The Bloom After The Blight

by mrsrockatansky

Summary

Sequel to The Lion And The Light. In a post-Blight Ferelden, Florence Cousland must come to terms with the loss of her magic, while Alistair Theirin needs to lead his crippled country towards recovery. Matters are complicated further by royal babies, foreign politics and the return of the Howes. The fisherman’s daughter from Herring has a whole new set of challenges to face...

Notes

See the end of the work for notes
Chapter 1: Alistair's Dilemma

A week had passed since the official ending of the Fifth Blight, and the city of Denerim was tentatively venturing back towards normality. It was a great tribute to the character of the people of Ferelden; that they had suffered through the worst and most terrible threat that any nation in Thedas could face (and it had to be said, Ferelden was hardly the most capable country when compared to its neighbours) and come out with a dogged sort of optimism. There may have been the odd smouldering crater where the Darkspawn siege weapons had made their mark; the refugee ships still set sail with Fereldans determined to seek better fortunes in the Free Marches; yet the majority of citizens were determined to roll up their sleeves and just get on with it.

It was common knowledge that their poor nation – poor in every sense of the word, since Ferelden had never been wealthy even during more peaceful times – had been grievously wounded by the Darkspawn horde. The teyrnir of Gwaren was all but destroyed, as were a dozen smaller settlements; including the new general's own seat at South Reach. The Archdemon's army had cut a swath from south to north, razing crops and tainting land as they went. Acres of valuable arable land had been left polluted and unusable, the animals either poisoned or consumed by the horde.

Yet, the people of Ferelden were a doughty folk, fiercely proud of their ailing homeland and unafraid of the hard work that it would take to restore it. Already, refugees were forming small collectives that they named restoration committees; planning strategic returns to their devastated hometowns. Those men and women who had served as soldiers in the great Ferelden Free Army and fought in the final battle against the horde, now turned their minds to the future.

Fortunately, the people had a firm foundation upon which to build their hopes. They had a new Theirin on the throne, one cast so strongly in the vein of Maric that the elders of Denerim swore blind that Alistair Theirin was the very reincarnation of his father. Like Maric, Alistair had proven his worth in battle; risking Royal life and limb to partake in the final fight against the Archdemon.

Located on its high rise overlooking Denerim, the Royal Castle had managed to avoid any superfluous damage from the Darkspawn attack. The servants had been safe within the thick stone walls, which had been bolstered after retaking the land from Orlais. Now the palace resembled more fortress than Royal residence; but as a result, it had managed to withstand the stray trebuchet volley launched towards it by the oncoming horde. There was some minor damage to the east tower and part of the sewerage system needed repairs where the Darkspawn had tried to tunnel their way through solid bedrock, but on the whole it had survived the Blight relatively intact.

The threat of civil war also seemed to have dissipated with the ending of the Fifth Blight. The new king appeared on civil – if not particularly cordial – terms with the disgraced former Teyrn Loghain; who had been horrendously maimed during the final battle. Mac Tir had taken the Grey, but, due to said injures, it was uncertain whether he would continue to follow the calling. The King's Council had been reformed with the new Teyrn Cousland at its head, alongside the Arl of Redcliffe, the Banns of Rainesfere and the Waking Sea, and the commander of the Royal Army, Leonas Bryland.

In addition to a Theirin king, and a reconciled peerage; the people of Ferelden also had another cause for hope. The armies of men, elves and dwarves - which had been so instrumental in defending Denerim - had not been assembled by a member of the established peerage; but by a girl barely out of adolescence, catapulted out of obscurity to make an indelible mark on Fereldan history. This same girl – a hidden scion of the Cousland family – had also been the one to strike down the Archdemon; ultimately ending the Fifth Blight and saving their nation from destruction.
Chantry priests across the city led services in Florence Cousland's honour – exalting how the Maker had compensated her for her bravery by purging both the taint and the touch of the Fade from her body. The removal of the young Cousland's magic was thus recast as a heavenly reward; that she was now forever free from the Fade's insidious influence.

Yet it was not so much this that gave the people hope, but the lady Cousland's swollen belly. The teyrn's sister was quite visibly with child, and the king had publicly claimed parentage. Alistair's acknowledgement was not strictly necessary; there were already a plethora of tavern songs that portrayed king and Cousland as lovers. These ranged from romantic ballads to lewd refrains that no retainer would dare utter in earshot of his liege-lord.

However, those who assumed that the strife within Ferelden's peerage was mended would have been sorely surprised at the scenes transpiring in the Theirin bedchamber; exactly one week after the Blight had been ended. It was the same evening that Florence Cousland had appeared at the great entrance of the Royal Palace, proving her survival to both her army and the curious townsfolk of Denerim. Those civilians who had made the trek up through the hunting grounds were the first to bear witness to the lady Cousland's swollen stomach, and enjoyed the consequent smugness of delivering the news to enthralled crowds in the taverns below.

After the young Hero of Ferelden had set out her twin arcs of burning remembrance on the turret roof, she had professed herself to be weary; still raw and shocked from the news that her spirits had departed forever, her connection with the Fade severed. The soul of the old god had purged her of extraneous influence; she had entered Fort Drakon as both mage and Grey Warden, and had departed as neither.

Alistair, in his new protective role as father, immediately dismissed Eamon's suggestion of a meeting of the Royal council; instead overseeing his beloved companion's retirement to bed with hawk-like vigilance. After only an hour, there had come an insistent knock at the door: the core of the Landsmeet had come to king when king would not come to them.

They were greeted with Alistair nursing a simmering rage over his dozing lover's bedside, his anger expanding until it reached the wood-beamed ceiling. Unlike most Theodesian Royal quarters; the Theirin bedchamber was sprawling but austere, the furnishings relatively plain, if well-made. Murals of Mabari and warhorses had been daubed onto the plaster walls, interspersed with the occasional stuffed trophy. The most prominent piece of furniture in the room was the bed; raised on a stone step, with four dark posters of wood reaching up to the ceiling. Wide enough to house four, it was covered with a mismatched array of blankets and animal furs.

Florence Cousland – colloquially known as Flora – now lay snoring in the midst of a tangle of bedding, curled up against a tawny fur with a cushion clamped to her cheek. Alistair stood over her like a mother bear defending an injured cub, his handsome olive features flushed with anger as he turned his wrath on his uncle.

"No," he hissed towards the Arl of Redcliffe, nostrils flaring and Maric's characteristic temper evident in the twist of his mouth. "Absolutely not. Out of the question!"

"Alistair, " started Eamon in placating tones, starting forward. "Son-"

"Don't 'son' me!" retorted Alistair a fraction too loudly, then made an effort to mute himself with a glance down at his snoring companion. "I can't believe you'd even suggest it. Flora has saved this country – and your life, uncle, and your town, and your son – and you're suggesting we lock her back up?"

The king's nostrils flared indignantly and he paced an angry circle about the bed, lifting the golden
band from his head and letting it drop onto the furs.

Eamon shot a meaningful glance towards the others, who were standing a safe distance away near the hearth. These consisted of Ferelden's most influential peers – including the only remaining teyrn, Fergus Cousland – and a handful of Flora's companions.

Fergus took a deep breath, stepping forward to face Alistair square-on. He raised his palms to show amiable deference, attempting to snare the king's gaze with his blue-grey stare.

"No one is suggesting that we lock her up, Alistair," he murmured, bravely standing his ground as Alistair turned a predatory green-flicked glare in his direction. "But the Grand Cleric has agreed to officially confirm Florence's non-mage status – after she spends a month under constant surveillance by the Templar Order, in their nearest monastery. Revanloch is only a short ride from the city walls."

Alistair sat down heavily on the edge of the bed, careful not to disturb Flora as she mumbled bleary and incoherent. His sister-warden no longer dreamt – a consequence of her severance from the Fade.

"But, a whole month," he said, bleakly. "I can't be without Lo for that long. I need her, Fergus."

"You could visit her every day," Fergus replied, with a quickness that suggested he and Eamon had already discussed the subject extensively. "Besides, I don't imagine that she'd want for company. I think visitors will be queuing up to see her; myself and Finn in the front of the line."

"Aye," Leonas added quietly, the arl standing stiffly beside the hearth. "The lass is like a daughter to me. I'd happily go and read with her of an afternoon."

There came general grunts of agreement from Flora's companions; all clustered on the other side of the bed, save for Sten and Morrigan.

Alistair passed a tired hand over his face, rumpling the hair at the top of his head. He glanced down once more at Flora, who was now flat on her back with her mouth open, the blankets tangled around her swollen waist. Reaching down, he moved one of the heavy furs up to her chin, tucking it in around the edges.

"I don't understand why it needs to be publicly endorsed by the Chantry, anyway," he muttered, bitterly. "It's obvious that Flo's lost her magic. The Circle has confirmed it, the Templar Order has tested her blood. She's less susceptible to the Fade than you or I in her current state."

There was an elongated pause, during which Fergus glanced at Leonas, and Eamon at his younger brother. The Arl of Redcliffe gave a slight nod, and Teagan spoke up, quietly.

"Because if the Chantry confirms it, then the Landsmeet will corroborate it," the bann explained, his green Guerrin eyes focusing steadily on Alistair's own.

"So?" retorted Alistair, belligerently.

"Well, don't you want to make her your wife? To sit beside you as queen, rather than simply as mistress?"

There was another long silence, which expanded to fill the room like a thick, portentous miasma. Wynne glanced swiftly at Leliana; both women had predicted and extensively discussed this potential series of events.

