops directly in front of him, forcing him to acknowledge her.

For a moment, he grimaces, then changes his expression to one of false friendliness. “Ah, welcome,” he croons. “I heard we had a visitor wandering about. I trust you’ve enjoyed your time in Haven so far?”
“Father Imric?” she asks, crossing her arms.

“I am,” he says with a smile, bowing his head.

“You killed the knights of Redcliffe,” Hera accuses, wasting no time. “We saw the bodies.”

The man looks to his people. “This, my brothers, is what happens when you let an outsider into the village. They have no respect for our privacy. She will tell others of us if we let her, word will spread, and then what? You, stranger, do not understand our ways. You would bring war to Haven with your ignorance.”

“Oh, you’re right about me bringing war on you,” she says with dark amusement. “You deserve it.”

“We don’t owe you any explanations for our actions- we have a sacred duty. Failure to protect Her would be a greater sin. All will be forgiven.”

“Not by me,” she says, drawing her sword.

Imric is ready for her and pulls his staff from his back to counter her attack. Morrigan shouts out a spell that stuns the villagers and guards surrounding them, and they use the opportunity to take care of the guards at the edges of the room. Villagers in a place of worship are usually unarmed and without armor of any kind, and these are the same. Hera regrets killing so many, but they risk their own lives by attacking them.

Imric’s robes are no great protection, but even so, he is the last to die. She and Zevran start sorting through them, taking what might be useful or valuable, while Alistair searches the adjoining room for a sign of Genitivi.

“Hera, look here,” Morrigan calls, staring at a blank wall. “This wall...something is wrong with it.”

“The mortar is a different color,” Alistair offers. “And it’s directly across from Imric’s chamber. I’d bet it’s a false wall.”
“Oh? And how shall we open it, Alistair the Wise?” the witch says snidely. “Why don’t the womenfolk stand aside so you might open it without our getting in the way? Zevran, stay away, Alistair is going to solve all our problems!”

Hera crouches beside Imric and taps Zevran’s arm, watching them quietly and trying not to laugh. “Well, I would guess…” Alistair begins, running his hands over the wall.

“I swear, you are the stupidest -” Morrigan’s words are cut off by the wall moving aside with a slow grinding sound.

Alistair grins at her, his hand on a torch set in the wall. “There was a switch,” he says smugly.

“Oh how I hate you,” Morrigan whispers bitterly.

Alistair’s grin gets wider, and he swagger a little as he steps away from the wall. “I know.”

Hera and Zevran try not to laugh but fail, having to sit and lean against one another as they howl. Once they catch their breath, they stand and all four go into what appears to be a library.

“Why would you wall up a…” She trails off as they enter the room and see a man lying on his back in the center of the room. “Please be Genitivi,” she whispers, glancing up at the ceiling. “Please don’t be dead.”

At the sound of her voice, the man’s head lifts and turns to see her. “Who are you?” he asks softly. “They- they sent you to finish it?”

“My name is Hera,” she says softly, kneeling beside him. “I’m here to help you. Are you Brother Genitivi?”

“Yes.” He lays his head back with relief. “You don’t know how glad I am to see someone who isn’t from this village. I-” he sits up with a pained groan. “The leg’s not doing so well, and I can’t feel my foot.”

Hera looks up at Morrigan. “Morrigan, can you help?”
She glances down at the wound. “The leg is wounded, but that will heal in time. The foot...may have to come off.”

“Morrigan!” Alistair scolds.

“I thought you might say that,” he says solemnly. “But if the foot goes, it goes. There are more important things than an old man’s feet. I don’t have time to rest now- I’m so close! The Urn is just up that mountain!”

“I need to find the Ashes,” Hera tells him. “Arl Eamon grows sicker every day.”

“The arl is sick? Will he live?”

Hera shrugs. “The arl was poisoned under Loghain’s orders.”

“Politics,” he sighs. “Never did anyone any good. The arl is a noble soul, but the Ashes...the Ashes will surely cure him. Haven lies in the shadow of the mountain that holds the Urn- there is an old temple built there to protect it. The door is always locked, but I know what the key is. Imric wears a medallion that opens the temple door- I’ve seen what he does with it.”

“This medallion?” Zevran asks, pulling it from a pocket.

“Yes,” Genitivi says almost cheerfully. “That is your key. Take me to the mountainside and I will show you.”

“Are you sure you can make the journey?” Hera asks, looking carefully at his leg.

“It is not that far, and will you let me lean on you? For the Urn, any pain is worth enduring.”

“All right, let’s go,” Hera says, helping him to his feet.
Alistair stops her, asking Zevran to help the brother and pulls her aside. “I didn’t think we would find the Urn so soon,” he says. “Leliana wanted to see this so badly.”

“Alistair, the camp is three hours away,” she reminds him. “We can’t lose six hours walking, and with his leg...it would be the day.”

He nods, even though he looks upset at the idea of denying his friend something so special to her. “Yes, I know. It just...I know she wanted to be there.”

“We can’t afford to lose so much time,” she repeats. “I’m sorry, Hero. I’ll find a way to make it up to her.”
Tender Mercy

Chapter Summary

Hera, Alistair, Morrigan, and Zevran start exploring the mysterious temple dedicated to Andraste.

They help Genitivi up the mountain, and when they stop to let him rest for a bit, Alistair pulls her aside.

“Can you help him?” he asks softly, glancing at the old man rubbing his foot. “He’s not going to make it back down the mountain— if he even makes it to the temple.”

Hera nods. “I could if you want. Are you all right with my using magic?” she asks.

Alistair looks conflicted but finally nods. “This is for the arl. He’ll die if we waste time.”

She nods again. “So be it. Distract them.” She walks over to Genitivi and kneels beside him. “Does it hurt very much?” she asks, touching it gently.

He nods. “I will not let it slow us down much more,” he promises.

Behind her, Hera hears Alistair pulling Morrigan and Zevran aside to tell them yet another horrible joke, and Morrigan begins berating him for it. Under the cover of their bickering, she prepares her spell mentally, running the long-familiar word through her thoughts and feeling magic pool in her fingertips.

“Let me rub it for you,” she offers. “I’m quite good at restorative massage.”

Brother Genitivi blushes and stutters, but lets her put her hands on his bare foot. As the brother starts to laugh at the childish banter behind her, she casts the spell under her breath, a soft breath scattering the faint wisps of shadow that appear before he notices. He flinches at the heat, and she pulls her hands away looking surprised.
“I’m sorry, did I shock you?” she asks.

“I think you might have,” he tells her, rubbing his foot. “But whatever you did helped. It feels much better now.”

She nods and pats his shoulder. “Good, I’m glad. Are you ready to go?”

With Genitivi restored, if not totally healed, they make better time. As they get higher, snow appears, and Alistair explains that there’s always snow in the Frostback range. Hera stops and stares in awe as they approach a gorgeous ruined temple nestled among the icy pines, but Genitivi walks on, determined to get inside. She quickly follows them, and find a door locked at the mouth of the temple.

“Here we are,” Genitivi says with a tired sigh. “Give me the medallion, and let’s see if I remember. Yes...yes, you see...it can be manipulated like this…” He twists and opens hidden mechanisms in the medallion and fits it into a strange pattern cut into the stone door. Hera remembers seeing something similar on one of her adventures- Jameson had known how to open that door- and watches Genitivi turn the medallion in the lock. “And there! A key to open the way.”

They watch, crowding the door, as he swings it open. Genitivi smiles over at Hera, then leads them inside. Weak sunlight filters through broken windows, lighting the huge hall filled with snow and ice. Carved columns line the way with burning torches mounted on every other one. Hera, who has seen much in the way of majesty, finds herself swept up in the beautiful destruction of it all.

“Careful, Brother,” Hera warns, “the floor is icy.”

He only nods and puts up a hand, too busy looking around and taking everything in. Even Morrigan is silent as they enter, their leather boots softly tapping on the floor. In the center is a giant bonfire, roaring steadily and fed with logs on what can only be a regular basis.

“Someone’s here,” she whispers, making sure her weapons are loose in their sheaths.

“Oh what I would give to have seen this hall in all its splendor,” Genitivi sighs. “As it was meant to be. Still, sweep away the ice and the snow, and the traces of beauty remain.”

Hera touches his arm, understanding the hold this place would have. Her own castle in Ravenloft
had been much the same—full of dust and spider webs—and she had been in awe of it even through the layer of grime. But she didn’t have time to appreciate it now. “You need to stay alert, Brother,” she reminds him.

“I’m sorry, what? Oh, I was a little distracted, I apologize. The carvings were created just after Andraste’s death, and they may reveal things about her life that we do not yet know. I think I need more time to study these statues and carvings.”

“You want to stay here?” she asks, glancing at the others behind her. “Is it safe?”

“Oh, I could never keep up with you with my injuries. I should be safe, I don’t think there are any villagers here. Go, I will be all right,” he assures her. “Perhaps my destiny was to lead you the Urn.”

She nods. “Is there anything we should know about the temple?”

“It was designed to protect the Urn from anyone who would steal it or do harm to it. Namely, the Tevinter Imperium.”

“What sort of protection?” she asks.

“I’m not sure,” he admits. “The legends were never very specific on that point. Only the faithful shall lay eyes on the Sacred Ashes, death and misfortune await the unbeliever. The Maker’s gaze has fallen on Andraste’s final resting place. He weeps for his Beloved, and His wrath her betrayers endures.”

Death and misfortune await the unbeliever, she thinks ruefully. I guess it’s time to believe in something for once… “So it is the wrath of the Maker that strikes men down?”

He shrugs. “That is what the legend says. And the Maker may indeed watch this place. Read between the lines, however, and you’ll understand that it is merely a simple truth draped in hyperbole and metaphor. After all, no one wants to hear ‘Willie toiled for many a year to perfect the curious mechanisms that would send a sharpened spike up the arse of the unwary intruder.’”

“Traps,” Hera mutters, wishing she had her brother with her; he was much better at disabling traps than she was.
“I think my decision to stay here was the best one,” he chuckles. “Don’t you?”

“Just try not to get into trouble,” she advises.

“I’ll be right here if you need me,” he promises. “Hmm...now I need something to write on…”

Before they go, they leave a little food and a black scroll of paper they’d found for him, then move deeper into the hall.

“An ancient temple,” Morrigan says with only a little reverence, “lost to all but a select few. Magnificent.”

“I find it difficult to imagine you awe-struck,” Alistair tells her.

“How should we do this?” Hera cuts off Morrigan’s reply before they can start fighting. “We always handled things like this with a full sweep, left to right, then forward.”

“We?” Zevran asks.

“Hera and her brother,” Alistair explains. “They’re…”

“Adventurers,” she explains. “That’s what we’re called, usually.”

“Do you have many titles, Hera?” Morrigan asks. “You seem so faceted, we learn more about you every day.”

Hera laughs lightly. “I’m rather popular in Sigil and Ravenloft,” she says. “People always have lots of things to say about me.”

“Well, yes,” Alistair says awkwardly, wondering what exactly gets said about her. “I think your sweep idea is good.”
She nods. “Sweep it is. There’s a hallway that way,” she says, pointing. “Let’s start there.”

They enter a long hallway that leads to a small room holding three more villagers. Hera keeps wishing they didn’t have to kill the zealots, but they will not be reasoned with. After careful searching of the room, they find a long taper, a book on dragons that she thinks Wynne will enjoy, and another blank scroll.

The scroll she leaves near the bonfire for Genitivi so that he can take his notes, and they enter a hallway on the far side of the hall, but it only leads to a ruined library. In spite of water damage and mold, Morrigan insists on having a look around. To her disappointment, she finds nothing of interest and stomps ahead, pouting.

Back in the hall, Hera spies the old man making notes with bits of charcoal and muttering to himself. “I do hope he stays off the stairs,” she says, approaching them herself. “They look icy.”

It is here they’re ambushed. More zealots, this time in full splint mail and with sharp weapons, attack with a furious cry. It catches them off guard, and Hera is certain she would have taken an ax to the head had Morrigan not cast a spell to freeze their attackers in place. Hera is caught in the blast, her sword arm coated in thick ice she has to break off before she can retaliate.

Zevran isn’t so lucky and takes an arrow in the arm before they win the pitched battle. Unfortunately, there isn’t time to do more than knot a bandage around his arm before more pour from the landing above them. Zevran does his best to fight one-handed, and Hera stays on his injured side as they kill the last of them.

“Let’s get you patched up,” she says, helping him sit on a step while Alistair goes through the bodies, looking for valuables and better armor pieces.

“It does not hurt,” he lies, grimacing when she unknots the bandage and digs out the arrowhead. “At least it did not, before you began such- ah,” he gasps, “tender mercy.”

“Liar,” she snorts, amused. “Morrigan, Wynne taught you that healing spell, didn’t she? Would you mind?”

Morrigan sighs, but does as she’s asked, grumbling the whole time. Hera and Zevran ignore it, and when he can move without pain, she wraps a clean bandage over the slow-healing wound and
kisses it.

“For luck,” she tells him.

“I am sorely in need of that,” he says with a gleam in his eye. “Perhaps more than such a chaste kiss will lend.”

“You’re going to need that luck,” Alistair quips from behind, and Zevran looks up innocently. “Oh don’t give me that look.”

Laughing, Hera puts out her hand so he can help her to her feet and looks around. “Well, two more rooms off to the sides. Let’s get to it. Zev, stay back a little until your arm is feeling better. I don’t want to get bottlenecked in a hallway with you in front.”

“Aye, Captain,” he teases, saluting her.
Chapter Summary

Zevran’s been keeping a secret, but the truth always comes out eventually...

As soon as they open the door, a large creature comes barreling down the hallway, grunting and swinging it’s horned nose back and forth. Hera hears Alistair shout that there are two more men behind it with bows, but she gets crushed between the wall and the creature. Morrigan again casts her ice spell, and Hera closes her eyes and whispers a shield just as she’s encased completely in ice.

Unfortunately, her shield also shielded part of the thing, and she gags on its wretched scent. Stuck between the stinking thing and the wall, she hears the sounds of battle, specifically the clashing of steel and Alistair’s favorite warcry. Out of nowhere, there’s a great groan, and the beast pinning her to the wall relaxes and gets heavier. It must be dead, she thinks and hears Morrigan call out to her.

“Hera? Stay still, I’m going to melt the ice.”

She lets her shield down before the witch’s fire engulfs the ice, melting it down without so much as singeing her hair. “Thanks,” she says with relief as soon as she sees the others.