Alistair blinked for a moment, his pupils expanding and constricting in rapid succession. His mouth
twisted, and he dropped his gaze to Flora's limp, bandaged palm as it lay motionless on the blankets.

"Of course I do," he said at last, bleakly. "I've wanted to marry her since last Satinalia. I just… I just never thought it would be possible."

"Well, Alistair," replied Eamon, his voice soft and persuasive. "If you agree to this, it will be possible. The Landsmeet would approve, you could take Florence as your bride, and your child would be born legitimate."

_A Theirin on the throne, and one in the cradle. The dynasty would be secure. And the country's stability would be ensured._

"But would _mi florita_ even desire this path?" Zevran interrupted, his voice shadowed. "You talk about her as though she has no choice in the matter. She hardly embraced becoming a Cousland, why would she want to become a _queen_?"

The elf was leaning against the hearth, arms crossed and a scowl writ across his tan, tattooed face. The assassin had mastered a peculiar duality of gaze; where he could focus on one aspect within his purview, while simultaneously keeping an eye on something in the background. In this case Zevran's stare was trained hawklike on Arl Eamon's lined face, yet he was continually glancing down to where Flora lay snoring in bed.

There was another long silence; and this time, it was Alistair's turn to flinch.

"That's my fault," he said eventually, voice raw. "I can't help this bloody parentage of mine."

Wynne cleared her throat, moving her wrinkled fingers absentmindedly over the notebook she kept hanging on a chain at her waist.

"If Florence becoming queen would give hope to Ferelden," the senior enchanter mused, in measured tones. "I believe that she would do it, despite her reservations. She has a sense of duty second to none. And she'll need a task to perform now that she cannot heal."

Alistair, still perched on the edge of the bed, turned to face his former sister-warden. He leaned down and kissed Flora tenderly on the edge of her forehead, lips brushing her hairline. One hand went to settle on the curve of her belly, prominent enough to be visible even through the thick furs that covered it.

"If she's in a monastery outside the city, I can't protect her," he said, throatily. "She can't shield herself any more, and she's got no type of… no combat skills. She can't even wield a _dagger_. How am I supposed to defend her and our child if she's not by my side?"

"Well, she'll be surrounded by church soldiers," Finian said, reasonably. "I've visited one of those monasteries before. You can't move without a Chantry Mother breathing down your neck."

"I know," snapped Alistair, uncharacteristically harsh. "I spent ten years in one. It doesn't mean that she'll be _safe_."

"What if I stay with her?" piped up Leliana, her musical Orlesian tongue standing out above the native Fereldan tones. "They'll permit me to stay, since I'm a lay-sister. If I promise to stick to Florence's side like one of her Herring limpets, would that help to assuage your fears?"

Alistair's gaze moved appraisingly over the bard, whose innocuous smile and demure Chantry robes masked one of the most skilled fighters that he had ever known. Leliana, to his knowledge, had never been bested in combat – had not permitted even a scratch to mar her creamy, perfumed flesh –
and a keen intelligence lay behind the earnest blue stare.

There was a tense pause; Eamon glanced at Leonas and Teagan at Fergus. Finally, Alistair let out a long sigh, his face crumpling.

"Fine. But I'm going to tell her."

Wynne cleared her throat, the pointed sound interrupting Alistair's hand before it could settle on Flora's pyjama-clad shoulder.

"Alistair?"

Alistair stared at the senior enchanter, his handsome face creased with weariness and guilt.

"What is it, Wynne?"

The old mage grimaced, pale eyes settling on where the snoring Flora lay tangled in the blankets.

"I wouldn't mention to her the possibility of becoming queen yet," she murmured, quietly. "Florence has enough to cope with at the moment, with the loss of her magic. Let her work through that first."

Alistair gave a tight nod, before waking his former sister-warden with a soft kiss to her mouth, cupping her cheek against his palm.

"Sweetheart?"
Breaking The News To Flora

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Flora yawned into the cushions, lifting her bandaged hand to her head sleepily. Seeing Alistair's handsome, concerned face hovering over her, she gave him a reflexive smile; then remembered the disappearance of her spirits and flinched, the loss still a raw and painful wound.

"It's so strange, not going to the Fade," she whispered, registering no one's presence save for that of her best friend. "When I sleep now, there's just – nothing. I suppose it's peaceful, but… I'm not used to it."

Alistair leaned his face down to hers, feeling a sudden lurch of sadness deep in his gut as he gazed into his former sister-warden's wide, unsuspecting grey eyes. In an attempt to assuage his guilt, he pressed a kiss first to her forehead, then to each cheek, then to the end of her nose.

"I love you," he said, the words emerging as earnestly as they had done when he had first uttered them; in a draughty bedroom at Redcliffe Castle. "I love you more than the world, Flora of Herring."

Flora blinked at him, finally registering the presence of the others crowded around the walls of the Royal bedchamber. None of them looked particularly happy, but it was Alistair's grieved face that disconcerted her the most.

"Flora-"

"What's wrong?" she asked in a small voice, pushing herself up on the cushions and kicking the furs from where they were wrapped around her legs."What's happened? Is it more Darkspawn? I'll run after the armies and get them back-"

"No, sweetheart, nothing's wrong," Alistair hastened to reassure her, his hand smoothing down a thick strand of sleep-rumpled hair. "I- it's just… the Chantry says-"

He trailed off helplessly, the words tangling together on his tongue. Eamon stepped forward, clearing his throat and snaring her wide eyes with his steady Guerrin gaze.

"Florence, the Chantry needs to put you under observation for some time before they can publicly announce that you've been cured of magic-"

"Cured?!"

Flora sat up a little straighter in indignation, nostrils flaring. Eamon pressed onwards; already envisioning the stability that a popular queen and legitimate Theirin heir would bring.

"The Grand Cleric and Knight-Commander have agreed to house you in the Revanloch monastery, during which time you will be kept under close observation by Templars. After that, the Chantry will-"

Flora sat bolt upright, her eyes widening in dismay.

"You're sending me away?" she croaked, red blotches quickly rising to the surface of her cheeks.
"You're sendin' me away and lockin' me up?"

Visions of the Circle flooded Flora's mind and she scrambled out of bed, clearly agitated, ducking Alistair's entreating arms.

"Darling-"

Alistair immediately rose to his feet and headed to the other side of the bed; Flora avoided him with surprising agility considering that she was five months weighed down with child. Her voice rose in hurt and confusion, indignity writ stark across her fine-hewn Cousland features. A sudden hormonal surge accompanied this distress, and tears began to well in the corners of her eyes.

"You want to send me away because I'm useless now! Because I can't cure the taint!" Flora wailed, entirely missing the point. "I don't want to be locked up again, I can't, I won't! I'm goin' away, I'm goin' back to HERRING-"

With a melodramatic toss of the head, Flora sailed out of the room with her dishevelled ponytail streaming behind her; despite the adolescent angst, there was a genuine poignancy to her diminutive pyjama clad figure as she scuttled barefoot down the Royal corridor.

Alistair swore under his breath, shooting Eamon a dark look as he made to follow his distraught companion. Wynne reached out a hand to intercept him, lined fingers curling into his leather sleeve.

"Wait, Alistair. You're hardly the best person to reassure Florence, since you didn't even want this confinement to happen in the first place. I'll go after her."

Alistair's eyebrows rose as he took in the senior enchanter's thoughtful expression, indignity infusing his own voice.

"You surely don't approve of this idea, Wynne?!"

"I think that the girl has the opportunity to be in a very unique position," Wynne retorted, her sky-coloured eyes giving a flash. "I think she could do a lot of good as your wife, and it would be nice to have a leader sympathetic to mages, for once. It's only for a month, Alistair. Doesn't Ferelden deserve the best possible Queen?"

Alistair gave a defeated half-nod, reluctantly grasping the enchanter's argument.

"Of course Ferelden deserves the best," he muttered, sinking down onto the edge of the bed. "And Lo is the best. But she won't do it, Wynne, you saw her just now-"

"Oh, she will do it," replied Wynne, her tone sharpening a fraction. "I'll talk some sense into her."

"I'll come with you," offered Leonas Bryland, a rueful and humourless smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. The arl – who was the only one in the room with an adolescent daughter – was well-accustomed to handling bouts of feminine distress.

Flora had burst from the Royal bedchamber so quickly that the guards did not even have time to open the doors for her. Careless of her dishevelled appearance, she stormed down the corridor; caught halfway between distress and indignation.

She passed pairs of soldiers clad in gold and crimson Theirin livery, who scrambled to do the pike-shift from hand to hand to mark the approach of a Hero of Ferelden. The portraits of the great rulers of Ferelden loomed up on either side – Maric, Moira, Brandel – and Flora duly ignored them.
As she neared the portrait of the hunted *halla* at the top of the staircase, she sensed someone with a longer stride rapidly gaining on her. It did not sound like her former brother-warden – this pursuer was heavier on their feet, and they sounded slightly out of breath.

Despite this, they had no issue in catching up with her – a relatively simple task, considering that their quarry was only a handful of inches over five foot, and carrying an extra sixteen pounds of weight on their abdomen.

"I'm going back to Herring NOW!!" declared Flora tearfully, catching sight of Leonas Bryland out of the tail of her eye. "Don't try and stop me!"

"I'm not going to try and stop you, child," Leonas said, and she shot him a suspicious glance. "You're perfectly entitled to go wherever you please."

Flora wiped her nose on the Theirin-crested pyjama sleeve and eyed Leonas, slowing down a fraction as they approached the *halla* portrait together.