“Are you all right?” Alistair asks. “What happened?”

“This...thing...pinned me, is all,” she explains, wiggling and pushing to get leverage. “Help me push it away. It smells terrible.”

“Sure,” he says quickly and forces his way between it and the wall to help. “It’s a bronto, by the way.”

“A what?” she asks, straining to push. “Zev, is that a chest over there?” she asks, looking over its bulk into the room it ran out of it.

“Yes, amora.”
“Go pop it open while we do this,” she grunts as she and Alistair push the bronto out of the way.

“Well...about that,” Zevran chuckles, rubbing the back of his neck. “I’m afraid I cannot.”

“What?” she asks, sucking in a lungful of the stench rising from the dead beast and choking.

He waits until she’s done coughing to answer, his voice uneven with nervousness. “Well...You see, when I told you I could pick locks...I was not...telling you I could pick locks in practice. I was telling you I could do it...in theory.”

Hera’s jaw drops, and Alistair bursts out laughing. “I told you!” Alistair laughs. “Hera, I told you he was lying!”

“You lied?” she asks. “You lied. To the person who saved your life?”

“Well, I am quite dexterous- as you know,” he stammers. “And I was very against dying at the time.”

“What else is a lie?” she demands, hands on her hips and biting the inside of her cheek to keep from laughing at him.

“Nothing! Nothing else! I can warm beds and assassinate people and clean armor and everything I said was true! Except that one little, tiny little thing,” he amends, looking thoroughly ashamed of himself.

Hera approaches him slowly, looking like she’s either going to kiss him or slit his throat. Zevran swallows audibly, keeping his eyes on hers as she comes closer. “Zevran,” she says softly, lifting his chin with one finger. “I already knew you couldn’t pick locks.”


“Yes,” she says, not looking away from Zevran. “And I kept it to myself because it isn’t important. I can pick, and so can Leliana. You will learn. But if I find out you’ve lied about anything else, I will flay the skin off your bones and show you—” she stops herself before she can add why I am the
“Y-Yes?” he prompts, looking half-afraid, half-aroused. “You will show me…?”

“How dexterous I am,” she says with a flirtatious giggle.

Zevran takes a deep, calming breath as she releases him and moves away. “I like you, Hera,” Zevran tells her, still a little shaky. “You look like you would make love to a man, stab him in the heart, and smile sweetly while doing it.”

Hera flutters her lashes and gives him a secretive smile. “Wouldn’t be the first time. Let’s move on, shall we?”
The Cult of Andraste

Chapter Summary

Hera strikes a deal with the Cult of Andraste's leader.

They make their way through the temple ruins, encountering more zealots along the way shouting about Andraste. Alistair explains to Hera that Andraste was the spiritual bride of the Maker, how she lead an army against the Tevinter Imperium and was later burned at the stake for it.

“But why are they shouting for her now? As if she’s here to hear them?” Hera questions, scanning a tattered journal they’d found. “Wait...the Cult of Andraste? Have any of you heard of it?” she asks, looking up at them. Her three companions all shrug and shake their heads. “Well, I guess we’ll find out, won’t we?”

Deeper into the temple they move, until they leave behind stone walls and enter hollowed out tunnels in the mountain itself. They encounter more and more cultists the farther they go, but Hera points out that as long as they’re meeting opposition they must be on to something. It isn’t until they enter a vast cavern and see a man in shining armor that she thinks this might be more than a mere village of zealots.

They approach slowly, weapons drawn, until he puts a hand up and tells them to stop. Hera listens thoughtfully as he tells her that they are the worshippers of an Arisen Andraste, and accuses them of violating a sacred space. When she tells him that she’s only after the Ashes, his demeanor changes.

“I am Father Kolgrim,” he says, suddenly friendly. “Leader and guide to the disciples of Andraste. The Prophet Andraste has overcome death itself and returned to Her faithful in a form more radiant than you can imagine! Not even the Tevinter Imperium could hope to slay her now.”

Hera shoots Alistair a look that clearly implies this man is insane, and he shrugs back in answer. “What has happened to the Ashes, then?”

“They are still within this temple,” Kolgrim explains. “But why would we need ashes when we serve the risen Andraste in all Her glory?”
“So I can have them, then.”

“So you are after the Ashes then?” he muses, rubbing his chin. “Perhaps there is a way to make up for your desecration.”

Hera rolls her eyes. *It’s always something.* “Just get to it, then.”

Kolgrim launches into a plan for Hera and her companions to enter the temple and make their way to the Urn of Sacred Ashes. It seems there is a Guardian of some kind that stops them from entering and retrieving the Urn. He claims they can have the pinch they need to cure the arl, but she must promise to pour a vial of blood into the ashes directly after. Behind her, she can hear Morrigan and Zevran voicing approval of this plan, both telling Hera it would have Kolgrim in the palm of her hand then. Alistair voices a little disapproval, his tone clearly implying that the idea makes him uncomfortable.

“All right,” she decides. “Give me the vial. I’ll do what you ask.”

“You will?” Alistair asks in surprise.

“Yes,” she says, taking the vial of dragon’s blood. It’s hot to the touch and reminds her suddenly of the vial of her own blood held in the depths of Ravenloft Castle’s vault. She tucks it safely away and follows Kolgrim out of the cavern and into the sunshine. They exit onto a stone walkway lined with pillars with nothing branching from it or a roof.

Blinded momentarily from the beautiful view of the Frostback Mountains, Hera almost misses the presence of the dragon lounging atop a nearby mountain shelf. Mouth open in awe, she walks forward, enraptured with the deep red creature shining in the sun like a ruby. It isn’t until the dragon screams, the sound like metal tearing, that she realizes she’s alone. Looking back, she sees Alistair, Zevran, and Morrigan frozen in place.

*Dragon fear,* she thinks, turning back to them. *It strikes everyone the first time they see a dragon—some people never get used to it no matter how many times they see a dragon. I remember the first time I saw one; I had never been so afraid in my life.*

She approaches Alistair first, getting close to his face and trying to dominate his field of vision. “Hero,” she says softly, turning his face to hers. “Hero, look at me.” He doesn’t respond, his gaze locked on the dragon, so Hera takes a deep breath, filling her voice with power the way her brother
taught her and tries again. “Alistair, look at me,” she commands, and his eyes slowly break away and look at her in fear.

“Hera,” he whimpers.

“You are not alone,” she continues. “I am here, and I do not fear the dragon. There is nothing to fear.”

It works, and slowly she can see him coming back to her. She lets him lean against a stone while she moves on to Morrigan, doing much the same, and getting a sarcastic response- and a grateful look- from the witch. Zevran is harder, having never seen anything like this in the Crows and still getting accustomed to the darkspawn they hunt. She has to call him back several times, putting more and more power into her voice and risking Morrigan catching on to the game of secrecy Hera plays.

Finally, they're ready, and walk to Kolgrim as one. “You see the majesty of the Risen Andraste,” he says smugly.

“I do,” Hera says softly, looking back up at the gorgeous creature. “She is a thing of great beauty and power.”

Happy enough with her response, he points to a door at the far end of the walk. “The Guardian is through there,” he adds, pointing to a door at the end of the stone walkway. “We will await your triumphant return.”

“Thank you,” Hera says, bowing her head. “I will not disappoint those I serve.”
The Gauntlet

Chapter Summary

Putting themselves through the Gauntlet of Andraste’s Temple, Hera comes face to face with someone long dead.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They enter a second temple, this one far more ancient than the other. Hera can feel magic and power flowing through the place and knows Morrigan must feel it too. They climb a short flight of stairs and see the Guardian Kolgrim had mentioned at the far end of the hall.

“What is this place?” Alistair murmurs. “It’s different from the rest of the ruins.”

“It’s a place of power,” Morrigan says. “Even you must feel that.”

For the first time since coming to Ferelden, Hera feels something greater than just magic. It feels as if the whole world is holding its breath, she thinks, drawing a hand over a beautifully carved pillar. Or waiting for something. There is a very real presence here.

He is dressed in ancient armor, but his beard remains neatly trimmed and he does not fidget with boredom the way a man in his position would. He must not be human, or maybe even alive anymore, she decides.

“I bid you welcome, pilgrim,” he says as they approach. His voice echoes off the walls with traces of magic.

“Thank you,” she says, bowing to him. “I am Hera, come for the Urn of Sacred Ashes.”

“You have come to honor Andraste,” he responds. “And you shall... if you prove yourself worthy,”

“I need the Ashes to cure a noble man.”
“Still, you must prove yourself worthy. It is not my place to decide your worthiness. The Gauntlet does that. If you are found worthy, you will see the Urn, and be allowed to take a small pinch of the ashes for yourself. If not…” He simply raises his eyebrows and shrugs.

“What is this Gauntlet?” she asks.

“The Gauntlet tells the true pilgrims from the false,” he explains. “You will undergo four tests of faith, and we shall see how your soul fares.”

“Very well, let’s get started.”

“Before you go, there is something I must ask,” he adds. “I see that the path that led you here was not easy, there is suffering in your past- your suffering, and the suffering of others. You made a dangerous promise to dark and malevolent powers, and with it betrayed your brother. He will lose the only thing that matters to him. You keep dangerous secrets from him, and from your friends. Tell me, do you feel guilty, leaving your brother with a lie?”

Hera doesn’t waver, keeping her eyes locked with his. “Yes. But it was necessary; I have no regrets.”

“Then you do not dwell on past mistakes.”

“It’s easy for others to judge what you’ve done in hindsight,” Alistair comments. “But it doesn’t make it any better.”

“No, Guardian,” Hera says in a firm voice. “I do not. It needed to be done, so I did it. It is my way.”

The Guardian looks as if he might as something of the others, but Hera stops him with a hand. “I am the one being tested,” she says. “Do not ask them, Guardian.”

“Very well,” he concedes. “I will respect your wishes, Hera. The way is open, good luck, and may you find what you seek.”
A blinding light fills the room, and as they blink away the spots, he disappears. Hera ignores the looks from her friends and walks through the now-open door with all the confidence she can muster.

The next room is full of spirits with riddles, each one unlocking a different lock on another door. Between the four of them, they are able to answer the riddles and learn more about Andraste as they do so. When the final door unlocks, they see a shadowy figure standing just inside the room.

Hera freezes as soon as she sees him. Tall and broad, with chestnut hair and a rakish grin playing on his lips. He’s dressed in his favorite hunting leathers, and if she closed her eyes, she’d smell the leather and sweat. A rugged, beautiful face, like a cherub grown into a man.

“Do not fear me, little beast,” he says, holding his hand out to her. “Come closer.”

“Who is that?” Alistair whispers behind them.

“You’re not...you can’t be,” she whispers, stumbling closer. “He’s dead.”

“Yes, you saw to that, didn't you?” he chuckles. “I bear you no ill will, my love. I deserved the death you sent me,” he admits, “but you did not deserve the betrayal that came first.”

“I...You were wrong,” she tells him in a hard voice. “I adored you. I loved you.”

“I know, beast. I'm sorry for using you the way I did. Take this, and do great things,” he says, offering something in his palm.

She ignores his offering. “You called me a monster,” she says with venom in her voice.

Anatoly gives her his charming smile and shrugs, taking her hand and pressing something small and hard into it. “Sometimes the world needs a monster, my little beast.”

She lashes out, punching him in the face. His head rocks back with the blow, but he laughs and
rubs his jaw. “I guess I deserve that, too,” he laughs, and a faint wind comes from behind them, and he disappears into the shadows.

Hera covers her face with her hands, forcing herself to breathe slowly, to control the angry whirlwind of magic within her that screams to level this place. *It won’t do to fall apart now,* she thinks, struggling for control. *Not now. Not when we’re so close to the Ashes.*

“Who...who was that?” Alistair asks.

“A past lover, it seems,” Morrigan suggests.

“Both of you shut up!” Hera snaps fiercely.

Alistair suddenly looks as if he’s been kicked, and his expression goes flat. “Of course, commander,” he grumbles.

Zevran says something to him, but she doesn't quite hear him. To Hera, they sound very far away, as if she’s at the other end of a tunnel. She feels alone; the betrayal from all those years ago seems so fresh and new. Suddenly she is a heartbroken girl who’s just lost her mother and her lover in a single blow, and grief threatens to break her resolve. *The Guardian should have just stabbed me in the heart,* she thinks ruefully. *It would have been easier than this.*

She feels hands on her shoulders, light and gentle. Looking up, she sees Zevran standing in front of her, looking as if he understands everything that just happened. *I know betrayal,* his expression seems to say. He holds her gaze for several breaths, and she nods.

“Good,” he says, giving her shoulders a gentle squeeze. “We will move on.”

Chapter End Notes

I've been so busy with Fictober that I almost forgot to post!

Also, for a sneak peek at Hera's future, see my Fictober stories!
Andraste

Chapter Summary

The Temple of Sacred Ashes continues to test Hera, asking for her to prove a worthiness that she doesn't necessarily feel.

Slowly the approach a crater in the middle of the path. Around the crater are twelve trigger plates, six on each side. “Well this looks complex,” Hera mutters, placing her foot on one of the plates carefully. A section of a stone bridge lights up but doesn't look solid. She lifts her foot, and it disappears. “Right,” she says. “One of these.”

“Have you ever encountered something like this, Hera?” Alistair asks.

“No, but I’ve heard of them,” she explains, taking a moment to stand on each plate and register which one makes bridge sections appear. I imagine the others make them solid. So it’s just a matter of finding out which ones.

It takes a little while, but they get two sections of the bridge complete by moving each person onto specific plates. It’s nerve-wracking, but Hera slowly steps onto the first section of the partially-revealed bridge. With a deep breath, she calls to Morrigan, flinching when she leaves her trigger plate and approaches.

“It is a clever thing,” she says, tapping her foot on the stone. “Solid, and yet a moment ago it was thin air. Hera, what do you-”

Morrigan is cut off by Hera’s scream as Alistair steps off his trigger plate and the stone beneath her disappears. Acting quickly, Morrigan drops to the floor and grabs Hera by the hand.

“Fool!” she shouts. “You’ve nearly killed her!”

“Hera!” he shouts, moving to step back into place.

“No!” Hera says quickly. “Don’t do that. Don’t move.”
Hera looks up into Morrigan’s face, fully aware that she could let go and kill her. She dangles in open air, staring up at the woman she’s called friend, and hoping it isn't her end. Something shifts in Morrigan’s eyes, giving her a predatory look, and Hera’s heart races.

“Morrigan,” she says, hanging on to her arm with both hands. “Don't let go.”

As swiftly as it appeared, the look disappears, and Morrigan braces herself. “Do not be foolish. I will not.”

With the help of a spell, Morrigan pulls her over the edge and helps her climb up. Gasping for breath, Hera embraces her, thanking her luck for such a friend.

“Luck?” Morrigan asks. “Do you not believe in fate?”

Hera laughs and hugs her again. “I believe fate is exactly why I’m lucky.”

After that, they manage to get the bridge solidified completely, and pass through the final door. Immediately they shield their eyes from a wall of bright flame, leaping higher than a man is tall but fed by nothing. Once Hera blinks the spots from her eyes, she notices an old stone altar before her and approaches slowly.

The carved altar is waist-high and dusty from years of neglect; she brushes her hand over its surface, trying to make out the carvings. “Wait...it’s words,” she murmurs and grabs a bandage and her water skin. Carefully, she cleans the dust away so she can read clearly.

“Cast off the trappings of worldly life and cloak yourself in the goodness of spirit,” she reads. “King and slave, lord and beggar, be born again in the Maker’s sight.”

“What do you suppose it means?” Alistair asks.

“If taken literally...we have to remove all our equipment,” she answers, studying the stone. “Down to the skin.”
“Finally!” Zevran cries. “Be my guest, amora, you are our leader.”


“Shy, Templar?” Morrigan teases.

Hera drops her pack and starts unbuckling armor. In moments, she’s completely naked and unpins her hair, shaking it loose. Behind her, she hears several sharp intakes of breath, and she turns to glance at her friends, all in various stages of undress.

“Worth the wait, Zev?” she asks, arching an eyebrow.

In response he starts reciting something in his own tongue, lifting his eyes to the ceiling. “I...I think that’s the Chant of Light,” Alistair explains, awkwardly trying to cover himself in his small clothes.

Morrigan, like Hera, simply stands and waits for the men to finish. *I imagine modesty has as much importance in her life as it does in mine,* she thinks.

“C-Can you turn around?” Alistair asks, his face red and blotchy.

Morrigan sighs and makes a derogatory remark, but turns. Hera gives him a slow look up and down, a smile spreading across her face, before turning and facing the flames. “I have never in my life been cloaked in anything close to goodness of spirit,” Hera says with a laugh, hoping it masks the small, uncertain voice in her mind telling her that she could live a thousand years and never be worthy.

“Are you a villain then, Hera?” Morrigan asks, surprised.

“Perhaps.” Hera shrugs. “I never thought so. Zeus and I have certainly spent our lives doing just as we pleased. If that helped people, well and good. People like us don’t always serve the good of the people.”

“He is,” she says wistfully. “I hope you get to meet him one day. Are we ready?”

“Yes, my Warden,” Zevran says behind them.

“I’ll go first,” she decides. “Morrigan, have that ice spell ready, if you please.”

With a deep breath, Hera walks toward the flames. Andraste, I am no servant of the Maker, she prays silently, the heat of the fire enough to make her hair flutter. But this thing I do, she explains, stepping into the flame itself, is done for love.

Heat and flame envelop her, and for a moment she fears she will burn. Instead, time stretches, and before her she sees herself as a young girl, making foolish decisions and falling in love. All her bitterness and grief over Anatoly’s betrayal and her mother’s death fall away from her, and for once she feels light-hearted. She takes another step, passing out of the flames and into the cool air of the temple, and opens her eyes in wonder at this feeling having been cleansed. It is painful, like having an infected wound lanced, and tears spring into her eyes at the sudden ache in her heart.

“You have been through the trials of the Gauntlet,” she hears and turns to see the Guardian approaching. “You have walked the path of Andraste, and like Her, you have been cleansed. You have proven yourself worthy, pilgrim. Approach the Sacred Ashes.”

The others pass through, carrying their gear, and take their time getting dressed. Hera is quiet and contemplative, shaking her head when Alistair moves to embrace her. Not now, she thinks, wondering at the strange heartbreak. Slowly, they approach the Urn, and Hera feels something strange, almost a kinship, with Andraste as they get closer.

“I didn’t think anyone could succeed in finding Andraste’s final resting place...but...here She is,” he says in an awed tone.

“Nice vase,” Zevran drawls. “I should get one for my house.”

“I am in awe,” Morrigan adds. “Really.”

Trying to shake off the storm of emotions, Hera rolls her eyes at the jokes and looks up at the statue of Andraste. Thank you, my lady, she thinks, taking the promised pinch and securing the
pouch inside her shirt for safety.

“And now the blood?” Morrigan asks.

“No,” Hera says softly. “We will leave her in peace.”

“Kolgrim will not like this,” Zevran warns as they make their way out of the temple and back into the sunlight.

Seeing Kolgrim waiting ahead, Hera makes sure her weapons are loose. “I really don’t care what he likes. We will deal with him.”
Chapter Summary

With a moment to rest and breathe, Hera begins processing the meeting with her long-dead lover.

Hera approaches Leliana slowly. “Lel,” she says softly, sitting beside her. “I am truly sorry. We had no way of knowing just how close we were when we left yesterday morning. How could we? If I could go back, I would, but there’s simply no time to make the trip again and possibly encounter more cultists.”

“I know,” Leliana grumbles, wiping her tears of frustration away. Leliana had kept to herself ever since Hera and the others had dragged themselves into camp this morning. They’d spent an uneasy night in Haven, restlessly tossing and turning in the beds of dead villagers, a large pyre burning in the center of town making them wish they had just continued on and left the ghostly hamlet behind them.

Over a cold breakfast, they had shared the story of finding Brother Genitivi and how he had led them to the temple of Andraste. As they spoke, Leliana did her best to hide the hurt of being left out. When Alistair spoke of seeing the ashes and the sense of peace that had accompanied them, her hurt had turned to anger.

Brother Genitivi had elected to stay with them until they made it to another village, but due to his injuries, Wynne had suggested that they remain where they were until the next morning. Morrigan and Zevran had loudly agreed, citing their own troubled sleep in Haven, and retired to their tents as quickly as possible.

Shooting a guilty look at Leliana, who ignored her completely, Hera had avoided her until they drew the same straw for watch.

“Please don’t feel too badly about it,” she pleads, tucking Leliana’s short red hair behind her ear. “I didn’t mean to hurt you. When this is all over, we will return, you and I.”

Leliana nods, wrapping her arms around her knees. “Do you really think Andraste is there?”
Hera nods and tells her about the peace and cleansing she felt as she passed through the flames. “It was a wondrous thing,” she adds, “and I have seen my fair share of what passes for gods. And yet...the hatred I’ve held for the man I saw there is gone. I am able to remember our happier days, and not just the pain of it. Your Andraste is influential, indeed.”

“Are you a believer, then?” she asks, her pitch rising.

Hera considers her words carefully. “I believe that Andraste was a truly special and powerful person, and that comes through in Her followers- mostly. In you, definitely.” Hera leans over and looks deeply into Leliana’s eyes. “And you are just as lovely as she ever was.”

Leliana blushes and looks away coyly. “You’re too much of a flirt for your own good,” she chastises, but can’t hide a small smile. “Alistair will get jealous.”

“Alistair has a lot of jealousy in store then,” Hera chuckles.

Leliana laughs. “Tell me about it all again,” she asks.

Hera tells her, keeping her eyes scanning the woods until Leliana falls asleep. After a while, she wakes her and sends her to bed, then keeps watch alone, thinking about Anatoly.  

* 

Hera looks up as Alistair comes to sit beside her, watching the sun rise. “You’ve been awfully quiet since the Gauntlet,” he says, offering her a cup of coffee. “You didn’t even wake anyone else for their shift. Have you been sitting up all night?”

She nods, taking a sip. “You all needed the rest.”

“There were actually three people here who could have done it,” hereminds her. “People who didn’t nearly die yesterday. And a dog, who slept and ate all day.”

She shrugs. “I’ve had a lot to think about. The kind best done late at night.”
“Do you want to talk about it?” He keeps his tone even and careful, but she can see the tension creeping into his shoulders. *Is he afraid of what I would say?*

“Not particularly,” she tells him honestly. “Not right now.”

Alistair nods, and they sit in silence for a while as the sky brightens. “Can I ask you just one question?” When she nods, he visibly gathers his courage. “Are you still in love with him?”

Hera is so shocked she laughs, nearly spilling her coffee. “I’m sorry,” she says, catching her breath. “I don’t mean to laugh at your question.”

“Right,” he says slowly.

“It’s just...he’s been dead *so long,*” she explains. “And I hate him,” she adds without passion. “At least I did.”

“He was that bad, huh?”

“Worse,” she says softly, looking back to the horizon. “He was worse, Hero.”

“I’m sorry, Hera. You know you can talk to me about anything, don’t you?” he asks, putting his hand over hers. “I’m here for you, pretty lady.”

His touch is warm, but with Anatoly in her thoughts all night, she instinctively pulls away, pretending not to see how his jaw tightens or hear him clear his throat. *I don’t want them connected in any way,* she thinks, tugging at her boots. *I can’t allow him to touch me while I’m thinking of another. I just...*

*He’s too good, and I don’t want a dead man to spoil this.*

“Let’s get an early start,” she suggests, standing and whistling for Ares. Somehow she can’t quite wrap her mind around the idea that this man might actually care for her, not so soon after seeing Anatoly in the Gauntlet.
“Hera.”

She turns, a pleading look on her face. “I... It just hurts,” she explains. “I can’t. Not now.”
The longer his sister remains missing, the deeper Zeus falls into despair. When a pair of old friends come to visit, he reaches a breaking point.

“Zeus, I wish you would at least try to sleep.”

The drunken prince raises his head from the card table, squinting at the pink-skinned beauty before him. “Whoz zat?” he slurs.

“It’s Krynne, Zeus,” she says gently, coming to his side. With a shooing motion and a sharp look, she waves away the players, glaring as they gather up their winnings. “Rafiq and I have come back, remember?”

“Oh. It’s you. You didn’t bring him back, did you?” he sneers.

“No, Jami stayed away this time.”

Something flashes across Zeus’ beautifully chiseled features- if she didn’t know him better, Krynne would say it’s fear. His feud with Jami had reached a boiling point when the fire wizard had accused him of leaving the work of ruling to Hera out of selfishness. Since then, Zeus had drowned himself in vice; Krynne’s heart broke for someone who had no idea how to grieve for such a loss. It was as if his sister had been his soul, and without her, he didn’t know how to function anymore.

“Good,” he mutters, plucking at the lace on his cuff.

“Zeus, darling, go to bed,” she pleads softly. “You need to sleep.”

“No!” he says, eyes wide. “What if she comes back?”

Krynne sits beside him, brushing his hair off his face and giving him a warm smile. “I promise I’ll
wake you if she does.”

“I can’t,” he says in a small voice. "I have to wait."

“Darling, let us take care of you-”

“I hurt her. I don’t deserve to be taken care of,” he argues, turning his face away.

Krynne's heart swells with tenderness. Zeus has never one to show pain or accept blame of any kind. “Yes you do, love," she assured him, turning him back to face her. "Come along, Rafiq and I will get you to bed.” Krynne gestures to her husband, a tall, dark-skinned, devilishly handsome man not far away. “Gently, my dear.”

Zeus allows himself to be hefted to his feet, then all but carried to his rooms. “The king’s rooms,” he mutters, glaring at the lavish decor. “Imposter’s rooms, more like.”

“Why do you say that?” Krynne asks, pulling the linens back and gesturing for Rafiq to lay him down.

“I’m not king,” he says, sighing as his body sinks into the mattress. “Dear Dunkle rules in her stead.”

She can’t help the little giggle that escapes her as she and Rafiq tug off his boots. “Dear Dunkle” is Zeus’ personal endearment for his uncle the Duke. “You could, though. There’s no one else would stand in for her.”

A soft sob comes from the head of the bed. “I miss her, Krynne.”

The words are barely more than a whisper, but the weight of his sorrow drops into her belly like cold iron. Krynne moves to go to him, but Rafiq cuts her off with a gesture. “Do you remember when my lady Aara left us?” he asks Zeus instead, rolling down his stocking. “When she and the Sheik made a mess of everything?”

“Yes,” Zeus sniffs, staring up at the ceiling. “You were such an angry little child. A sniveling,
Krynne gives her husband an amused look, but Rafiq only rolls his eyes. “She was gone five years, Zeus,” he reminds him, making him sit up.

Zeus’ head hangs, making him look even more like a broken doll. “She wrote you a note. My dearest love just left.”

“So dramatic, Krynne thinks, helping him out of his coat. Both of them. “And that note did nothing to ease his pain.”

“And she came back,” Rafiq adds. “Eventually.”

Zeus chokes on another sob, turning bloodshot eyes to Krynne. “Hera isn’t coming back,” he says brokenly. “She’s left me forever.”

Tears prick her eyes and she wraps her arms around him. “Oh, sweet Zeus,” she whispers into his hair. “She’ll come back, I know it.”

The dam finally breaks, and for the first time since his sister disappeared, he shares the burden of his grief. Rafiq sits on his other side, an arm around his shaking shoulders. “I’ve never loved anyone else,” Zeus sobs, clinging to her. “No one else understands me.”

“I know, darling. I’ve known you longer than anyone. I know.”

“Krynne, I need her.”

Looking up, she meets the warm brown eyes of her husband, currently red with tears himself. “She’ll come back.”

I hope.
Rest

Chapter Summary

After Wynne voices her concern for Hera, Alistair makes certain that she rests.

“She kept watch alone all night,” Wynne says worriedly, studying Hera. “I can hardly believe she’s even upright today after everything that happened yesterday.”

“I know,” Alistair says, watching her race Zevran and Ares to the next mile marker. “She the last shift the night before, too.”

“Did she? I thought that was Leliana and Zevran.”

“Leliana started feeling poorly,” he explains. “Something about her stomach, so Hera took it.”

“What happened in the temple?” Wynne asks. “She’s been acting strange ever since you got back.”

He tells her about seeing someone called Anatoly, and the conversation they’d had. “She’s avoiding talking about it, but it hurts her. I don’t know how to talk to her about it.”

Wynne grabs his arm, her worry increasing. “Alistair, you must say something to her. She’s going to get hurt if she goes on this way. I’m worried.”

“What can I do, Wynne? She won’t take orders from me.”

“But she’ll listen to a fellow Grey Warden.”