The Arl of South Reach bore his usual faintly disgruntled expression, one hand still heavily bandaged after a Hurlock had taken several fingers during the final battle. He wore a Chantry amulet bearing Andraste's seal on one side, and the emblem of his doomed seat on the other.

Once he saw he had her attention, Leonas reached into his tunic and pulled out a small leather-bound book, with a pencil attached by an unravelling string.

"Now, what supplies will you require for your journey back to Herring?" he asked, his voice mild. "I'll be happy to provide whatever you need, Florence, as well as an escort. I won't have Bryce's daughter travelling alone and unprovisioned."

Flora blinked, coming to a stop just beneath the hunted *halla*. Its wide, mournful eyes and miserable expression mirrored her own, as she stared at Leonas Bryland with abject forlornness. Abruptly, she sat down on the top step of the stairs, resting her chin on her knees and staring gloomily at her bare feet.

Grunting slightly as his stiff limbs protested, Leonas lowered himself onto the step beside Flora. They sat together in silence for several minutes, with she giving the occasional hiccup and he quietly offering her his handkerchief.

"I'm not really going to go back to Herring," said Flora at last, in a small and tearful voice. "But why are they putting me in *jail*? I haven't been on the rob or nothing."

Leonas wisely stifled a chuckle at her northern patois, taking back the square of linen.

"Of course you've done nothing wrong, pup. And it's not *jail*, it's a Templar monastery. Not the most entertaining of places to be sure, but it's certainly no dungeon."

"And only for a month, Florence."

The senior enchanter manifested from the shadows of the corridor, kindness and sternness breaking even in her voice. Wynne did not deign to also sit on the step beside Flora, but she did brush her hand kindly over the rumpled, dark red head.

"One month at the monastery, and then the Chantry will publicly announce that you are no longer a mage. No matter what happens in the future, no Circle – or Templar - will ever lay claim to you again. Think of the peace of mind that will bring to those that love you, child."
Flora twisted her head to gaze up at Wynne, her grey eyes damp and miserable as rain-clouds.

"Everyone keeps calling it a miracle," she whispered, rubbing at her nose with her sleeve. "The fact that my magic is gone. It doesn't feel like a miracle. It feels like part of me is gone. It's painful."

"It will be painful, Flora, but even painful wounds heal without magic, with time," the senior enchanter replied, softly. "One day you will wake up and it will hurt a little less than the night before; and then that will happen again and again, until the pain is but a quiet sigh in the back of your mind."

Wynne's voice was distant, and she seemed to be speaking of something other than the removal of Flora's magic.

"You promise it will?"

"Yes, child."

Flora nodded, swallowing her fear as she had needed to do so many times before in her short life.

"Alright," she said with only the slightest tremor to her voice, lifting her chin slightly. "I'll go to the mon- the monisturgy. Arl Bryland?"

"I've told you a thousand times to simply call me Leonas, pup, but – yes?"

"Arl Leonas, I'm sorry that I can't grow your wife's arbour-garden again, like I said I would," Flora said earnestly, remembering how she had coaxed forth blossoming life in the South Reach garden. "Well, I can still help you with it, but... it'll need to be the old-fashioned way."

Leonas let out a half-bark of laughter, to hide how touched he was. He dropped his hand to Flora's head and gave her hair a rough tousle before pushing himself awkwardly to his feet.

On the way back to the Royal bedchamber, Wynne reached out to touch Flora's arm; the young Cousland instinctively dropped back to walk alongside the elder mage.

"Take this month of confinement as an opportunity to learn who Florence Cousland is without her spirits," the senior enchanter murmured, her clever blue eyes moving over Flora's face. "You're a very beautiful girl and men will fall over themselves to make life easy for you. Don't rely on anyone overmuch, until you...re-learn... your own self. Do you understand what I mean, child?"

Flora gave a vague nod, biting absent-mindedly at her lower lip.

"I hope they don't actually fall over," she replied at last, solemnly. "I won't be able to mend any broken bones from now on."

Inside the Royal bedchamber, Alistair was sitting on the edge of the bed with his head in his hands, Teagan perched beside him murmuring assurances into his ear. Two servants were discreetly piling more logs onto the great hearth; despite it being a mild summery night, the royal palace was perpetually cool and damp.

Flora entered with Leonas and Wynne at either side, her head bowed with embarrassment at having made such a dramatic exit. At Zevran's delighted exclamation of mi florita!, Alistair looked up with naked hope scrawled across his olive features.

"Sorry for making a fuss," muttered Flora, not quite able to meet anyone's eye. "I'll go to the mon- monister."
"Monastery," corrected Finian under his breath, flashing a quick smile at his sister.

"Monastery," repeated Flora, immediately before being swept into Alistair's desperate, affectionate embrace. He clutched Flora tight to his chest, feeling the firm swell of their child between them; burying his face in the untidy abundance of red hair and inhaling her scent.

"My love," he murmured, desperate to provide some reassurance for the both of them. "Leliana has volunteered to stay with you, so you won't be alone. I'll have guards patrolling the perimeter of the monastery day and night. I'll make sure that only the most experienced and devout Templar are set to watch over you. You and the baby will be safe, I swear to the Maker."

Flora had stopped listening after Alistair had mentioned Leliana; needing no further guarantee. Twisting her neck slightly, she smiled across at her fellow redhead, who waved elegant Orlesian fingers in her direction.

"I look forward to a month of quiet contemplation and giving thanks to our Maker for our redemption from the Blight!" chirped the bard, indomitable as always.

"And I'll come and visit you every single evening, darling," Alistair continued, eager to compensate for this added burden on his already grieved lover. "Every evening, I swear it. It'll be what keeps me going through all the eight hour council meetings."

Flora knew that Alistair was feeling horribly guilty – she could see it writ plain across his face – and suddenly wanted to alleviate his dismay. She reached up and touched him, tracing the line of the Theirin jaw with the tip of her thumb.

"I'll look forward to your visit," she said, pulling Alistair's head down to her own so that she could press a kiss to his cheek. "I can practice my reading and writing while I'm there. I'll set myself the goal of learning how to spell my own name."

A relieved Alistair smiled anxiously, then bent to press his lips against hers.

"My lovely Lola," he murmured, quiet enough for just her to hear. "Andraste, I'm a blessed man."

Finian added his own guarantee of frequent visits, promising to bring her some easy written exercises that they could work through together.

Flora's gaze moved sideways, to where Zevran and her brothers were standing near the hearth. For a split second, before the elf noticed Flora looking, Zevran looked tired and older than his near-three decades. Flora narrowed her eyes at him; Zevran spotted her and immediately blew over a little kiss, accompanied by the characteristic wink. Flora was not fooled by the elf's quick masking of emotion, especially since she had relied on her own solemn mien to hide her feelings more times than she could count – literally, since she found it hard to count beyond twenty-nine.

As the others drifted out in small clumps after Alistair's pointed cough, Flora sidled over to where the elf was adjusting the buckle on his glove.

"Zevran?"

The surface smile returned, quick and bright as lightning across a summer sky.

"Yes, my buxom beauty? Ah, your bosom looks so ripe and full in that tunic, carina. Being with child suits you."

Flora refused to be distracted by Zevran's lechery, knowing that he was prone to use it as a
diversionary tactic.

"Is there something that you're not telling me?"

"Many things, mi amor," the elf purred, immediately. "But many of them involve what I should like to do to you, and we are in polite company."

"Zev-raaan…"

Flora pulled a face at him and the elf relented a fraction, darting her a quick look.

"Nena, just promise me one thing- "

Her brows drew together and she focused on him, giving a solemn little nod.

"Eh?"

"That – that no matter what position you hold in life, you'll always be able to spare a minute or two for your Antivan elf companion, hm? I count you as a… as a good friend, and I should be sorry to lose you."

"Of course you won't lose me," Flora retorted, perplexed. "Why would you ask such a thing? What position am I going to hold?"

Zevran shot her a wistful smile, then dropped into an exaggerated bow.

"Ah, no reason, mi sirenetta. Tell me, will you be adopting Chantry dress during your residence at the monastery? Full length robes and ornamental headpieces?"

"No!"

Chapter End Notes

OOC Author Note: At the end of the day, Flora is a Herring girl, and Herring girls just get on with it! I actually think it's a good thing for her to have some time in quiet isolation – to mourn the loss of her spirits properly – without getting immediately caught up in Ferelden politics. Losing her spirits is almost like losing family – they had been with Flora through Herring, the Circle, the Blight… and she does need to grieve, though she doesn't realise it yet. Plus, Leliana can prepare the unwitting Flora for becoming queen (starting with NOT storming out of a room like a stroppy teenager, haha).
I'm Not Made Of Glass!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After everybody else had taken their leave, king and mistress sat side by side on the Royal bed; his arm slung protectively around her shoulders. The candelabras had bled down to waxy stumps, leaving the room cast in a faint red glow from the smouldering hearth. The fire spat and hissed as it shot sparks up the chimney breast, rolling forth waves of cedar-scented heat into the bedchamber.

Flora, to distract herself from the prospect of a month spent under intense Templar scrutiny, was counting the Mabari painted around the border of the hearth. These plaster hounds were interspersed with crimson Theirin lions; some depicted as frolicking about and others lying down peacefully together.

"I don't think that's very realistic," Flora said at last, frowning up a loll-tongued Mabari paw-in-paw with a Theirin lion. "I think that the lion would eat the dog, not hold hands with it."

"Have you ever met a lion, my love?" Alistair replied in half-distracted tones, focusing on the profile of his sister-warden as she gazed up at the painted murals. The firelight brought warmth to Flora's pale skin and lit lustrous filaments in her dark red hair, bright skeins running through her braid like copper wire fresh from the forge. The golden fleck in her iris – a memento of when Flora had been able to breathe life as easily as air – was illuminated by the reflected heat, a fragment of gilt against a watercolour background.

"I've never met a lion," Flora said, stifling a yawn. "I think that they must be like the… the sharks of the land."

Alistair stifled a laugh, then felt his gut constrict in sadness at the prospect of parting from his best friend for an entire month. He wrapped his other arm around Flora, lowering his head to her shoulder and burying his face in the familiar texture of her hair. Her scent was as comforting as a hot meal and a soft bed after an arduous journey; and he took a long, unsteady inhalation.

"Maker's Breath, I'm going to miss you, Lola."

"You'll see me every day," Flora reminded Alistair, running her fingers across the broad, muscular expanse of his back as he pressed a kiss to her hair.

"Yes, but- " Alistair broke off, his mouth having discovered her earlobe buried in a tangled mass of scarlet. He nuzzled his face against it for a moment, then kissed the lobe gently, teasing the outer curve with his tongue until he heard her breath catch in her throat.

"We'll have Templars and Chantry Mothers breathing down our necks," he murmured, his thumb dropping down to caress the delicate line of her collarbone. "We won't have a moment of privacy."

Flora inhaled, feeling something deep within her instinctively respond to her brother-warden's low murmur. She tilted her face up, letting her fingers trail over his leather-clad chest.

"You could always get some winches," she said, then blinked as Alistair gave a snort of humour. "What?"

"Wenches, sweetheart. Who told you what a wench was, anyway? Don't tell me, the blasted elf!"
"No! Bann Teagan was talking about them. Wenches."
"Teagan?!"
"He didn't know I was in the room," Flora explained, tracing a line from her brother-warden's heart to his abdomen. "I was sitting in the corner and being quiet."

Despite no longer having the healer's sight, she could still easily remember each vital organ's location.

*Heart, lung-bags, stomach pouch. Kidneys.*

Alistair let out another soft grunt of amusement, his palm dropping to cup Flora's breast through the linen of her pyjamas.

"Anyway, I don't want wenches. I want you, my beautiful girl," he murmured thickly, brushing his calloused thumb over where he knew her nipple to lie. "And I won't be able to have you for another month. Unless…?"

He gave her breast a gentle, suggestive squeeze; circling its stiffening tip with his thumb. Flora gave an experimental wriggle, and her body responded with a dull throb, limbs still sore from the final battle.

"I think I'm too achey," she said reluctantly, and Alistair immediately withdrew his fondling fingers; substituting groping with a chaste embrace and a kiss on the cheek.

"Of course, my darling," he breathed, hand dropping to rest protectively on Flora's swollen abdomen. "Let's just have a cuddle instead. Besides, I've got lots of fond memories to reminisce over in the meantime."

Alistair winked at her and Flora smiled back at him, resting her head contentedly against his shoulder.

Both awoke in melancholy mood the next morning, curled up warm in a tangle of entwined limbs. Alistair sat yawning on the edge of the bed, watching his best friend pack up her scant belongings in the battered leather pack that she had owned since Ostagar. Despite the optimism of the sun, gleaming with bright hopefulness through the leaded windows, neither one of them were in the mood for its cheerfulness.

"It's only for a month," Alistair said out loud, as though trying to reassure himself. "Four weeks. And I'll see you every evening. Every evening, Lo, without fail!"

Flora let out a little grunt, having packed *Exotic Fish of Thedas* out of habit. With slight astonishment she took it out again, placing the leather-bound tome on the blankets.

"I'd like a new book to read," she said, wistfully. "Do you think Fergus or Finian might ever buy me another one? I could pay them back … somehow."

Alistair refrained from mentioning that the Landsmeet had promptly agreed to grant the arling of Amaranthine to their new Hero of Ferelden; and that a bank vault within Denerim was already beginning to receive customs duties in Flora's name.
"Flo, say the word, and I'll have a whole library sent down to the monastery," he replied, impulsively. "Anything you want, just say, and I'll get it for you."

Flora shot him a slightly appalled look, nostrils flaring as she tied up the laces of her pack with a fisherman's knot.

"I'd need to live as long as a Par Vollen sea-turtle to finish reading a library."

As promised, Flora's companions - both noble and common - gathered on the palace forecourt to escort her on the road to the Revanloch monastery. It was a beautiful summery day, the salt-taste of the sea drifted lightly on the air and the city of Denerim spread out like a storybook town on the banks of the estuary below. It was hard to envision that the Darkspawn horde had been baying for blood outside the city walls only a week prior. Denerim Castle rose up like a protective guardian over the Theirin seat, stoic and sprawling; not the most attractive of Theodesian royal palaces, but certainly one of the most formidable.

The stable-boys led out a selection of thoroughbred Ferelden Forders, each one groomed to a glossy sheen. The largest one naturally went to the tallest man present; the new Theirin king. As the others mounted up around him, Alistair – for the first time in his life – experienced a flash of anxiety as he gazed up at the lofty saddle.

"What's wrong, lad?" Teagan, sporting the ochre and cream colours of Rainesfere, nudged his own steed over with an expert knee.

Alistair gnawed on his lip, then glanced over at his pregnant mistress. Flora was standing on the gravel, talking earnestly to the mounted Finian – possibly entreating him for another book.

"Maybe Flo should ride in a carriage, or something- " he began, hesitantly. "If she falls from the horse…"

Teagan, who had once seen his elder brother equally protective over Isolde, reached down and clapped Alistair's shoulder, reassuringly.

"You can call for a carriage if you wish," he murmured, in a low enough voice not to be overheard by Flora. "But I don't believe that you'd ever let her fall. Have some faith in yourself, Alistair, you're one of the best horsemen in Ferelden."

"Not as good as you, uncle," replied Alistair, smiling reflexively as Flora wandered over to him.

"Finian says he's going to see if there's a sequel to Exotic Fish of Thedas!"she breathed, eyes wide with awe. "Imagine! More fish of the world!"

Alistair grinned at her, forcing down his fears and assuming a cheerful expression.

"Right, darling, up we go- careful now- "

Gripping her around the waist, he propelled her gently upwards onto the saddle. Flora looked slightly confused – usually, Alistair mounted first and then hauled her up behind him like a sack of potatoes.

To Alistair's relief, Teagan reached out to grip Flora's elbow as she perched astride the saddle, keeping her firmly in place while the king planted boot in stirrup and lifted himself up behind her. Once seated squarely across the leather seat, Alistair immediately clamped a protective arm around
his sister-warden's swollen waist.

"Why are you treating me like I'm made of GLASS?" hissed Flora indignantly in his ear. "Last week, we were galloping along the city walls with a giant dragon breathing fire at us, remember?"

Alistair went a shade paler: he remembered only too well.

"I'm not going to apologise for wanting to keep you safe, Flora," he replied, with a thin vein of Theirin steel running through the words. "You can't summon your shield anymore."

Flora slumped slightly, the loss of her spirits still a raw wound. Alistair sensed her sadness and pressed a kiss to her hair, seeking out her ear with his lips.

"I'll be your shield, sweetheart," he replied, softly. "You've spent almost a year protecting me: let me do the same for you."

Flora swivelled around as best she could in the saddle, reaching her arms up to wrap around her handsome brother-warden's neck. Alistair embraced her back as tight as he dared, kissing her on the forehead, nose and lips in rapid succession.

"Whenever you're ready," Eamon called out across the cobbles, no rancour in his tone.

At the boundary of the Royal hunting grounds, a pair of soldiers approached to inform them that there were throngs of people lining the streets. The city guard had managed to clear a path, but the party should be prepared for crowds. This caused a slight delay as additional Royal Guard were summoned from the barracks, in sufficient number to form a steel blockade around the king's company.

Fergus saw that his sister was looking slightly apprehensive, and called out to reassure her.

"They're not expecting an attack, Floss! They're supposed to keep the people from crowding around you. Don't worry about it, petal."

As the guards had warned, the streets of Denerim were indeed thronged with people who wished to see both their new king, and the girl who had slain an Archdemon. Additionally, they wanted to confirm with their own eyes the rumours that had sprung up yesterday; that the lady Cousland was heavy with a Theirin child.

Several of Flora's companions enjoyed the attention – Oghren was basking in the reflected glory that came with being one of the mighty heroes who had gathered Ferelden's free army; and expected to never pay for a drink again in his life. Leliana, who was wearing her most demure and elegant Chantry robe in preparation for the monastic confinement, accepted the praise of the crowd with refined grace.

Zevran, meanwhile, was keeping as unobtrusive as possible near the back of the company. He had formulated vague plans for the immediate future, and they did not involve having his features emblazoned upon the memories of every citizen in Denerim. Wynne also did not relish the attention, although it was nice – she mused quietly – to have the people cheering at her, as opposed to glowering with suspicion.

The party meandered down on horseback through the noble district, the wide cobbled avenues affording plenty of space for the crowds to gather. The various households had come spilling out onto the streets; a rainbow myriad of retainers clad in the different colours of their liege-lords. There was green for South Reach, ochre for Redcliffe, violet for Calon; and the men of Highever marched proudly behind their teyrn and his battle-scarred brother, who had gone up a great deal in their
estimation. These crowds managed to restrain themselves, since most of them had seen both Flora and the new king either during the Landsmeet, or up in the royal palace.