Alistair nods, his eyes on Hera. Sometimes, even her boundless strength and energy fails her, like in the Tower of Magi. Right now she seems fine, laughing and squealing as Ares tackles her into a pile of leaves beside the road. But if they were to meet one of the roving bands of darkspawn- an increasing possibility- she might not get through it unhurt.
“I’ll see what I can do,” he decides. “Would you be opposed to playing the tired old lady?” he asks suddenly. “If you tell her you’re too tired to go further, we can make camp early.”

“Alistair, that’s a wonderful idea. An afternoon to ourselves will be good for us all.”

They call to Hera, and Wynne explains how exhausted she is, and she doesn’t think she can go another mile. Their leader instantly consults their map, looking for a water source to make camp near.

“Alistair, isn’t there a spring nearby?” she asks. “I’m almost sure this is where the villager was talking about.”

He looks over her shoulder and nods, pointing to the spot. “Here, I think. It’s farther into the forest than we usually go.”

“Wynne, can you make it?” Hera asks, worried.

“I’m sure I can, if Alistair lets me lean on him.”

Alistair watches as Hera takes Wynne’s pack and plunges into the forest. “Well...it’s a stop,” he mutters as they all start to follow.

They find the spring an hour later and start camp. The forest is quiet, with shafts of warm sunlight filtering through the canopy. As soon as they stop, Hera immediately starts working: digging the latrine and fire pits, gathering water and setting it to heat. While she’s distracted, Alistair takes her pack and sets her tent up a little further from the others.

“Did you set up my tent?” she asks, approaching and wiping the sweat from her neck. “Thank you, Alistair.”

“You need rest,” he says, hammering in the last spike. “You haven’t slept since the temple.”
She laughs. “Well...I’d be a poor leader if I didn't let everyone get a full night’s rest once in a while.”

“And what about you, Hera?” he asks, concern giving his voice a hard edge.

“Me? I’m fine,” she insists.

“Really?” he asks, standing and taking her hand. “Raven, you can’t run yourself ragged. You have to rest. No watch tonight.”

“I’m fine, I swear,” she tells him, looking up into his eyes. “I just…”

“Just what?” he presses, wrapping his arms around her.

Hera looks down, her hands on his chest. “I’m just afraid that I’m going to lose this,” she says softly, toying with a button on his shirt. “All of it: you, Ferelden, them. I just want to get as much time in as I can.”

“You could stay,” he suggests.

“I can’t,” she sighs. “And it’s not fair to you, but I can’t. Even if I want to.”

Alistair tilts her chin up and meets her violet gaze. “Hera, let’s get through the Blight,” he tells her. “We’ll figure out the rest later. For now, rest.”

“Alistair, I-”

“Later,” he demands, lowering his lips to hers. When he breaks away, he presses his forehead to hers and sighs. “Rest, Hera.”

She grins up at him. “Come rest with me,” she offers, tilting her head toward the tent.
Alistair laughs—she can always make him laugh—and shakes his head. “You temptress,” he teases. “Get some sleep, I’ll be back to wake you for dinner.”
As Alistair's confidence and desire for Hera grows, she finds herself drowning in frustration.

They make their way back to Redcliffe as quickly as possible, striking camp before dawn and not stopping until the sun is half set against the mountains. Hera wants to waste as little time as possible, and considers just giving the ashes to Morrigan and letting her fly to the castle, but hesitates. After the strange look Morrigan gave her in Andraste’s temple, she isn’t sure if defeating the Blight or saving the arl rank very highly on Morrigan’s list of preferred activities.

She doesn’t say anything, but scouts ahead with the witch, keeping a close eye on her for anything unusual. The first day passes normally, Morrigan is taciturn and quiet, and Hera just goes about her business, not bothering Morrigan with idle chatter.

“There is a river not far from here,” Morrigan tells her late in the afternoon. “If we head east for an hour, we will see it.”

“There is? It isn’t on the map.”

Morrigan sniffs with derision. “Your map is not so inclusive. This is a branch of the river that runs through Redcliffe. We can camp beside it tonight and begin to follow it tomorrow, it will lead us to the village.”

“That’s a great idea,” Hera decides. “We’ve been traveling hard for a few days, a little extra rest tonight will be appreciated. Why don’t you scout out a campsite and I’ll tell the others?”

Morrigan nods and takes to the air as Hera turns back down the path. As she walks, she daydreams about the few stolen moments she and Alistair have shared recently; hushed laughter, passionate embraces, his eagerness for more. The same eagerness and desire was in direct opposition with his religious upbringing and caused him much guilt. Only the night before, they’d gone gathering firewood and ended up rolling around in the woods, lips pressed together and hands teasing one another through their clothes, when he’d pulled away and begged for patience.
“Hera, I want...Maker, don’t know what I want!” he’d said, breathing heavily.

Hera pulled herself together, setting her clothes to rights and nodding. “I understand. I do, Alistair. But if you want more time...” She laughs now, remembering. “You’ve got to stop teasing me this way! I’m not used to chaste men.”

Even now her blood heats remembering his hands on her, and she’s glad for the brisk wind already lending color to her cheeks. She starts jogging, anything to get her mind off the path of desire Alistair seems bent on keeping her on.

*

Hera wraps her arms around Alistair’s neck, desperate to get him closer. She sighs when his hands roam down her back, cupping her backside and shifting her slightly. He had ambushed her on the way to wash clothes, pulling her into the bushes and on top of him. Half an hour later, they still have their clothes on, but her laundry is scattered around them, still unwashed.

“Alistair,” she gasps, pushing herself up on her arms. “You have to stop.”

He pulls her back down, kissing her neck. “Give me one good reason,” he demands, breath hot on her skin.

“Because if you don’t, I’m not going to stop you,” she moans. “And then your first time will be in the dirt, surrounded by stinking socks.”

He groans, letting his head fall back to the grass. “Stop me if you’ve heard this one...but would that be a bad thing?”

“I can’t say it would be my first time in the great outdoors, but is it really what you want?” she asks, sitting up and straddling him.

He raises an eyebrow at her and raises his hips beneath her. “You have to ask?”

She grins back at him, shifting slightly and biting back a moan. “This isn’t my ideal location,” she
admits. “And we have second watch. And really disgusting socks. But if this is what you want...”

“Maker’s breath,” he curses. “I hate when you’re right.”

Hera slides off him slowly and pushes her hair back. “I can’t wait to be with you,” she tells him, gathering the clothing. “But you said you wanted to go slowly.”

“I do.”

She laughs. “This is not slowly. Think about it.”

He sighs and puts his hands behind his head. “I do,” he says dreamily. “So often.”

“I can’t believe that I’m the one putting a stop to this,” she mutters to herself. “Me. Hera of Ravenloft. Courtesan extraordinaire.”

“Me either,” he laughs, sitting up and reaching for her. “I’m dying to find out if your reputation really is what you say.”

As if you’d be able to tell, she thinks with a wry smile. “You stay away,” she orders, slapping his hands away. “I’m going to go...jump in the river or something.”

Alistair laughs and sits up. “It’s really cold,” he warns.

“Good,” she mutters. And he calls me the temptress.

“I’ll see you for watch?” he calls, watching her walk away.

“Oh no,” she says smugly, stopping and leaning against the tree. “Not unless you want to while away a couple hours with Morrigan, too.”
“Are all women this evil?” he asks, scowling. “I hate her.”

“Best way to keep you chaste, Hero,” she teases and flounces off for the river.
Age is Just a Number

Chapter Summary

Morrigan asks Hera about the passage home and leaves Hera feeling unsure of her choices.

“How old are you, Hera?”

Hera’s brows draw together, and she looks up from her mending. “How old am I?” she repeats. “Older than I look, I’m sure.”

Morrigan raises a brow curiously. “You look rather young. I would put you at no more than eighteen years of age.”

“Oh well I’m older than that,” Hera assures her. Technically. “My bloodline just ages really well.”

“You cannot possibly be old enough to say such a thing,” Morrigan declares. “Yet sometimes you act like an old woman,” she says, pointing to the pile of mending at Hera’s side. After dinner, Hera had simply gathered her things and the endless mending that everyone needed done and sat down to it during her watch with Morrigan.

“I don’t mind mending. I was the only one with any skill for it for a while. The finer stuff- knitting, weaving, embroidery, I’m all thumbs with. But this I can do.”

“So...how old are you?”

Hera decides on a half-truth. “About twenty? Twenty-one?” she guesses. “The dates are strange here, and my name day was in the fall in Ravenloft.”

“Ah yes, your mysterious home. Tell me, how does one find a door when one cannot see it?” She tilts her head, giving her a scrutinizing look. “You did say that the mirror you passed through was destroyed on this side, yes?”
“There are always clues,” Hera answers. “Some are easy to find, others not so much. Some worlds have many doors, others one if any. I will find it.”

“And what of young Alistair? He was already an idiot, but now he’s gone stupid with love for you. Would you leave him now?”

Hera shrugs, biting her lip and ignoring the rush of guilt. “I...don’t know, Morrigan,” she says softly. “It will all depend on if I find a way home. He’s young; he would heal if we part ways.”

Wouldn't he? Surely he will, this isn't...

He'll be fine. He'll get over it.

Morrigan raises a brow and tilts her head. “He’s older than you, Warden.”

Damn. Why do I always forget that? “You know a man is never as old as his age,” she laughs. “I’m younger and older than him at the same time. Age is just a number anyway, right?”
Alistair's jealousy gets the better of him and forces his relationship with Hera into new and uncomfortable territory.

They arrive in Redcliffe a few days later, stumbling with fatigue. Hera sends everyone to the tavern to rest and have something to eat while she and Alistair go to the castle. Accompanied by her ever-faithful mabari, they slowly climb the path, hardly speaking. She can tell something is bothering Alistair, but she lets it ride, knowing he’ll say something when he’s ready.

When they reach the castle, Isolde is overjoyed to see them and rushes them off to the arl’s bedchamber. Erik, the physician they met before, is with him, watching closely for any sign of change. Irving is also there, and Hera feels a small sense of relief that someone with magic has been caring for the arl as well.

In a chair in the corner, Teagan dozes, but jolts awake when the door opens. “You’re back,” he says, coming closer. “Oh my lady, we were starting to fear the worst. Thank the Maker you’ve returned. Do you have the ashes?”

Hera pulls the pouch from inside her shirt and hands it to him. “We found them.”

Erik and Irving instantly begin working on a cure for the arl, and Isolde sits on the bed, holding her husband’s hand. “This may take some time,” Teagan explains. “I don’t understand everything they’ve said about it, but I do know that. Let me offer you a place to rest until there’s word.”

She looks over at Alistair, his face desperate for something to happen. “Thank you, but we can rest here,” she says, and nudges him to the chair Teagan had just vacated. “If you’d send someone to the tavern for our companions…?”

“Of course, my lady. And I’ll have rooms prepared for you all.”

She thanks him, sitting on the floor beside Alistair and leaning on his knee. With Ares’ head in her lap, they watch quietly while the mage and physician make a potion. Alistair is so quiet that she’s almost sure he’s fallen asleep until he brushes his hand through her hair gently.
“Thank you,” he says softly.

“For what, Hero?” she asks, resting her chin on his knee and looking up at him.

“Arl Eamon will live,” he answers, eyes still on the figures working. “I...I can talk with him when he’s better. I have you to thank for that.”

She smiles, blinking sleepily. “It was my pleasure, Alistair.”

Alistair looks down at the top of her head, eyebrows knitting together. She really means that, doesn’t she? Everything she’s done has been for someone else- usually me. What kind of woman is she?

A cry from the other side of the room scatters his thoughts, and his heart freezes. “Is he dead?” he whispers as Hera stirs beside him.

“No,” she says softly, pushing the dog’s head from her lap and rising. “He didn’t die.”

Alistair follows blindly to the foot of the bed, where the arl is shaking his head and blinking slowly. “Arl Eamon?”

“Oh, he’s alive!” Isolde cries, kneeling on the floor and praying aloud.

“Alistair?” Eamon rasps.

“Careful, my lord,” Erik cautions. “You’re weak, and have been ill for quite a long time.”

Alistair stares at the arl, pale and thin from his long illness. This man had shown him kindness as a boy, had saved and repaired the amulet he wore now. Whatever the arl had allowed his wife to do to him, Alistair had to acknowledge that it had all led to his becoming a Grey Warden. Those early years were all right, he thinks, rubbing grit from his eyes. It wasn’t until he was married that I had to go out to the stable. And now he has no words for him. “My lord,” he says softly, his heart too full for anything else.
“Alistair, let me show you to your room,” Teagan suggests. “And we can let my brother rest. We’ll meet again for dinner.”

He nods, watching Hera take Teagan’s arm, flirting and laughing all the way to the rooms they’d held the last time they were here. Somehow she seemed refreshed, as if sitting on the floor had been as good for her as a full night’s sleep. Watching them, all his confused feelings for both the arl and the woman begin to meld and expand until he’s brooding and stomping behind them, totally unsure of why he’s angry.

“Oh, Teagan!” he hears her delighted cry. “What a lovely idea!”

“Do you think so, my lady?” Teagan asks, and Alistair wonders what he’s missed. “Then perhaps I shall claim you as my first.”

_First? First what?_ He narrows his eyes and studies the way she flutters her lashes and acts coy. _What’s that bastard planning?_

“I would be honored, dear bann.”

Teagan stops in front of the door, holding a hand out to either side. “Alistair, you, of course, are in the room across the hall. My lady Hera,” he says slowly, lifting her hand and kissing it. “I have taken the liberty of having a few things added to your room to make your stay more comfortable. If you have need of anything, please do not hesitate to ask.”

Hera’s smile and the silly way she turns her shoulders to him makes Alistair’s blood boil. “A woman could get used to this kind of attention,” she simpers.

“A woman who deserves it certainly would need to,” he responds. “I shall see you at dinner.”

Alistair and Ares both snarl.

“Until then,” she says, and goes into her room.
“Why do you always do that?” he demands, following her into her room.

“Do what?” she asks, dropping her pack on the floor.

“Flirt with Teagan.”

Hera raises an eyebrow and looks at him over her shoulder. “I like him. Flirting with him is fun. Is that a problem?”

“Don’t you think it’s a little inappropriate?” he asks, leaning against the door. “You’re a bastard, he’s a lord.” The words feel like a whip, striking her back without warning.

“Excuse me?” she asks sharply, turning to face him. “What did you just say?”

Alistair realizes his mistake, but it’s too late now. Exhaustion, anger, and confused passion have all boiled down to a single insult he isn’t sure he would take back if he could. She let Zevran kiss her. She let me. Has she let Teagan, too? Am I just another conquest to her; a story to take back to her brother and laugh over?