Once the company crossed the canal into the market district, the nature of the crowd changed slightly. It was now made up of ordinary Denerim townsfolk; who were fiercely loyal to their home-grown Theirin dynasty and equally proud of their unlikely, solemn-faced young Hero. Rumours spread like wildfire around the various neighbourhoods as people slowly recognised the lady Cousland as the girl who had spent hours down the docks healing refugees; who had offered her services free of charge to anybody who required mending. They had already been told in the Chantries of the 'Maker's miracle' that had purged both taint and magic from their young commander's blood; and were eager to congratulate her on this dual deliverance.

Now they called out for Flora's attention, waving and cheering; and if not for the silverite ring of Royal Guard, they would have pressed forward to surround the king's horse. Instead, they tossed scarlet ribbons and posies of flowers in the company's path, thrusting Chantry tokens onto the pikes of the guardsmen.

Alistair, the gold band of Landsmeet-granted authority placed prominently on his head, smiled easily down at his people. The Theirins had always had the gift of charisma, it ran strong in their ancient Alamarri blood. He raised a hand to acknowledge the calls, keeping his other arm tightly anchored about Flora's swollen abdomen.

Flora was used to riding amongst crowds, since they had made frequent appearances on horseback before their army. However, she was unused to being the target of such unanimous applause – she did not even cope well with individual praise – and felt deeply uncomfortable.

*It wasn't even me who ended the Blight. It was you. And you're gone.*

*You're gone, aren't you?*

She paused, heart in mouth, but – as expected – received no reply.

Alistair felt his former sister-warden slump on the saddle before him; and assumed that it was merely due to her discomfort at being amidst so many people.

"We'll be through the city gate soon, my love," he murmured, resting his chin for a moment atop her head. "Then it won't be so crowded."

Flora let out a small sound of miserable acquiescence, still brooding on the loss of her spirits.

Alistair let out a small sound of miserable acquiescence, still brooding on the loss of her spirits.

Alistair felt the reins drop for a moment, using his strong thighs to control the movement of the horse. Turning his best friend in his arms, he kissed her squarely on the mouth; stroking the soft peach-fine hairs on her cheek as tenderly as if they were alone in the bedchamber.

The crowd gave a ripple of excitement, a smattering of applause breaking out at such a public display of affection. A little elven girl ran forward with a determined expression on her narrow, fine-boned face, darting past the guards and thrusting something up towards Alistair's boot. The king reached down a gloved hand to retrieve a long crimson ribbon, reminiscent of the scarlet banners that had been tied to the pikes and sword-hafts of Ferelden's first free army.

Alistair gazed at it for a moment, explicitly touched, and then swiftly tied the skein of crimson silk in a bow around Flora's high ponytail. The crowd demonstrated their approval loudly, with hands and feet and gaping mouths.

Eamon shot a quick glance towards Leonas and Fergus; both men returned the pointed look with
brief nods of acknowledgement.

*The people want her with Alistair. The Landsmeet wants her as queen. All that needs to be done now is to convince the lass herself. It's a long way from a fisherman's village to a throne.*

Chapter End Notes

OOC Author Note: Both Alistair and Flora are still in the habit of referring to each other as brother- and sister-warden, even though that's technically not true any more.

The wenches thing was inspired by Oren, poor little sod! Alistair is still in his ridiculously over-protective phase. I wanted to show his slightly 'harder' personality in that he's not afraid to defend his concern for Flora's well-being. The chapter title also has a dual meaning, since Flora is actually far weaker now than she was in the previous story – she has no way to defend herself, and she's also emotionally fragile due to her recent 'bereavement' re spirits leaving, etc

I also realised that I forgot to explain what a 'free army' was, and I kept referring to the elves/dwarves/mages as one in the last story. Sorry! It's a name to refer to an army not gathered by a monarch.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Four: En Route To Revanloch Monastery

As predicted, the crowds began to wane once the mounted party reached the city walls. To everyone's relief, the road from the south west gate neatly skirted the Alamarri plains, where they had all spent far too much time over the past six weeks. Instead, it followed a pleasant, if windswept, grassy route along the clifftop that stretched south from Denerim. The sky was as clear and bright as a blue jay's wing; the occasional wisp of cloud hanging over the placid expanse of the Amaranthine Ocean.

"What a beautiful Justinian day," Leliana enthused; by some miracle managing to appear cool and serene despite the warm temperatures. The bard was cloaked in the full garb of a Chantry lay sister – complete with delicate white finger gloves – and yet not a single bead of sweat rose to mar her unblemished forehead. "It is as though the Maker Himself approves of our journey today. What a blessing it is; to be able to enjoy such fine weather without fear of the Blight! Zevran, does this weather not remind you of Antiva?"

The elf, riding near the rear of their party, took longer to reply than was normal. Finally, Zevran lifted his white-blond head and returned a dazzling smile to the bard; though his eyes were still mired in thought.

"Ah, it cannot compare to my beloved Antivan sun, yet I will admit that it is far better than what I have come to expect from the Fereldan climate!"

"Those outcrops are known as the Teeth of Angmar," Teagan called over his shoulder to Flora, who was swivelled in the saddle to gaze at the ocean. "Legend has it, a giant named Angmar once used to come here to sharpen his teeth against the rocks."

The bann made a gesture towards the irregular basalt outcrops that punctuated the otherwise sheer and even white cliffs.

"We used to get the occasional giant in Herring," Flora replied, solemnly. "They'd wander down from the Storm Coast. They'd leave you alone, as long as you left them alone."

An odd sense of melancholy had settled in her stomach, as though she had eaten something sour and disagreeable. For a moment, Flora could not diagnose the cause of this sudden sadness; and then they passed a half-rotten tree stump that tugged at her memory.

"I came down here with Riordan," she said, suddenly. "When we went to get the Darkspawn blood for Loghain. We rode this way."

Behind her, Alistair fell silent and Flora knew that he too was picturing the same terrible image: the senior warden, broken on the cobblestones of Fort Drakon, bones pulverised and organs damaged beyond even Flora's precocious ability to mend.

"We did him proud," Alistair said quietly after a moment, gripping the reins in one experienced hand as he steered the horse around a pothole. "The… the funeral is this Sunday."

Flora twisted around in the saddle, an anxious question already forming on her lips. Alistair went to
reassure her, shifting his weight forward to kiss her mouth.

"I've already organised for it to take place up at Revanloch," he murmured, watching the relief suffuse across her face. "I know you want to pay your respects, Lo."

Flora tried to smile gratefully at him, but her mind was still bloodied from the aftermath of Riordan's fatal leap. Instead, she leaned back against her brother-warden's chest and he enveloped his arm about her; pressing affectionate lips to the back of her head.

They rode onwards, following the grassy trail that surmounted the gently undulating cliffs. The seagulls cried and wheeled overhead, casting an appraising eye over the small company and deciding that they were not of interest.

Before the hour had passed – as Eamon had promised – Revanloch monastery came into view. It was perched precariously on a rocky outcrop; a formidable building constructed from grey basalt, weathered so extensively that it appeared almost as ancient as the cliffs upon which it rested. It was low and sprawling, with small windows, and was dominated by a vast central spire. The entire structure was as stern and uncompromising as the Chantry itself.

Alistair felt Flora flinch, and tightened his grip around her waist; trying to stop his own stomach from dropping.

"It looks like a prison," Finian announced in horror, succinctly voicing the thoughts of his sister. "Andraste Herself would want to jump from the cliffs if She was confined there, I think."

Fergus shot his younger brother a pointed look that said - very clearly - shut up. Finian did not get the message, and continued blithely.

"In Orlais, I once went to a party at a monastery named Fleureval. Nobles who didn't want to split their fortunes sent their second sons and daughters there."

The teyrn was about to snap at his brother, but then noticed that their sister was listening; turning round in the saddle to stare at Finian with her mouth slightly open.

"I'm afraid that the atmosphere there wasn't exactly devout," Finian continued, with a conspiratorial wink from his sole eye. "I remember – vaguely – some very questionable parties taking place up at Fleureval. With company of a most dubious nature."

Flora blinked; not understanding what Finian was referring to.

"I mean, orgies," her brother informed her, the word carrying on the wind to the rest of the party. "Wholly unwholesome behaviour for men and women of the cloth!"

Alistair shot Finian an appalled look, spreading a protective palm across Flora's burgeoning stomach.

"Finian! Don't say that in front of the baby," he hissed, hazel eyes wide and accusatory. "I don't know if it's got ears yet, but if it does, I don't want it hearing anything… inappropriate."

"Then you ought to bind the elf's mouth for the next few years," Finian retorted, and Zevran let out an indignant squawk.

"The cheek! I said not a thing!"
Alistair felt Flora tremble against his chest. For one horrible moment, he thought that she was *crying*, and then she let out a muffled giggle. Seconds later, she was laughing so hard that she was slipping from the saddle. Alistair tightened his grip on her, suddenly feeling tears prickling at the corner of his eyes. He could not remember the last time that he had heard his sister-warden laugh – *it must have been weeks ago* – and now he was inordinately grateful for the sound.

The road up to Revanloch widened as they drew near, and the Chantry banners draped over the monastery gates came into clearer view. The closer they came, the more formidable the crenellated walls seemed; the entire place seemed like the architectural embodiment of a particularly severe Chantry cleric.

"How can a building seem to *scowl*?" Zevran murmured, nudging his pony alongside Finian's. The younger Cousland gave a shrug, his remaining grey eye wide and appalled.

"I don't know, but it looks like we've got a welcoming party."

Sure enough, there was a small contingent of Templars and Chantry officials waiting outside the gates; a crowd of people clad in either cream or silverite. All were stern-faced and stiff-backed, though the Templars had removed their helms in honour of their esteemed visitors.

"How do you tell them apart?" Flora whispered to Alistair, knowing that her brother-warden had spent ten years in a monastery similar to the one looming before them.

"The taller the hat, the more important they are," he whispered back, only half-joking.

Templars and priests dropped into deep bows as the horses came to a halt, the Chantry stable-boys creeping out with far more solemnity than those residing at the palace.

Alistair dismounted first, boots crunching onto the gravel of the forecourt. Immediately, he turned and reached up for his sister-warden, lifting her down as though she were made of crystallised glass. The others also dismounted; although only Fergus, Eamon and Alistair would be accompanying Flora and Leliana into the monastery itself.

"Your Majesty," murmured the Knight-Commander, a man with a lurid burn-scar distorting the entire right side of his face. "My lady Cousland. The Templar Order of Ferelden is grateful for your actions in ending the Fifth Blight."

Alistair let out a soft grunt, barely heeding the man's words as he mentally ran over his list of demands once again. Flora wondered if she should reply with *you're welcome*, but elected to remain quiet instead; bowing her head politely.

After dismounting from his own steed, Eamon glanced briefly at Alistair; ready to step in if the new king needed any assistance. Alistair, however, was already striding forward with a determined expression, the green flecks in his eyes standing out like fragments of cut glass.

"Right," he said tersely, gaze moving from Knight-Commander to Grand Cleric. "There is a *great deal* to be discussed before I even *consider* leaving the lady Cousland here, so I suggest we go inside and find somewhere comfortable to sit. Ideally, with refreshments."

Since only a few would be accompanying Flora inside Revanloch, she parted from the majority of her companions at the gates. Each one promised that they would come and visit their former Warden very soon, if not *tomorrow*, and whispered their own assurances into her ear.
Oghren declared that he would try and smuggle in a bottle of rum – since the monastery did not appear to be the most convivial of accommodations. Wynne gripped Flora's elbow between her own elegant fingers; struck by a sudden sadness that they would never again be senior enchanter and junior apprentice.

Leonas ran a brief, paternal hand over Flora's hair, his eyes soft and reassuring. Teagan attempted to emulate this fatherly demeanour but was unable to carry it out with such ease; his enduring, slightly shameful desire for the young Cousland manifesting in a half-dozen small tells.

Finian embraced his sister as heartily as he dared, squeezing her shoulders rather than her swollen waist. He promised grandly that he had planned a surprise for her; one that she had to be a little patient for. Flora, who had never had a surprise that she had liked, shot him a look of mild alarm.

Zevran also embraced Flora, drawing her close to his chest. The hug, however, was more of a ploy to bring her ear within range of his whisper.

"If you change your mind and wish me to come and free you from this prison, let me know," he hissed urgently against her hair, breath hot on her ear. "I swear it, carina. Say the word and I will liberate you."

"I will," replied Flora gravely, then smiled at him. "Thank you."

Expecting the usual bold kiss at the border of cheek and mouth, she was startled when the elf's lips landed softly in the centre of her forehead, tender and wistful.

"I'll see you soon, mi florita."

In the end, Eamon, Alistair and Fergus accompanied Flora and Leliana into the shadowy, damp coolness of the monastery interior. The inside of Revanloch was no less stark than its outer appearance suggested; segmented into small and sparsely decorated stone chambers.

The Knight-Commander showed them into his office, which had an empty hearth and a large, graphic depiction of the Martyrdom of Andraste hanging on the southern wall. The Grand Cleric took off her tall, ponderous headpiece and wiped some sweat from her forehead, making an offhanded comment about the summer heat.

Flora sat on the wooden bench and wondered whether a mage had given the Knight-Commander the burn scar emblazoned across his cheek. The Grand Cleric had a sonorous, undulating voice that probably sounded impressive when leading prayers in the Chantry; yet was rather grating in close quarters. Flora did her best to listen to the conversation, but the little creature drew her attention by shifting impatiently against the confines of her belly.

She rested her fingers on her stomach, stroking the firm mound absent-mindedly. Alistair glanced over, attention caught by the motion of her hand, and his face went through a cluster of small changes in rapid succession. His expression softened at first, eyes bright with affection; then quickly hardened to a steely, uncompromising resoluteness. Turning to cleric and head Templar, he cleared his throat pointedly.

"Right," the king said, cutting abrupt across the old priestess. "I'm going to set down a few ground rules; which I want you both to listen to very carefully."

Such was the vein of Marician steel in his voice that the Knight-Commander and the Grand Cleric of Ferelden turned immediately to their new king.

"When I leave here today," Alistair began, quietly. "I am entrusting the two most precious things in
the world to me, into your keeping. Oh, and Leliana—sorry, Lel."

The bard rolled her eyes with a small, don't-worry-about-it snort.

"So, believe me" the Theirin continued, darkly. "I won't be setting a single foot out of here until I'm reassured that my requirements have been met."

The Knight-Commander gave a slight nod, his eyes watchful.

"And these requirements are, Your Majesty?"

The immediacy with which Alistair responded suggested that he had been going over the demands many times in his head, prior to this moment.

"Lay-Sister Leliana is to accompany the lady Cousland everywhere, without exception, and she is permitted to carry whatever weapons she deems suitable. Royal Guardsmen will be posted at each entrance and exit to the monastery. The lady Cousland will have whatever she needs to be comfortable – warm quarters, and good food. I'll not have her served any of the bland pottage that I lived on for a decade. She's your honoured guest, not your prisoner."

Alistair grimaced, recalling years of draughty bedchambers and tasteless gruel. The Knight-Commander gave a small nod; none of the king's demands were unexpected.

"Is there aught else you require, King Alistair?"

"I want to meet the Templars you've assigned to watch her," Alistair replied, expression grim. "These soldiers had better be your best, ser knight."

The Knight-Commander nodded, gesturing towards a young aide discreetly waiting in the corner.

"Bring them in."

Chapter End Notes

OOC Author Note:

The monastery that I was envisioning when I pictured Revanloch, was the Tatev monastery in Armenia (which is on a cliff, albeit not on the coast, and quite a bit smaller.) I love stark and brutal Medieval architecture!

Haha, Alistair is not taking any chances with Flo's safety here, lol.
Moments later, two soldiers walked into the Knight-Commander's study with a militaristic precision to their stride. Many years of hard service were writ across their faces, and their blades hung at their sides as comfortably as an extra limb. Alistair surveyed them through narrowed eyes, attempting to assess their competency through appearance alone.

Flora gazed up at the new arrivals with slight wariness. She had become familiar with many types of Templar during her four years at the Circle – the officious type, the bullying type, the type who didn't avert their eyes when standing guard in the wash-chamber. Yet there had also been kinder ones – the ones who had brought her fresh buckets of water when she was mopping the flagstones; or who didn't tell her off when she was caught creeping back from the kitchens after curfew.

The elder of the two – a man in his fifties, with a roughly cropped greying beard and eyes like chips of blue glass, gave a perfunctory bow towards the king.

"This is Knight-Captain Gannorn, your majesty," murmured the Commander, quietly. "Be assured, we have no better soldier of faith in our ranks."

Leliana gave a little flutter of recognition from where she was sitting beside Flora.

"The Knight-Captain Gannorn? The one who uncovered that maleficar plot in the Marches? Who single-handedly defended a group of pilgrims from Qunari mercenaries in the Rivaini desert? Who once deflected a blow meant for the Divine Herself?"

The man gave a stern, taciturn grunt of acknowledgement at each comment; as Leliana clasped her hands together in delight.

"Where are you from?" Alistair asked warily, wanting to gain some measure of the man.

"A village on the north coast, Your Majesty," the Templar replied in a thick, northern brogue. "By the name of Skingle."

Flora had hardly reacted to the Templar's litany of accomplishments, but at the sound of both familiar village and familiar accent, her head snapped upright.

"Skingle!" she squawked, enthralled. "Skingle is the next village over from Herring! That's where I'm from! Oh, and also Highever," she added, remembering Fergus.

"Aye, milady," the man replied, his throaty shaping of the word-sounds fundamentally similar to her own. "I left the coast decades ago, but I remember your pa. Pelegrin, eh? Believe I bought some fish hooks from the man. Good hooks, too."

As a proud Flora beamed from ear to ear, Eamon shot a quick and pointed glance towards Alistair.

See, the look chided. You need not have worried. I would not have entrusted the mother of your child to simply anyone.

His fears somewhat assuaged, Alistair turned to the woman. She was in her forties, slender and hollow-cheeked, with dark hair shorn close to her skull and piercing violet eyes. Her bow was neat
and perfunctory, a complement to her regimented stance.

"And you are?"

"'All heads bow! All knees bend! Every being in the realm pay homage!'"

Alistair let out a soft groan under his breath, shooting the Knight-Commander a dark look.

"A Chanter," he muttered, one eyebrow rising. "Really?"

"Ser Devotia was a Chanter before she joined the Templars," the Knight-Commander replied, placatingly. "She's never lost the – ah – habit, but I assure you that she is one of our most impressive soldiers."