She let Zevran kiss her. She let me. Has she let Teagan, too? Am I just another conquest to her; a story to take back to her brother and laugh over? “Don’t you think it’s inappropriate to flirt with someone so high above your station?”

*If that were true, she’d never have looked at me twice,* he thinks. In the back of his mind, he knows better, but doubts and questions have circled in his mind until he’s sick and has to have it out in the open.

Hera looks as if she’s been slapped. “You know nothing about my station, Alistair.”

“No, I don’t, do I?” he sneers. “You won’t tell anyone anything about yourself.”

“It’s not important.”

“I think it is,” his voice rising.

“Why?” she demands, balling her hands into fists. “Will it help end the Blight? Will it find my way
home? Why are you so damn curious about something I clearly don’t want to talk about?” she shouts. Between them, Ares barks and jumps around, unsure of whose side he should be on. Alistair watches her take a deep breath before she speaks again. “Before we take this flirtation any further, you need to think about something.”

“What do you mean?” he demands. *Flirtation? Is that truly all this is?*

Hera pulls her shoulders back and gives him a cold, impassive look. “I am not a good person,” she tells him. “I sell my body and the illusion of love. I use sex and people to get what I want without regret. My profession suits my nature. There are things I will never tell you. I’m not worthy of your affection, and I will leave you one day. Don’t think for a moment that I won’t.”

*What? What is she saying?* Alistair shakes his head, confused. “Hera, this is about you and Teagan.”

“Just think about it,” she interrupts, using that infuriatingly logical tone she gets when she’s trying to explain something to someone who refuses to listen. “And about how you will feel when I walk away. If you want to proceed with your courtship, these are things you should be prepared for.”

*Is she...is she trying to end this with me? Right here, in the middle of...everything?* Alistair stomps over to her, suddenly furious. “All right, I listened to you,” he growls, pointing at her. “Now you listen to me. I’ve watched you take on a fight that isn’t even yours, rescue a town plagued by undead, and *literally* walk through fire. You think you aren’t worthy of love? You’re a liar,” he spits. “So why don’t you shut up for once, and just let me court you?”

“Alistair—”

“Andraste’s flaming sword!” he roars, fisting his hands in his hair. “I have feelings for you, Hera! Why are you flirting with other men and talking about leaving me?”

For a second time, Hera looks as if he’s just slapped her across the face, and Alistair can feel the tension draining out of the room. “Feelings?” she asks, her lower lip quivering. “Are they...strong...feelings?”

*Maker’s breath.* “What? Feelings?” he asks, suddenly nervous and blushing. “Did I say feelings?”
“Yes. You shouted it,” she reminds him, and her eyes start to sparkle and make his stomach churn. “Just now. I imagine the whole castle heard you.”

“I- I meant...Maker’s breath,” he sighs and gives up. *I was going to have to tell her eventually.* “I have feelings for you, Hera. Strong ones.”

Hera smiles and turns her shoulder- the same coy trick she used on Teagan and is making his knees turn to water now. “I see.”

“Do you...um...maybe...have feelings?” he stammers. “I mean for me?” *Please, Andraste. If she says yes I’ll build you a whole new temple.*

Hera nods. “Yes,” she says, stepping closer. “In spite of my best efforts to ignore them.”

“Ignore them?”

“Yes. Feelings that are outside my nature.”

“L-Lustful ones?”

“Those too,” she whispers, her voice brushing over his skin like velvet.

He swallows hard to move the lump forming in his throat. *Praise Andraste. It’s going to be a big temple.* “Strong...ones?”

Hera nods again. “Yes. I have strong feelings for you, and not just physical desire,” she clarifies before stepping out of reach. “But I also have a powerful smell surrounding both myself and Ares. Can we continue this talk later, when you and I are more composed?”

Alistair nods, too tongue-tied to say anything, and he has to force out his next words. “A walk, maybe? After dinner?”

“I think that would be wise,” she says.
Alistair leaves her room dazed and a little confused. *What just happened?* he asked himself, leaning against the wall and staring at her door. He’d followed her in there to berate her for flirting with Teagan and ended up telling her he had feelings for her instead. “Maker’s breath,” he groans, banging his head into the stone wall.
Chapter Summary

Hera, Leliana, and Morrigan discuss the art of a courtesan.

“It’s the skills I have outside the bedroom that matter most,” she tells them. “That’s one of the reasons I can demand such a high price.”

“It seems to me that a woman who sells herself would focus more on the arts of the bedroom,” Morrigan chuckles.

“Oh, I’m quite focused on what I do in the bedroom.” With a hot look at her friend, Hera strokes her hand with a single fingertip, humming in amusement when the witch jerks her hand away with a sneer. “To the right man, I’m more valuable with my clothes on than off.”

“Is that so?” Morrigan asks dryly, shaking her hand as if she’d been shocked.

Hera glances fondly across the room at Alistair playing cards with Zevran and two other men in the castle’s large hall, her earlier fight with him forgotten. The arlessa and bann had been so grateful when Arl Eamon woke that they’d all been invited to stay and rest a few days, even throwing a large banquet to celebrate the arl’s recovery. “When I decide to build a person up, it happens—quite easily sometimes,” she says. “Leliana, you understand don’t you?”

“Of course,” she says with a nod. “When I was a bard in Orlais, I knew women like you who used their wits and their bodies to get what they wanted. The nobles would take them on as mistresses, and they would train their children in the Great Game. You remind me of them.”

Morrigan shakes her head. “And what, pray tell, has grown since you’ve put your hand to Ferelden?”

“Him,” Hera answers without hesitation, nodding at Alistair. “He’s grown.”

“From a bumbling idiot into a romantic idiot,” she snickers. “I’m not certain that’s an improvement.”
Hera and Leliana laugh. “Oh, I don’t know,” Leliana says thoughtfully. “I think it’s sweet. It’s like watching a boy become a hero in a story.”

“He dotes on you like a lovesick child,” Morrigan goes on. “And you allow it—encourage it, even though you talk constantly of leaving. I do not understand you, Hera. You claim to be a courtesan of great renown, yet you’ve tied yourself to that fool, with his flowers and silly favors.”

Hera shrugs. “I’ve never been courted before. I like it, so I’ll enjoy it while I can. Wouldn’t you like to be romanced at least once?”

“Romance?” she scoffs. “Me? No man would dare.”

“Or woman either,” Leliana giggles into her winecup.

Feeling a little of the wine herself, Hera laughs. “It really is great fun,” she tells her friend. “Especially when you like him.”

“How is this different than the men in your past?”

Hera props her chin in her fist and watches Alistair play cards and drink, truly allowing himself to relax for the first time in since they left the temple. “First, he can’t afford me. I charge more for one night than he’s ever seen. Second, this is not my home, and he was kind to me when we met.”

“Is there a third reason in your sickening list?”

“What’s wrong with spending time with a handsome young hero? He could do worse than learning to love from me,” she informs the witch.

“Do you think you’ll sleep together soon?” Leliana asks excitedly.

Hera drains and refills her cup before answering. “Gods, I hope so,” she groans. “He’s killing me. I’m a courtesan— I am not made for celibacy!”
“You are both idiots,” Morrigan sighs. “I had such hopes for you, Hera, but he’s made you a fool for love.”

Hera sushes them as he approaches, looking a little sick. “Um, Hera?” he says, jerking his chin toward the door. “That...uh...that walk?”
The Only Touch He's Ever Known

Chapter Summary

Alistair and Hera's relationship changes forever.

Chapter Notes

This is a love scene, and barely NSFW.

Alistair babbles nervously at her for a moment before he finally gets to his point. “I guess what I mean is that I want to spend the night with you. Here, in the castle.”

Is he really saying this? she asks herself. When he’d asked her to take a walk along the castle wall earlier, she’d had no idea he was going to ask her this. Surprised, she looks up at Alistair with wide eyes. “You...you want to spend the night?” she repeats dumbly. “In...In my room? With me?”

“Well, yours would probably be more comfortable,” he chuckles. “I’m pretty sure Teagan gave you a bigger bed. And it’s kind of...pointless...if you’re not there. With me,” he adds quickly. “Together.”

She studies him a moment, looking to see if he means it. “Alistair,” she says softly. “Do you really mean that? I don’t want you rushing into something you aren’t comfortable with. You’ve asked to go slowly… I will wait for the right time.”

He takes a deep, shaky breath. “I wanted to wait until the perfect time, the perfect place. But when will it be perfect? If things were...we would never have met. We sort of stumbled into each other,” he babbles. “And despite this being the least perfect time, I still found myself falling for you, between all the fighting and everything else. Maybe...maybe this is too fast, I don't know, but…” he takes her hands and looks her in the eyes. “But I know what I feel. It took me a while to figure it out, but I know now. I want to be with you.”

Hera keeps his gaze for a long moment, then lets her eyes travel over his face, silent. Damn me to seven hells, she thinks as her heart begins to pound hard enough to rattle her ribcage. The torch behind him gives him a halo of light, reminding her of the day they met. He really is perfect, isn’t he?
So what does he want with me?

“Um...is something wrong?” he asks, looking like he might be sick any moment.

“I’m just making sure I never forget this moment,” she says softly, smiling.

He tries to flash her a grin, but it fails. “So you can look back and laugh?” he jokes flatly.

“So I can look back and keep it close to my heart on cold nights,” she informs him, being more honest than she meant to be. “Are you certain?” she asks, squeezing his fingers lightly.

“Yes. I love you, and I want to...to share this with you while we have the chance.”

He loves me. He said it. Out loud. So easily.

“Don't talk like that, there’ll be time,” she whispers, reaching up to brush his hair out of his eyes. Her hand shakes and she feels as if she might faint. He loves me. Her heart beats to the rhythm of the words as if this new cadence was something she needed to survive.

“Will there?” he asks gravely. “I don't know that. You don't know that. I’d like to say I threw caution to the wind at least once. You’re going to find a way home eventually, and we might not make it through the Blight. So...” he shrugs.

Hera holds his gaze a long moment. This might be the only chance we have for a long time. We’re going into dangerous territory; I have been plucked from worlds unknowing and unwilling before—who’s to say it won’t happen again? “Say no more.”

“Is that a yes?” The hopeful lift in his voice is made more adorable by the uncertainty of his eyebrows raising, and she laughs in spite of the weight of the moment.

“Absolutely.”
“So...um...what now?” he asks, blushing.

“Now, you come with me,” she tells him, a smile curling her lips. “And I take over.”

His smile grows slowly, and his nervous expression smoothes over. He is no natural leader, she knows that; putting himself in her hands will allow him to relax and not be so anxious. “Lead on, my raven.”

Hera leads him to her room, glad for his sake that no one else is in the corridor. “Ares,” she says, holding the door open. “Go to Alistair’s room.” The mabari trots happily across the hall and leaps onto the bed, rolling around and getting comfortable.

“Well at least someone’s getting some use out of it,” he laughs, joking to try and cover up the question he didn’t ask.

“You won’t be,” she informs him, locking the door behind her. “Unless you decide you don't want to stay.”

“You know I’ve never done anything like this before,” he says nervously. “I- I don't know what’s...acceptable.”

“I know,” she reminds him, putting on the beguiling, murmurous tone she uses with all her patrons and lovers. “Just trust me, Alistair.”

She kisses him, wrapping her arms around him and molding her body to his. She can feel his heartbeat, already rapid, leap at her touch, and her own pulse follows. One hand runs up her back before tangling in her hair, while the other knots the silk at the base of her spine. Hera arches against him, ignoring the way her hairpins stab her scalp, and he moans into the kiss. Her head spins and she breaks away from him, stepping back.

In her pleasure house in Sigil, they would be in a lavishly decorated room filled with candles and incense, silk and velvet would surround them, wine and delicacies would be at hand. She would have been dressed in something glorious, her skin glowing and her hair artfully arranged. There would be a flautist hidden in a small alcove to provide music suited to the patron’s desire.

It would not be a small, dark guest chamber with only a fire in the grate and linen sheets gone soft
with use. They would not be wearing borrowed finery that didn’t quite fit or have hands calloused from wielding weapons.

It would not be the perfect time or place there, either.

Hera touched him with reverence, drawing her fingers over his jaw and down the column of his throat before flattening her palm against his chest. She closed her eyes, reminding herself that she has been trained by the finest, that she is a woman known for the way a man’s knees go weak for a smile from her.

And yet, for the first time in her life, she is a woman well and truly in love, and she is the one weak in the knees over a smile. The magic in her blood rises alongside desire, pinpricks at her fingertips only adding to the arousal coursing through her.

“Is something wrong?” Alistair breathes.

Opening her eyes and meeting his gaze, she shakes her head. “No,” she murmurs. “Just taking my time.”

Slowly, she unbuttons the doublet he borrowed from Teagan, her eyes on his as she slides her hands up his stomach and over his shoulders, easing the garment down his arms before it falls to the floor. He shivers when her hands untuck his shirt and slip under the hem, drawing it up and over his head, her fingernails dragging gently along his skin and making him suck in a sharp breath.

Hera kneels before him and removes his boots- the only thing on him that seems to be his own- and rolls down the socks. Desire and eagerness tell her to unlace his breeches, to skip a torturous arousal and take him into her mouth, but she fights the urge, wanting this night to be something he can hold close and remember.

Rising in one smooth motion, she cups his face and kisses him again, hands moving to guide his own to the laces at the back of her gown. His fingers fumble and he breaks off the kiss, looking embarrassed. “Can you... turn around?” he asks in a raw voice. “It’s knotted.”

She does so, giving him better access to the knot of satin he’s building. “Blast,” he mutters, tugging hard enough to make her stumble backward. “Is there any other way out of this?”
Hera gives him a hungry look over her shoulder. “I’m sure someone in the village sells dress ribbon,” she says. “There’s a knife in the side pouch of my bag.”

He grins and arches an eyebrow. “Good idea. Smart lady.”

She lets out a small giggle when he gleefully slices through the laces. The dress sags around her shoulders as she turns back to him, holding it up with one hand. Alistair’s face loses all amusement, settling into an intense look of longing. Hera was vain enough to know exactly what he saw: lustrous violet eyes made darker by the shadows and firelight, pale skin flushed with desire and lips still swollen from his kiss. Hundreds before him had seen the same portrait of aroused disarray.

But the sweet knowledge that he is different than all the others pricks her thundering heart like a needle.

Alistair’s hand reaches out, moving her own so that the dress falls farther and reveals a corset and silk chemise, dragging the dress down until her arms are free and it makes a puddle on the floor. He doesn’t have the skill or the grace she does; his hands have been rough since his boyhood and the only gentle touch he’s ever known has been hers.

Maker, don’t let me make a fool of myself, he thinks, swallowing hard and staring at her. She’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen. “I- um- more laces,” he croaks.

“Allow me,” she whispers, reaching back and untying the strings hanging from the middle of the corset as easily as slipping off a sock. “I have more practice, you know.”

He breathes out a soft ha, but his mouth is too dry for more as the intimidating contraption falls to the floor, leaving her in only a thin chemise. She raises her hands and unpins her hair, letting it tumble down in waves darker than the night sky. The smile she gives him makes him grow bolder, putting a hand on the back of her neck and drawing her close for another kiss.

“Maker’s breath, you’re beautiful,” he sighs when they part.

She bites her lip, looking suddenly shy. “So are you,” she says with a small laugh.

He’s just beginning to wonder how to shed these last layers between them when she reaches down between them, dipping her fingers into the waistband of his breeches and biting him gently on the
shoulder at the same time. His thoughts scatter as the breeches join his doublet and her dress on the floor.

With a groan, he pushes her back until her legs hit the bed, his mouth on her neck, his hands shredding the thin silk of her chemise in his desperation for her. Her touch leaves a trail of fire and he wants nothing more than for them to burn together.

She arches her back and they fall onto the feather mattress.

Hera trembles in his arms as he explores her body with hands and mouth, his touch filling her with wonder and igniting a white-hot desire she hasn’t known in a long time. This is a dance she knows by heart, the steps as natural to her as breathing, but Alistair has only his gentle heart and eager flesh. It is enough. For all the death and horror he’s already seen in his short time alive, there is an untouched sweetness to him that made her feel cherished, worshipped.

“I love you,” he says as he slides inside her, and to her, it feels like a prayer.

Alistair presses his face to her neck, breathing heavily as his hips thrust. Hera knows that he won’t last long- he’s a virgin and they never do, no matter what trick she might use. To prove it, his movements speed up and he releases a low moan as he reaches his climax.

“Damn,” he gasps, rolling off of her. “Maker damn me.”

Silently, she watches him sit up, drawing his knees up to rest his arms on. He hangs his head as if he could hide the flush of activity and embarrassment.

“Alistair…” she says softly, sitting up and resting her chin on his shoulder.

“I’m sorry,” he mutters, not looking at her. “That was- I-”

“w perfect,” she tells him, kissing his arm.

“But so…so short .”
She snorts out a small laugh, surprising him enough to look up at her with confusion. “Did you think you would last the night in one go?” she asks, her eyes twinkling. “No one does their first time.”

He frowns, clearly not expecting to hear this. “So you...knew it would be like- like this?”

“Yes.”

“And-”

“And the next time will be better,” she says, trailing a hand down his spine. “And the time after that, and after that…”

***

So this is why it’s called lovemaking.

Never in her long life had she felt like this: as if her world could end tonight with no regrets. She had loved Anatoly, true, but their every touch had still been under a contract, and later his betrayal had poisoned the innocent love of a girl. Even her sweetest, most gentle patron had always been just another signature on a contract.

To have someone make love to her was a new experience entirely. There was none of the innocent deception she had with her patrons, where they pretended to love one another to fulfill a need or receive payment, or the simple exchange of desire that she’d had with past lovers. This was true, and she thinks she might burst from joy.

The second time had, indeed, been better. As had the third.

Their skin slick with sweat and hearts still racing, he holds her close to him, curling around her as if she were something precious. “According to the chantry, I should be struck by lightning about now,” he murmurs against her shoulder.

“Is that so?” she purrs, glancing over her shoulder at him.
“Mmhmm. Then comes the fall of civilization and the end of the world.”

“They put awfully high expectations on you in your chantry,” she chuckles. “Do they expect all men to be so good their first night?”

“I suppose they do.” He clears his throat, and she turns over to look at him. “The, uh, the others,” he stutters. “They’ll talk, you know.”

She gives him a wicked smile. “First smart comment and I’ll feed them to the darkspawn.”

He laughs, throwing his head back with the sound, and she can see his uneasiness drain away. “This is why I love you. Have I... Have I told you I love you? Well, there it is. I do. I love you.”

She laughs at his endearing chatter and falls in love with him a little bit more. “You might have mentioned it earlier,” she teases.

“I do, you know,” he says seriously, tilting her chin up and gazing into her eyes. “I love you.”

“I love you, Alistair,” she breathes, melting into the gold-flecked depths.

“Finally. I’ve been waiting to hear that all night. Was that so hard?” he chuckles.

You have no idea, she thinks as he kisses her again. “Will you stay tonight?”

Alistair rolls her over, settling her on top of him. “I’m not going anywhere, raven,” he says huskily.

Later, when he’s sleeping like the dead, she lies awake, listening to the sound of his breath rush in and out of his chest and thinking of all her past partners. If asked, she could name every single one, from her first to now. Her dhampir mind made her the perfect courtesan, her inability to forget the smallest detail—what flower to send afterward, or where to place a chaste kiss to stir passion—gave her an edge against others who had to keep notes or journals for their patrons. Her hard heart helped as well; when one doesn’t fall in love, there is never a chance for things to get messy.
Some stayed, paying for the privilege of dreaming beside her. Most merely paid her and wished her well, pressing a kiss and gift into her hands as she flitted away. It had never mattered to her, she never invited them to stay for herself. Anatoly had been the only one she asked to stay the night. And now, decades later, here I am, wrapped in the arms of a man invited to stay. A man who has been freely given all I am, who has only asked for me to love him.

*It’s the ones who stay that we wear in our skins,* she thinks, tracing the muscle definition in Alistair’s chest.
A Prince's Duty

Chapter Summary

With Krynne's help, Zeus finally steps up to his responsibilities.

“The Crown Prince!”

The doors to the great hall swing open, surprising the crowd of petitioners and courtiers come to see the Duke. All heads turn to see Zeus Drakul, the playboy prince himself, striding down the length of the hall, followed by a demoness with pale pink skin and bright yellow hair and her dark brooding husband. Whispers explode behind them as the prince approaches the Duke.

“Dear Dunkle,” he says smoothly, giving his uncle a small bow.

“Nephew,” the Duke answers, bowing grandly. He looks a bit confused at his nephew’s sudden appearance. “How may I be of service?”

Zeus chuckles and explains that he’s there to take up the role of regent. Thanks to Krynne and Rafiq, he’s clear-eyed and sober for the first time in months, ready to do his duty. When she finally agreed to rule alone, the only thing she had asked of him was to take her place should something happen to her. Swallowing the lump in his throat, he wonders what foresight overcame her in those early days.

_Gods, I hope I don’t ruin everything._

“Only until her majesty returns, of course,” Zeus adds, holding up a finger. “I fully intend to return to debauchery the moment her perfect ass is back on her throne.”

The Duke’s dark eyes widen slightly, and he nods, gesturing for the prince to take his sister’s throne. Zeus hesitates, staring at the silver velvet cushions. _This is for Hera_, he reminds himself with a little shake. With a careless saunter he’s practiced for nearly a hundred years, he takes the throne, sprawling out so that he still looks the libertine.

_Come back soon, sister._
“I don’t know how you did it, love,” Rafiq chuckles, seating himself by the fire. “I’ve never seen him so…”

“Grown up?” Krynne offers, slipping her dress off her shoulders with a relieved sigh. It makes a slight thump as it hits the floor in a velvet puddle. “Court gowns are so heavy, how does Hera do it?”

“The same way she does everything, my love,” he murmurs, watching how the light plays on the tempting glimpses of flesh exposed by the shifting chemise. “With style.”

Krynne’s yellow eyebrows furrow, and she comes to sit in his lap. “Do you truly think we’ll find her?” she asks, curling into his arms.

Rafiq tucks her head beneath his chin with a sigh. “I...I don’t know, Krynne,” he admits. “It’s the silence that bothers me- she left no note and hasn’t written a word. The Hera I know wouldn’t just disappear unless something was wrong.”

Krynne swallows down the cold fear that something is wrong; the thought of her friend being in danger makes her insides quiver in fear. “We’ll find her,” she says firmly.

Gods willing, we’ll find her.
The Arl's Plan

Chapter Summary

The lovers' happiness gets a shock that might break such a new and fragile relationship.

The next morning is strange for both of them; he’s shy and awkward; she’s reserved and quiet. Both of them are unsure of how to proceed, and she finally breaks the silence before he leaves her room.

“Alistair,” she says, sitting on the bed. “Do you regret what’s happened?”

“Between us?” he asks, closing the door again. “Why would you say that?”

She gives him a nervous smile. “If I’m honest...I’ve never...there hasn’t been anyone like you,” she confesses, hoping he understands what she’s trying to say. “Not any of my patrons, or anyone. Ever.”

He comes to sit beside her, taking her hand and lacing their fingers together. “Not for me, either,” he says. “You know that. So what now? Where do we go from here?”

Hera shrugs. “I...I don’t know,” she answers, looking up at him. “I want to stay with you, but…”

“But you have to go home, eventually,” he finishes. “I could...I could come with you if you like. To Ravenloft.”

“You would do that?” she asks. “For me?”

“For you. I love you, Hera. And,” he adds with a grin, “I want to meet this twin of yours.”

“Zeus will hate you,” she laughs, “for a while, anyway. Then he’ll see how wonderful you are.” With a big smile, she lifts their hands and kisses the back of his. “We stay together, no matter what
“Right! I can handle that,” he says cheerfully.

“Then I suppose we should go find Teagan and the others,” she suggests. “The arl should be ready to discuss strategy now.”

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Together, Hera and Alistair tell Eamon the story, starting from the moment Loghain turned traitor on the king. He stands away from them, facing the enormous fireplace with his head bowed.

“And then we returned here with the ashes,” she finishes.

“This is most troubling,” he says, turning to the gathered adventurers. “There is much to be done, that is true. But I would first be thankful to those who have done so much. Grey Warden, you have not only saved my life but kept my family safe as well,” he goes on, gesturing to Isolde for emphasis. “I am in your debt. Will you permit me to offer you a reward for your service?”

Behind her, Zevran and Leliana snicker and whisper a comment about her “services” that is quickly silenced by a cold look from Wynne. Hera winks at her friends before speaking. “If you like, I won’t object,” she says lightly. “But it is not necessary. All I need is your assistance with the Blight.”

“You have that, madam. Allow me to declare you and those traveling with you Champions of Redcliffe. You will always be a welcome guest in these halls.”

“Thank you, my lord,” she murmurs, bowing her head and trying not to raise an eyebrow. A shame there has not always been a warm welcome for the Grey Warden standing with me. You have missed so much treating him this way, Eamon.

“And for you, Warden, a shield of the same make as those that have been given to our finest knights,” he adds, motioning for a servant to hand it to her.
It’s heavy and unwieldy, too large for her to make use of. “Thank you,” she repeats, setting it at her feet with a heavy thunk. “I’m sure it will be of great use.”

Teagan comes to the rescue before she has to thank the arl for anything else. “We should speak of Loghain, brother,” he reminds him. “There is no telling what he will do once he learns of your recovery.”

“Loghain instigates a civil war even though the darkspawn are on our very doorstep. Long have I known him, he is a sensible man; one who has never desired power,” he says in disbelief.

Teagan shakes his head quickly. “I was there when he announced he was taking control of the throne, Eamon. He is mad with ambition, I tell you.”

“Mad indeed. Mad enough to kill Cailan, to attempt to kill myself and destroy my lands.” He turns to the rest of them. “Whatever happened to him, Loghain must be stopped. What’s more, we can scarce afford to fight this war to its bitter end.”

“You can unite the nobility against him, can’t you?” Hera asks. “Surely that is the best way.”

“I could unite those opposing Loghain, yes,” he says, nodding. “But not all oppose him. He has some very powerful allies. We have no time to wage a campaign against him. Someone must surrender if Ferelden is to have any chance at fighting the darkspawn.”

“But once everyone learns what he’s done…”

“I will spread word of Loghain’s treachery, both here and against the king. But it will be but a claim made without proof.” He starts to pace, thinking aloud. “Those claims will give Loghain’s allies pause, but we must combine it with a challenge Loghain cannot ignore. We need someone with a stronger claim to the throne than Loghain’s daughter, the queen.”

Hera feels a hard knot settle in her stomach as realization dawns on Teagan. “Are you referring to Alistair, brother?” he asks, shocked. “Are you certain?”

She hears a soft intake of breath beside her as Eamon turns, nodding. “I would not propose such a thing if we had an alternative,” he admits. “But the unthinkable has occurred.”
“You want to put Alistair forward as king?” Hera clarifies.

“That fool would be a terrible king,” Morrigan quips. “And run the whole country into the ground in a year.”

“Hey!” Alistair snaps at her. “I’m right here!”

Hera raises a hand for silence and repeats her question to the arl, who nods.

“Teagan and I have a claim through marriage, but we would seem opportunists, no better than Loghain. Alistair’s claim is by blood.”

“And what about me?” Alistair demands angrily. “Doesn’t anyone care what I want?”

“You have a responsibility, Alistair,” Eamon tells him. “Without you, Loghain wins. I would have to support him, for the sake of Ferelden. Is that what you want?”

Hera frowns at his manipulation, looking at Alistair. *I don’t like it, but he’s right. As a prince...even a bastard prince...he has a duty. Just as I did, and Zeus now- at least, I hope Zeus has taken it up by now.*

Alistair sputters angrily before taking a deep breath. “No, my lord,” he says flatly.

“I see only one way to proceed,” Eamon continues, almost ignoring Alistair’s reply. “I will call for a Landsmeet, a gathering of all the Ferelden nobility in the city of Denerim. There, Ferelden can decide who shall rule, one way or another. Then the business of fighting our true foe can begin. What say you to that, my friend?” he asks, looking at Hera. “I do not wish to proceed without your blessing.”

“Me?” she asks. “My lord, I’m not even from this world. What I say makes little difference.”

Eamon chuckles, and Hera isn’t sure how she feels about his response. “Madam, you are a Grey
Warden, and leader of your band of adventurers. I believe what you say will make a great
difference, and quite soon.”

Hera looks at Alistair and sighs. She feels another weight settle on her, but this one makes her heart
hang heavy in her chest. “Then...I say we proceed with your plan,” she says, feeling slightly
defeated. *I’m sorry, Hero.*

“Very well,” Eamon says with cheer. “I will send out the word. But before we proceed, I believe
there is the matter of the mage...my son’s tutor. He still lives, I understand.”