Alistair let out a grunt, reaching out for Flora's hand and clasping it tightly within his own. His thumb ran over her knuckles, slow and tender; the affection of the gesture in stark contrast to the menace emerging in his voice.

"They had better be as skilled as you say, Knight-Commander," he murmured, a thinly veiled threat draped over the words. "I promise you, the Rite of Annulment will look like a picnic compared to what I'll do if a single hair on her head is harmed."

Flora shot her brother-warden a slightly awed look, unused to such blatant wielding of the royal hand of authority.

"I swear upon the Ashes of Andraste that the lady Cousland will come to no harm under Revanloch's roof," the Knight-Commander assured, remaining admirably calm in the face of Alistair's intimation.

As the Templar suggested that they go to see the quarters that had been assigned to Flora and Leliana; Flora almost piped up with the fact that she had seen Andraste's Ashes in person, and that she had actually carried them in her boot for safekeeping! She had WALKED on them for nearly fifty miles!

Leliana, who had the uncanny ability to read the words off Flora's tongue before they emerged; shot the young Cousland a pointed look and shook her head silently.

The Knight-Commander ushered them from his office and along a high-ceilinged corridor, lit at regular intervals by candle sconces set into the basalt walls. Gannorn and Devotia followed unobtrusively in their wake, stares directed rigidly forward. The atmosphere was hushed and contemplative; they passed the occasional pair of Templar, but the residents of Revanloch seemed to have learnt the ability to step silently in plate boots.

After a few minutes they emerged, blinking, into the sunlight of a courtyard surrounded by pillared terraces. A neat set of two dozen training dummies were spaced in even rows, while a stern faced instructor oversaw pairs of sparring recruits. These young Chantry initiates were clad in simple training cuirasses, and clutched basic iron swords with the ends filed blunt. They ranged in age from thirteen to eighteen, and were all male save for one belligerent-looking girl.

"Ah, memories," Alistair whispered in Flora's ear, remembering hours spent in similar training at Bournshire. "I don't miss these extended drill sessions."

As the Knight-Commander led them through the pillared gallery, several of the more curious and less disciplined of the recruits craned their necks to see who the visitors were. Their eyes moved over Alistair, noting the gold band atop his head, passed over Fergus and Eamon without pause; hesitated briefly on Leliana – who was beautiful, but slightly intimidating, and clad in Chantry robes – then
settle on Flora.

Although those who ran Revaanoch attempted to limit all outside influences and distraction; news of the Blight had seeped through the tall basalt walls like rising damp. In addition, many of the Templar had been assigned to guard the Circle mage camp on the Alamarri plains.

Thus, many of the recruits were aware of the Warden who had summoned the armies and smote the Archdemon; a girl only a few years older than they were themselves, who had risen from obscurity to be named the first Hero of Ferelden.

They had hoarded what little information they had been able to glean from eavesdropping on senior officials conversing in corridors; they knew that she was a Cousland, that she was red headed, that she was rumoured to be the lover of the king (due to a certain tavern song that had earned one recruit three days of penance when a Chantry Mother overhead him singing it. They knew that the Hero had been a mage, but that the Maker had rewarded the young Cousland for her heroism by severing her connection with the Fade, allowing her to keep her emotions. It was also whispered that she never smiled.

Now they saw the girl herself standing beside the well-dressed peers of the realm, her dark red hair caught up on top of her head and a solemn expression writ across her face. She was smaller than they expected, and far less intimidating; let there was no mistaking the cool arrogance of a sea-grey Cousland stare as she swept it across the courtyard.

The recruits whispered to each other in excitement, nudging and gawping; ignoring the perturbed calls from their instructor.

"Maferath's Balls, it's the Warden!"

"No, is it her? Really? She's not very strong-looking."

"Look at the hair, of course it is. That's the new king she's with."

"Maker, look at the mouth on her. Back home, we'd call that a - ."

"Mm, and those bosoms! Bit chubby, though."

"You idiot, Barney, she's got a babe in the belly. Wait, she's got a babe in the belly?!"

"Who's got his leg over the Hero of Ferelden? The king?"

Flora had been gazing out across the courtyard in a vain attempt to locate the kitchens, not seeming to notice the gaggle of adolescent boys staring at her like she were a stuffed peacock on a dinner table. Alistair, however, did notice, and a scowl spread across his handsome, olive-hewn features. The stubble on his jaw was growing in dense; he not only looked, but felt, far more mature than these initiates who were only a handful of years his junior.

Before he could voice his displeasure, Fergus had already spoken up. The teyrn's voice – well-bred, with only the barest hint of northern inflection – rose up in mild consternation.

"I hope you have some strategy for keeping those recruits away from my sister," he announced, bluntly. "I won't tolerate a crowd of youths trailing her around, with tongues lolling from their mouths like sun-stroked Mabari."

"They will be told," the Knight-Commander assured, gesturing them towards a low flight of stone steps that led back into the interior of the monastery. "Helpfully, they're all rather terrified of Chanter
Devotia."

As they passed a life-size oil painting of Maferath's Betrayal, Flora thought to herself that she was _also_ slightly terrified of Chanter Devotia. The woman had said nothing to her by way of greeting, just fixed Flora with her strange, violet eyes and murmured _'now her hand is raised, a sword to pierce the sun'_.

The Knight-Commander led them along a wide stone corridor, lined with stern-faced busts of previous Divines; then gestured towards a wooden side-door.

"I've assigned the lady Cousland these quarters," he explained, retrieving a large ring of keys from his waist and searching through them. "Ah, here-"

Unlocking the door, the Knight-Commander gave it a perfunctory nudge, revealing a spacious and neatly appointed chamber. Although the walls were plain plaster, decorated only with a handful of Chantry symbols; the furniture was well-made and the furnishings cut from expensive cloth. A large bay window was framed by violet curtains that hung to the flagstones, and a hearth smouldered away in one corner. A tiled wash-room was just visible, tucked away to one side.

"Lovely," announced Leliana brightly, her keen eyes taking note of a narrow pallet beside the door. This would presumably accommodate their Templar guardians as they slept on alternate shifts. "I foresee many hours of thoughtful contemplation spent in this chamber!"

The lay sister dropped her pack on one side of the bed, smoothing admiring fingers over the embroidered coverlet.

"This is the chamber we assign to Royal guests," explained the Knight-Commander, blithely. "So it should be suitable."

Flora, who had been wondering in what direction the kitchens lay, looked mildly confused.

"But I'm not-" she began, and then Leliana cut delicately and skilfully access her.

"_Ma petite_, come and look at the view! The Amaranthine Ocean is spread out before us, in all of its Maker-created glory!"

Fortunately, Flora never failed to be distracted by the sea. Abandoning her query, she went to join Leliana on the window seat.

While they occupied themselves with identifying the flags flown by the distant trade ships – Leliana had sharper eyes and a more incisive guess, while Flora just claimed that they were all from Ansberg or Kirkwall, the only Marcher cities she knew – Fergus lowered his voice and took a step closer to the Grand Cleric.

"Ideally, we want the wedding and the coronation to take place on the same day," he murmured, watching his sister rap her bitten-nailed finger on the glass to scare off a seagull. "How quickly can this public confirmation of Flora's lack of magic take place?"

The Grand Cleric lowered her voice, peering out from beneath the brim of her tall hat with clever, lined eyes.

"A letter from Divine Beatrix is already on its way from Val Royeaux," she replied, her voice soft as the whisper of crumpled leaves. "As you know, our Seekers have their connection with the Fade severed, without cost to their emotion. What's happened to your sister is _not unheard_ of, though of course the circumstances are much different."
Fergus frowned, glancing quickly to one side to check that Alistair was preoccupied. The king was standing at Flora's side, listening as she embarked on some inane nautical tangent.

"Then why this month of confinement?" he asked, bluntly. "I don't see the purpose in it, if the Divine already corroborates Florence's state."

Fergus, although a teyrn, had not been playing the political game for as long as Eamon. The Arl of Redcliffe gave a slow nod, his lips tightening.

"Publicity," he said, shortly. "The Fereldan Chantry played no role in the defeat of the Fifth Blight, and the people know it. Has attendance at local chapels been in decline over the past week?"

The old woman gave a nod, confirming with her shrewd eyes what her mouth would never shape.

"And if you associate yourself with the Hero of Ferelden, you'll be able to reclaim some of those numbers," the arl continued, his own voice soft. "They'll all want to know how their lady Cousland is doing; and you'll be the ones with the weekly news."

Fergus scowled, discontent brewing in the depths of his blue-grey irises.

"I won't have my sister used as a pawn in your bureaucracy," he began bluntly, then lowered his voice as the three figures at the window turned to look at him. "She's not used to any of this: the propaganda, the politics- "

"Your Lordship, this way, both of us get what we want," murmured the Grand Cleric of Ferelden. "We reclaim some of our misguided sheep, and-"

"And we gain a queen, and legitimate heir," finished Eamon, quietly.

When it came time for their party to depart Revanloch – without the two redheads – Fergus drew Leliana to one corner, his grey eyes shadowed.

"You swear that you'll never leave her side?" he asked, for the third time that morning. "Even when performing ablutions? I know she might chafe at the lack of privacy- "

"Oh, Florence has never had a shred of privacy in her life," Leliana replied, the cheeriest one in the room. "This will be nothing new to her."

"And you'll ensure that she's – sufficiently defended?"

Leliana slid up the sleeve of her demure Chantry robe, just enough to reveal the glittering blade of a knife strapped neatly to her forearm.