“He does; he is in the dungeon, brother,” Teagan explains, and Hera realizes that she’d never even
asked what Teagan had planned to do with him,

“Have him brought here, Teagan. I wish to see him,” Eamon orders.

Teagan nods and goes to fetch the mage. Everyone focuses on their breakfast, and Alistair pulls
Hera into a corner.

“What was that?” he asks. “I can’t be king! You know that!”

“I’m sorry, Alistair,” she whispers, not meeting his eyes. “But what choice is there? You’re the
only one who can step in.”

“But Hera, if I end up king, we can’t be together,” he points out, lowering his head. “I won’t be
able to go to Ravenloft with you.”

“Is that what’s bothering you?” she asks.

“Not everything, no. I don’t want to be king. I don’t want the responsibility of it. Being a Grey
Warden is the best thing that’s ever happened to me,” he tells her, looking up. “If I’m king, I
can’t...I’ll be king.”

Hera cups his cheek in her hand. *Maybe...maybe I could stay. Maybe Ravenloft doesn’t need me as
much as I think. Maybe I don’t need Ravenloft as much as I need him.* “Hero, I- we’ll find a way;
crowns and mirrors be damned,” she says and gets a weak smile out of him. “But if this is how it has to be, then that’s simply what we’ll do. Nothing’s been decided, anyway. Don’t fret.”

He still looks distraught but presses his forehead to hers. “I love you,” he whispers.

Before she can say anything, the door opens and Teagan returns with Jowan, the mage. Grasping Alistair’s hand, they return to see what the arl has to say.

“Jowan, what you have done is not in question,” he says. “You tried to assassinate me and sent into motion a series of events that nearly destroyed everything I cherish. What do you have to say in your defense?”

The mage hangs his dark head. “Nothing my lord,” he answers. “Other than to say I am sorry. I expect no mercy for what I have done.”

*Good lad,* she thinks, watching him. *Not many would accept his fate this way.*

“I see,” Eamon says, turning to Hera. “Grey Warden, have you anything to say on Jowan’s behalf?”

*I could save him...somehow,* she realizes. “He seems earnest in his desire to repent.”

“Oh?” Eamon’s eyebrows shoot up in surprise. “That is...unexpected. And what would you have me do? As the injured party, my ability to see the merciful path is...strained.”

His tone is arrogant, and in that instant, Hera decides that if it comes down to a fight, she will simply take Jowan with her, and allow him to redeem himself in his own way. Perhaps one day he would make a decent Grey Warden. She looks over at Jowan, then at Alistair and Morrigan, considering her decision carefully. “Give him to the Circle of Magi,” she decides. “Allow them to judge his crimes and punish accordingly.”

“True enough,” Eamon agrees, surprising her. “And wisely said. Jowan, I hereby turn you over to the Circle of Magi. May the Maker have mercy on you.”

Jowan pales, and she wonders what punishment awaits him there. Judging by the cold dread his
expression gives her, it must be horrible. *What fate did I just sentence him to?*

To his credit, Jowan bows, gathering his courage. “Thank you, my lord,” he says evenly. “And you, my lady.”

Hera watches him go, feeling Alistair’s hand squeeze her own tightly, and wonders if that was the right decision. As the guards lead him away, Eamon speaks again.

“Now, back to the matter of the Landsmeet,” he says. “It will take some time to recall my forces and organize our allies. I would prefer to wait until that is done before calling the Landsmeet. In the meantime, I suggest you pursue the remainder of the Grey Warden treaties. We will need all the allies we can get if we are to defeat the darkspawn horde.”

*Finally, we agree on something without reservation,* she thinks gratefully. “I agree, my lord,” she says. “If we could beg your indulgence for a few days to rest and restock our supplies, we will be on our way.”

“Of course, of course,” Eamon says. “Isolde tells me there will be feasting and banquets every night you are here, as well. Should you or any of your companions want for anything, only ask.”

“Thank you, my lord,” she says, bowing as he and Isolde leave the hall.
Chapter Summary

After the Arl of Redcliffe announces his intention to put Alistair on the Ferelden throne, Hera and her companions begin planning for the next step in their quest.

Hera looks around at her friends, well-fed and rested under the arlessa’s care for the last three days. Alistair, especially, looks happy, and she can’t help but remember how they’d laughed and teased one another in the small hours of the morning as he attempted to go back to his own bed only hours ago. The last three days had been a heavenly reprieve for the lovers, allowing them to walk arm-in-arm through the village and along the lake, finding the best places to hide from prying eyes, and even assisting the villagers rebuilding. They’d talked and laughed, for a short time forgetting everything that was wrong with the world.

If the days were heavenly, the nights were so pleasurable it was sinful. Hera continued Alistair’s education in lovemaking and found it far more fulfilling than any of the others she’d taken to bed. He was generous and selfish in equal measures as well; he’d made a promising start, and Hera intended to ensure that he continued to improve.

But all the time, she knew the time would come when they needed to focus on the Blight and move on.

“So we have a choice here,” she says, leaning over the map on the table. “Orzammar is closest, technically, and we need the dwarves’ help.”

Leliana groans. “Oh don’t talk about dwarves,” she begs. “I still can’t forget the one in Redcliffe,” she says, glaring at Morrigan when she starts to laugh.

“Leliana,” Wynne interjects calmly. “We will eventually go to Orzammar. You’ll have to see dwarves again.”

Leliana just groans and lets her head fall to the table, making everyone laugh. “All right, all right,” Hera chuckles. “Does anyone have any thoughts on the matter?”

“If we go east now, we may just catch the Dalish before they move for the winter,” Alistair
suggests. “Assuming they haven’t already run from the Blight, that is.”

Hera nods, studying the map. _And we’d pass close enough to Ostagar, _she thinks. _Maybe we could find the mirror, and my way home._ “I’m fine with that,” she says, straightening. “Any objections?”

“I once ran away from the Crows and sought the Dalish out,” Zevran says, leaning his chair back on two legs. “That is how city elves are, you know, we grow up on fairy tales of running away and joining the Dalish.”

“Did you find them?” Leliana asks.

“Yes,” he says, nodding. “It was...not like the stories, living so close to the earth. I prefer the finer things in life.”

Hera rolls her eyes, smiling. “Anyone else? Input?”

“It makes no difference to me,” Morrigan drawls, waving her hand and sending half a dozen tiny spiders up Alistair’s arm.

Alistair screams, the sound so high-pitched and full of terror that Zevran doubles over with laughter as the Grey Warden dances around slapping at his arm. Smothering a giggle herself, Leliana brushes it off and gives Morrigan a look that clearly means a scolding is coming later.

“I will go where you lead,” Sten tells Hera amidst the chaos. “So long as we are working toward defeating the archdemon.”

“Gathering an army is how we do that,” she agrees, idly watching the four adults acting like children. “Morrigan, stop terrorizing Alistair,” she sighs. “All right then. Everyone start packing, sell what you need to sell, and we’ll leave in the morning.”
Chapter Summary

Leliana and Zevran get the details of Alistair and Hera's first night together.

Leliana ambushes Hera on her way to the hot spring they’d been lucky enough to camp by. Ferelden is littered with them, and considering how much they walk and how often they get into trouble, it’s nice to soak their aches away at the end of a long day.

“Hera you have to tell me,” Leliana giggles, tossig her towel over her shoulder. “What happened?”

Hera gives her a satisfied smile. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“You do so!” Leliana laughs. “Hera! Something happened in Redcliffe! I’ve seen him sneaking into your tent, and we all know what’s going on in there. You aren’t exactly quiet. Oh come on ,” she pleads, “it’s been a week since we left Redcliffe! You’ve got to tell me something!”

Hera laughs. “Oh, all right. What do you want to know?”

“Everything!” she squeals.

They reach the stone pool, and Hera starts disrobing.

“What are you doing? Don't you want to wait until I have a sheet up?” Leliana asks, holding up the sheet she brought as a blind.

Hera’s brow knits together. “Why?”

“You’re getting naked,” Leliana reminds her. “There are people just over there.”
She drops the last of her clothes to the ground and shrugs, her pale skin glowing. “Leliana, nudity doesn't embarrass me. It’s normal for people to see me...Leliana?” she asks, waving a hand in front of her face.

The bard shakes her head, unable to look away. “I’m sorry...you’re just...Blessed Andraste, suddenly I’m very jealous of Alistair. You’re- you’re perfect.”

Hera laughs and picks up her clothes, laying them over a bush. “Close enough anyway. There are women in the Raven Court who are more beautiful than me.”

“Hera, you’re being coy,” she accuses. “And lying.”

“I’m really not,” she defends, climbing carefully into the pool. A slow moan escapes as soon as she lowers herself into the water. “I’m beautiful, yes,” she says as Leliana undresses and climbs down into the pool. “There’s no point in being humble about that. But there are more beautiful women.”

“And yet they must all still pale to your charm, amora.”

Hera looks up at Zevran, naked to the skin, approaching the pool. “Maybe,” she admits. “I really don't think about it.” She gives them a wicked smile. “Being one of the beautiful people gives me that privilege.”

“You’ve changed the subject,” Leliana tells her, splashing slightly as she makes room for Zevran. “How was it?”

“At least one of them enjoys himself,” Zevran chuckles. “My good friend Alistair is...not subtle in his exertions.”

Hera laughs. “No, he isn’t. But I don't mind, it’s better than being silent. The quiet ones are harder to read.”

“But was it good?” Leliana presses. “The first time?”

“I’m not sure I should say,” she admits uncertainty. “He might be embarrassed.”
“Only if it is bad,” Zevran informs her. “Was it bad? Oh, I hope it was.”

“No!” Hera gasps. “It was definitely not bad.” She chews her lip, looking at her friends. “Fine,” she sighs. “But do not tell him I said anything. I will dismember you and feed you one by one to Ares if you do.”

“I swear,” they say in unison.

“It was...perfect,” she sighs. “Really.”

Leliana sighs and Zevran laughs. “I cannot believe it,” he scoffs. “No man is good his first time. Except me, of course,” he amends.

“Zevran, I am a courtesan of the highest rank,” Hera says defensively. “If you think I can’t teach and please a man at the same time, I should go and find myself a teacher.”

Zevran laughs, covering his face with a hand. “Oh Hera, you are so in love,” he laughs.

“I mean it,” she insists. “He was...gentle, considerate. No one has ever touched me like I was…”

“Special?” Leliana offers.

“Precious,” Hera decides. “I’ve been bought a thousand times over, pretended to be in love, and had some even believe they loved me. But…”

“But this time it’s real,” Leliana says softly. “Oh, it’s so romantic.”

“Yes,” Hera says softly, looking down. “This time it’s real.”

“That’s all well and good, bella,” Zevran says, “but he pleased you, yes?”
“Several times,” she says with an arrogant smile.

Hera lights up when she sees Alistair approach, towel and fresh clothes in hand. “Coming to join us?” she asks.

“I thought I might,” he says, stripping to his small clothes. “What has you over here giggling like children?”

He settles in front of her, wrapping her legs around his waist. “Hmm, girl talk,” she murmurs, kneading his shoulders.

“Oh hey, you’re naked!” he says in surprise.

“Yes…” Zevran says, drawing out the word. He spreads his arms across the side of the pool and looks smug. “Girl talk is usually best done naked, you know.”

Alistair chuckles, looking over at Zevran. “Have they unmanned you?” he laughs.

“I was just offering to finish what you’d gotten started last night,” Zevran quips. “It seemed to finish so soon.”
Chapter Summary

Alistair and Hera discuss sex and their expectations.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Hera, can I ask you something?” he asks later that night.

“I suppose you just did.”

Alistair snorts in annoyance. “How... How was I, the first time?”

Hera slips under the blanket and props herself up on an elbow. “The first time?”

“You know. The first time I, uh, spent the night with you. Licking lamp posts.”

“Oh!” she laughs. “Oh.”

He groans and covers his face with his hands. “That bad?”

“Alistair, you were so wonderful,” she assures him. “How can I explain this without embarrassing you? Your lack of experience-”

“Virginity,” he clarifies. “Absolute, completely total virginity.”

“Was refreshing,” she goes on, ignoring his interruption. “Sharing that with you, experiencing it together, was a gift, and one not lightly given, I know.” She rests her hand over his heart. “Our first kiss was the first one I’ve ever had that wasn’t part of some game or contract. You made me feel loved; I’ve spent a lifetime worshipping myself with other people’s bodies, but you make me want to devote myself to the Church of Alistair.”
He flushed all the way to the tips of his ears but looked pleased at the idea. “So it was good? For you, I mean.”

She leans to whisper in his ear. “You were incredible,” she whispers. “My favorite, without doubt.”

He grins arrogantly. “So I’m a natural.”

“With the best possible instructor.” She leans back, pushing her hair out of the way. “Was it...was it good enough?”

“Sorry, what?” he laughs, rubbing his ear. “I can’t believe what I just heard! Hera, Courtesan Queen of worlds I don't even know exist yet, just asked me if she was good enough. I’m not even sure I’ve used up all my virginity yet.”

“Don't tease me, Alistair!” she says, unable to keep herself from laughing. “I’ve been brought in to educate rich young men on the arts of love, and sometimes they are...disappointed.”

“By you?” he asks, jaw dropping.

“By the experience as a whole. Sometimes a person builds in their minds this perfect idea of what their first time with a woman should be like, and all too often it’s unattainable. I just don't want you to feel the same way.”

Alistair smiles and runs a hand through her hair. “I had a very sheltered life, Hera. Other than—well, being terrified and rather intimidated by your experience, I had no idea what to expect.”

“That doesn't answer my question.”

He smiles gently. “You are incredible, in so many ways. You’re kind, strong, fearless, and a true leader. And you were magnificent. If I live to be an old man, my heart will race to remember it.”
Hera smiles and lays her head on his shoulder. “Was that so hard?” she laughs.

Chapter End Notes

The Wrong Warden is celebrating its first birthday on December 20! As a gift to my wonderful readers, what would you like to see? A prompt list for ficlets? Some unseen chapters that have been cut from the original? Let me know!
Chapter Summary

The path to the Dalish leads Hera and her friends through blighted Lothering. While Leliana's grief overwhelms her, Alistair faces a hard truth.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They take the West Road out of Redcliffe, intending to follow it until they move into the Brecilian Forest. All too soon they pass through what is left of Lothering, and Hera’s heart breaks for Leliana, who had lived in that very chantry.

The village is a burned-out shell of itself, left to fall in on itself in piles of ash that blind their eyes and fill their mouths. The taint left by the darkspawn tugs at the edges of Hera’s mind, echoes of screams and the snap of bones. As they move closer, she and Alistair both begin to pause, looking around as if Lothering is still aflame and they expect their enemy to leap out at them any moment. Reading his mistress’ tension, Ares lowers his head, sniffing cautiously.

“It’s so...empty,” Leliana whispers, tears filling her eyes.

Hera takes her cold hand in her own, blinking away the visions of civilians trying to outrun the darkspawn or fight back. In her mind’s eye, she overlays this ashen, blighted place with the colorful, lively village she had seen the first time, full of refugees determined to survive the Blight. Surely some of them had escaped before the darkspawn came? So many were preparing to travel...

“The chantry!”

Leliana rips her hand from Hera’s, running for the bridge—damaged, but still standing. Hera drops her bag and follows, reminding herself to run as a human and not let her dhampir speed take over. Not to be left behind, Ares follows, reaching Leliana first. “Leliana, wait-”

Leliana skids to a stop at the gate, her skin as suddenly gray as the ash floating on the breeze. “No.” The word leaks out of her, no louder than the snuffing of a candle.
Hera slows, approaching her friend slowly and putting a hand on her arm. Leliana’s eyes are wide and a tremor runs through her. Following her gaze, Hera’s own eyes turn wide with shock.

*Powers save me*, she thinks. Between them, Ares growls, hackles raised and ready to defend the women.

The chantry stands, but not as it was. Blood streaks the walls, sharpened bones are driven into the wooden pillars like spikes. The statues of Andraste lie broken on the ground, blood and a substance Hera doesn’t wish to think about smeared over the statue’s mouth. The colored glass that had once given light the interior was shattered, some of it glittered in the dirt and ash at their feet.

Worst were the doors.

From this distance, Hera could see the marks clawed into the aged wood. The grooves weren’t deep enough for the claws and weapons of darkspawn; they were made by human hands. Hands that had desperately fled to safety only to find the doors barred against them.

The others hung back, standing awkwardly on the bridge and watching as Leliana fell to her knees, a scream so bitter breaking into the silence that Hera flinches from the sound. Her tears come then and Hera kneels, wrapping her arms around her while Ares paces and whimpers, trying to nuzzle Leliana. *I am sorry, my friend*, she thinks sadly, guiding Leliana’s head to her shoulder. *I am sorry for this pain, but this is what we face.*

*I have to find a way to save them.*

Hera holds Leliana while she sobs brokenly, looking up when Wynne kneels beside them and puts a comforting hand on Leliana’s shoulder. Hera gently transfers the weeping young woman to Wynne and stands to walk over to the others.

“Sten, will you stay with them?” she asks, keeping her voice low. “I want to look around, see if there’s anything useful left.”

Sten nods, his eyes on Leliana. “I will stay. We will wait for you there,” he adds, pointing to the stone road leading out of Lothering.

“Morrigan, go with Zevran to the refugee camp,” Hera says. “Don’t touch anything that looks like
it might be blighted-"

"-Covered in darkspawn blood," Alistair explains. "Anything that looks like it has a black leather stretched over it."

Morrigan and Zevran nod silently and hurry away, making Hera wonder if they’re eager to move on or fleeing the sound of Leliana’s grief. “Alistair, let’s try the other side of the bridge,” she suggests. “Ares, with me.”

The tavern is, like everything else, a skeleton of itself. Hera combs through it quickly, looking for anything that might still be useful, but all she finds is a half-burned copy of the Chant of Light. “Nothing.” She sighs when Ares trots over with a table leg. “Ares, put that down, you goose.”

“Damn.”

She looks up at Alistair; his back is turned to her, shoulders shaking. “Alistair, what is it?” she asks, going to his side.

Alistair clenches his jaw, his eyes red and face streaked with ash. Wordlessly, he hands her a small rag doll. She takes it gingerly, brushing her fingers over the yellow yarn hair. “Children,” she whispers.

“Children.”

Hera looks up at him, heart aching. “I…” If Zeus were here, he would have some comforting thing to say, she thinks, swallowing hard. I wish I had his talent.

“Cailan and Loghain could have- they should have listened,” he says, his voice raw. He takes the doll, placing it in a pouch hanging off his belt. “The Grey Wardens could have come from Orlais, we could have had help. Instead, all we have is a dead town and the ghosts of children.”

“Alistair-”

“When I’m king,” he says, lifting his chin and looking out over the ruins, “I’m going to make sure
my people never suffer so needlessly again. I won’t turn away an offer of help for my stupid
pride.”

The words fall into Hera’s gut like a stone. *When I’m king,* he’d said.

It’s late when Alistair and Hera rejoin the group on the broken stone road outside the village, the
setting sun casting long shadows that look like broken fingers reaching for their legs. No longer
crying, Leliana stands silently beside Sten, staring at the desecrated chantry.

The darkspawn knew what they were doing when they chose to leave the chantry standing. Before,
it had glowed in the warm light of a sunset, its graceful lines like welcoming arms; now it looked
monstrous, as if some great beast were waiting with open jaws to swallow them whole. Hera
shivers as darkness creeps along the edges of her visions, building in the shadows before spilling
out into the open spaces.

“The village is clear,” Alistair says, “I don’t sense any darkspawn anywhere near. I...I suppose we
could camp here, on the road,” he suggests. “Not that I like the thought.”

“I don’t want to stay here,” Leliana says in a rough voice. “Let’s camp somewhere else.”

“Leliana,” Wynne says gently, “traveling in the dark is dangerous and we can’t-”

“Yes we can,” Leliana argues, her words shaking. “We’ll just light a torch, and-”

“Leliana be reasonable,” Morrigan persuades. “We’ve been walking all day.”

“So we can walk another mile,” Hera decides, picking up her backpack. “Anyone who’s tired can
give me their pack, and I’ll carry it.”

“But ‘tis too dark-” Morrigan begins.

“I can see fine. Follow me now, or find us in the morning,” she says, pointing toward some open
farmland far off the road. “I won’t be upset if you’re tired and want to stay here.”
Without another word, she picks up her pack and takes Leliana’s hand. Leliana had watched the exchange with wide, fearful eyes, as if she had been afraid that Hera would change her mind and make her stay there. Squeezing Hera’s hand tightly, she sways a little closer to her.

“Thank you,” she whispers as they walk away, leaving everyone standing in the growing gloom.

Hera doesn’t answer, listening for sounds of movement behind them. *Are they really going to stay?* She wonders. *Alistair would never side with Morrigan, but Wynne and Zevran? This is torture for Leliana, don’t they care?*

As if to answer her unspoken question, she hears the familiar creak of Alistair’s armor behind them as he jogs to catch up with them. “You didn’t think I’d stay with *Morrigan*, did you?” he asked with a wry smile. He puts a hand on Leliana’s shoulder, stopping them for a moment. “Leliana… we’re all behind you. Literally,” he adds, jerking his chin behind them.

She gives him a wan smile and nods. “Thank you.”

One by one, Sten, Zevran, Wynne, and Morrigan follow silently.

They pass through abandoned farmland, moving in a long line and staying vigilant in case there are darkspawn lingering in the area. No one speaks, and only Leliana makes the occasional snuffle in the darkness. Hera’s leary to take over one of the abandoned cottages this far south, so they camp in an open field.

Leliana is exhausted and distraught, so Hera pitches her tent. Alistair gathers a handful of stones from a broken fence and starts digging their fire pit. A few moments later, Wynne and Zevran arrive with an armload of firewood each. Sten takes longer but appears carrying their two leather water bags. He tells Hera that he’d stopped at a well they passed, but the water had been brackish and slick with some kind of oil or growth, so he’d gone in search of a stream for fresh water. Morrigan comes last, appearing when the rest of camp is set, three small rabbits over her shoulder. To Hera’s surprise, once Morrigan skins the rabbits and passes them off to Wynne, she sets up her tent within the party’s circle—quite unlike her, but given their location, understandable.

No one speaks while they set up camp, and Leliana silently goes to the tent she shares with Wynne, saying she isn’t hungry. Even after her departure, dinner is a quiet affair, with only a few words spoken by Hera to admire the meal and those who had a hand in it and to announce that she would take watch all night. Zevran only nods and ducks into Leliana’s tent.
“Not alone, surely,” Wynne says softly. “You don’t get enough rest.”

“I’m fine,” she assures them. “You all get a good night’s sleep, I want to get as far away from here as quickly as possible in the morning.”

No one else argues, and they all turn in directly after dinner. Belting on her sword just in case, Hera walks outside the circle of firelight, arms wrapped around herself. After a while, Alistair joins her, hands in his pockets, and they walk in silence for a while.

“Is everyone in their tent?” she asks.

“Yes, Zevran went to his own just a minute ago. I think he and Leliana might be...”

She smiles at the idea. “Good, I think they’d be good together. Alistair-”

“I understand,” he interrupts. “About not wanting to camp there. I...I didn’t even think about how it would hurt Leliana to be there. I should have, and I’m sorry.”

Hera’s heart softens, and she takes his hand. “You don’t have to apologize to me,” she tells him. “I’m not angry. But being there...It would have driven her mad, and I couldn’t do that to her.”

“I meant what I said earlier. About protecting my people, I mean,” he explains. “I guess that means I should start by apologizing to her.”

Hera stops walking and looks up at him. “I know you did. I know being king isn’t what you want-”

“Not at all .”

“But it’s important,” she finishes. “Just...help me get through all this, and I’ll help you get through that.”

He grins and pulls her close. As always, Hera’s blood races and she feels her power rush to her fingertips, making them tingle. “I’m going to hold you to that,” he murmurs, lowering his head to
kiss her.

Hera pulls away before their lips can meet. “Do you hear that?” she whispers, turning her head.

“No,” he says softly, moving in front of her and putting a hand on his sword. “What is it?”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter went through so many changes last week that I didn't feel it was ready to post last Thursday. I eventually had to cut the chapter in half it grew so much. I hope you enjoy it!
**Chapter Summary**

When darkspawn ambush the camp, Alistair gets to see Hera do battle as she was meant to.

**Chapter Notes**

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“I sense darkspawn,” she tells him, drawing her sword. “Maybe six. Straight ahead.”

“How are you better at this than me?” he asks, grabbing his shield off his back.

“How are you not better than me?”

“I asked you first!”

“Well, I don’t know!”

“Now I can sense them.”

Their hushed bickering goes on a moment longer, the darkspawn creeping closer, before Hera spins around and casts a barrier around the camp, removing it and its bright campfire from sight.

“What happened?” he whispers frantically. “What did you do?”

“I hid the camp,” she answers in a normal tone. “They need rest. They can’t hear anything now.”

“Well, that’s- here they are! For the Grey Wardens!” he shouts, waving his sword and rushing the small band coming out of the field.

“I’ll take the archers!” she calls, waving her free hand. Suddenly she’s cloaked in shadows and impossible to see, running toward the two archers attempting to get a clean sight on Alistair. She sends a wave of pure force ahead of her, knocking them on their backs and draws her dagger. In one swift movement, she slices through the gut of the first, then spins her sword around and uses it to pin the second to the ground.

“A little help!” she hears and turns, seeing him fending off three of the small green genlocks and another larger, paler hurlock. She can’t use a magical attack without hitting Alistair, so she runs forward and joins the fray. Without hesitation, she uses one of her favorite spells taught to her by
her old friend Krynne and lays her bare hand on one of the darkspawn, sending lightning shooting through it, stopping its heart as she draws another away from Alistair.

“How did you-” Alistair grunts, ducking a wild swing from the roaring hurlock.

“Spell!” she answers, putting her dagger through a genlock’s throat. The last genlock runs for her, tackling her to the ground. Hera wrestles with it, trying to keep its snapping jaw at arm's length, and hears Alistair shout.

Suddenly the thing’s head explodes, showering her in bits of bone, blood, and brain. Breathing heavily, she looks up, seeing Alistair holding the kind of corrupted mace the darkspawn carry. He looks just like the kind of knight in shining armor she’s seen in her adventures: paladins full of righteous morality and goodness, covered in the blood of the vanquished. I don’t deserve him, she realizes, he is genuinely too good for someone like me.

“Thanks,” she says softly as he lifts the genlock from her.

Alistair gives her that one-sided smile that melts her heart as he pulls her to her feet. “That’s what I’m here for,” he quips, running his hands over her to make sure she isn’t hurt. “Poorly performed heroics and one-liners. Are you all right? You seem dazed.”

Hera waves a hand and uses a spell to clean the blood and gore off them both. “Just tired,” she lies. “I’ll be glad when we’ve left Lothering behind.”

“Is...is that what it’s like?” he asks, watching her walk into her illusion and disappear. “Battle, I mean. For you,” he stammers, following.

Hera sits near the fire, rubbing her neck and casting her cleansing spell once more, just in case. “Sometimes. I don’t usually run into battle- Zeus covers me while I cast- but I can’t always be sure of how my magic will work here, or what reaction it would get. I have no desire to be arrested as an apostate or tortured by some zealous templar. But sometimes I used weapons and magic together.” She shrugs. “It’s just a matter of doing two things at once.”

“I’ve never seen anything like that,” he says, sitting beside her. “I’ve heard of arcane warriors, but I’ve never seen one.”

“Is that what I am?” she teases. “I’ve never been called that before.”

He smiles and leans over to kiss her hair. “I think it’s the truest thing ever said about you, Raven.”

She’s quiet a long time, leaning against him. “Alistair, how can you love me?” she asks, her voice so soft he almost misses it entirely.

“What do you mean?”

Hera doesn’t look up at him, keeping her eyes on her boots. “I’m not a good person. I’m a sorceress and a prostitute and-”

“And I don’t care about any of that,” he says softly, lifting her chin and looking into her eyes. “I don’t, Hera. Run naked shooting lighting from your nose through the Grand Cleric’s chantry for all I care- I’ll hold your clothes for when you’re done. Just be yourself, and I’ll protect you.”

Emotion threatens to overwhelm her, and Hera throws her arms around him, pressing her lips to his in a passionate kiss. She doesn’t know the words to express how much she loves him, so she tries to show him, instead.
Alistair grips her close, passion and terror coming together in a tight knot of dread in the pit of his stomach. Maker help me deserve her.

Chapter End Notes

This is the other half of the "Lothering" chapter, so you can see why I had to cut it in half! It didn't undergo nearly as large a change as it's partner, which is why it's a bit shorter. I hope you like it!

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