"I have more about my person," the bard purred, with a devilish flash of white teeth. "But it would be improper to show you in the company of others."

Fergus let out a bark of laughter, then accidentally caught sight of where Alistair and Flora were tangled in an enthusiastic clinch beside the window.

"Oh, Maker's Breath!" Fergus hastily averted his eyes, teeth gritted. "You know, you are seeing her tonight. It's not as though you're being separated for a year."

Alistair was well-aware of this but equally did not care, he was too preoccupied with his best friend's eager lips. On its men, the traditionally full Cousland mouth manifested as expressive; whereas on women, it translated as sulky. There was nothing that Alistair enjoyed more than seeing those
petulant lips part, rosy and swollen, in response to the demands of his own tongue.

"Alistair," said Eamon, patiently. "Whenever you're ready. The Council is waiting for you."

Alistair thought that he would never be ready to leave his beloved sister-warden. He was hoping that something would have been fundamentally flawed at Revanloch – that the room would have been unsuitable, the assigned Templars incompetent, or his lover too distressed – which would allow him to return with Flora to Denerim. Unfortunately, the room was comfortable, the Templars proficient and Flora herself had assumed a mantle of dogged stoicism.

Drawing back a fraction, Alistair gazed down at her flushed and desirous face; wanting nothing more than to pick Flora up and put her back on his saddle.

"I'll be back at sundown tonight, baby," he said finally, eyes shadowed.

"Yes," Flora replied, trying to mask her forlornness.

"And at sundown every single day, Lo."

"Mm."

He kissed her once again, hard and longing; hands dropping to cradle the rounded swell of her stomach.

"Look after our child, sweetheart."

"I will!"

Flora was about to add I always have, then realised that taking it into battle against the Archdemon probably did not quite constitute looking after it.

With a final agonised glance over his shoulder, Alistair departed; following on the heels of Eamon.

There was silence for a long moment. Leliana gazed at both Gannorn and Devotia, who stared ahead with absolute neutrality of expression, flanking the doorway like suits of armour. Flora dropped her gaze to her feet, miserably; wanting nothing more than to run down the corridor after her departing brother-warden.

The bard, catching sight of the gleam of impending tears, clapped her hands together brightly.

"Right!" Leliana declared, eyes shining. "We've several hours until lunch. Shall we explore our new temporary home? I believe I saw a fish pond in one of the side-gardens."

"Oh!" Flora immediately perked up.

Chapter End Notes

OOC Author Note: I thought about having Cullen as one of the Templar guarding Flora, then thought that would be pretty unrealistic – he is only twenty years old and relatively inexperienced, and Alistair is insisting on the best of the best. Also, it would
be a slightly strange dynamic considering that he still fancies Flo, so making him watch her bathe, change her clothing… it seemed a little cruel to me! I don't actually want to be mean to the poor bastard lol. Anyway, they're going to run into him pretty soon – he's at Revanloch too, waiting to be transferred to Kirkwall.

I want to show off the consequences of a hardened Alistair here – he's more confident, and he makes that veiled threat about the Rite of Annulment being less terrible than what he would do if Flora was harmed – I don't think a pre-hardened Alistair would have said that, somehow!
Bard and Cousland spent several hours exploring the confines of the Revanloch monastery; which sprawled for a decaying acre atop the cliffs. Leliana was horrified at the sheer ugliness of a building supposedly devoted to the Maker. The basalt walls loomed menacingly overhead, casting a shadow over the inner courtyards; the archways and terraces were crumbling away through sheer decrepitude.

The interior was no less sombre than the exterior, a warren of passages and chambers cast in perpetual gloom by the narrow, shuttered windows. Candles burnt from every surface, though they made little headway against the darkness. There was a great chapel large enough to house two hundred, dominated by a vast and unforgiving effigy of Andraste. Several libraries and reading rooms branched off another corridor, near the Knight-Commander's quarters. A dining room, austere and without decoration, was located in a separate wing.

As they wandered about, Leliana reminisced in unsubtle tones about the Grand Chantry in Val Royeaux. She enthused fondly on its peach-marbled walls, gilded ornamentation and floors intricately tiled with onyx and ivory mosaic. There had always been singing drifting lightly on the air, and each perfumed chamber carried a different scent of floral incense.

*Not this heavy, throat-clogging stink!* the bard whispered derisively in Flora's ear, turning her nose up at the pungent, waxy odour wafting from oil burners fixed on the walls. *The Maker does NOT look on this hideous building and smile, I know it!*

Strangely, Flora felt far more at ease in this austere heart of the Ferelden Templar Order. The stark ugliness of the basalt rock reminded her of Herring, as did the gloomy, cramped chambers. The missing tiles in the roof meant that she could hear the constant cawing of the seagulls overhead, along with the occasional waft of salt-edged breeze. The highest ramparts of the monastery provided an unparalleled view of the Amaranthine Ocean; far better than any that could be gleaned from the Royal Palace.

*I think I'll be alright here,* Flora told herself, as they approached the dining hall for lunch. *Everybody watches me, but everyone has had their eyes on me for months anyway. Years, going back to the Circle.*

Even the stern, constant presence of Gannorn and Devotia had not disconcerted her. The two Templars had followed them around at a short distance all morning, without initiating a single dialogue. Leliana had attempted to begin several conversations with the Knight-Captain, only to receive monosyllabic grunts in response.

To Flora's alarm, once they entered the dining hall, they were ushered to the top table. Rows of wide-eyed recruits followed their progress to the raised platform at the front of the hall, where Flora took a tentative seat beside the Knight-Commander.

"Can't we eat in our room?" she hissed in Leliana's ear, self-conscious at the stares of nearly two hundred gawping adolescents. "Everyone's looking at us."

"No," replied Leliana sternly, spreading her napkin over her thighs. "You should be used to this from dining at South Reach!"
"That wasn't this many people! There must be at least…"

Flora trailed off; her literacy and numeracy practice had been neglected in recent weeks, and she had no idea how many recruits were crowded on the benches before her.

"At least… a lot," she said inanely, taking a gloomy sip of water.

"Ah, but you must get used to this, ma petite," Leliana replied, slightly enigmatically. "Being in the public eye."

Before Flora could ask Leliana what she meant, she felt her stomach give a low roll of discontent. In alarm, she looked up to see platters of meat being carried out by young initiates: whole roasted pigs skewered on iron rods. Their flesh was blackened and apples had been wedged into their gaping mouths.

Immediately, Flora felt her belly curdle as the little creature lodged within objected violently to the smell of the meat. She had rather naively assumed that the top table would be served the same vegetable stew as the masses below.

The pig was placed on the table, and looked sadly up at Flora, its glassy eyes meeting her own. Flora stared back at it; and for a moment she saw the corpse of a human soldier charred by a Darkspawn necromancer's flame.

Taking a deep breath she picked up her fork, and then hastily put it down again as a Chantry sister rose to her feet and cleared her throat.

"O Maker, this meal is a symbol of Your enduring love for us; bless us and bless our homeland; preserve us so that we may glorify You, now and forever."

The Chantry sister continued in similar vein for the next fifteen minutes, while Leliana smiled and nodded. The sad-faced, cooling pig congealed before Flora; she slunk down an inch in her seat and tried not to vomit across the table.

Why don't you like meat? Every true Fereldan likes meat. I'm Fereldan, and your papa is Fereldan. If you ever turn against fish, little creature, we're going to have a real problem.

Finally, the Chantry sister sat down and there followed a period of murmuring as the initiates tucked into their vegetable stew.

Leliana used her knife – the table knife, not the blade secreted up her sleeve – to expertly carve into the pig's flank. Flora watched the bard fork several pieces of meat onto her plate, then glance sideways.

"Ma petite, why are you not eating?"

Flora made a face, and understanding dawned on the bard's finely hewn features. Leliana leaned forward and made a swift gesture to one of the servants. A quick exchange of words later, and a bowl of tepid vegetable stew was placed on the table.

Flora beamed at Leliana, and was surprised to see a frown contorting the Orlesian lay-sister's creamy forehead.

"What did I do?" Flora asked, anxiously. "I'm sorry-"
The bard reached out and put a finger on Flora's lips, her expression stern.

"Don't apologise! You must stop apologising for everything, Florence, like some pandering sycophant."

"Pan-panda-sick panda-"

Leliana continued, her eyes bright and earnest.

"And you mustn't just sit there if something is not to your liking. You must speak out, and ask for it to be changed!"

Flora blinked, the spoon motionless in her hand.

"Oh, you're trying to make me authoritative!" she said, in eventual realisation. "Aren't you? You're trying to make me into a proper Cousland."

"Not just a Cousland, ma crevette," murmured the bard, deftly carving the pork slice in two. "Now, try not to speak with your mouth full, s'il vous plait!"

"I don't do that, do I?"

"You're doing it right now!"

After lunch, Leliana took Flora into the Templar library, which – impossibly – had an even more funereal atmosphere than the rest of Revanloch. It was a quiet, hallowed hall, lit by great stained glass windows depicting scenes from the life of Andraste. The walls were lined with bookshelves, with more valuable contents protected by gilded cages. The entire space was lit by hanging candelabras, suspended spiked iron wheels that seemed more torture device than source of illumination.

Various young recruits were tucked into study carrels, pouring over texts with varying degrees of diligence. Many of them had positioned themselves on wooden benches that provided a direct eye-line to where the lay-sister and the lady Cousland were sitting.

At first Flora had chosen a reading table at random, then realised that it was located beneath the gold and crimson glass depiction of Andraste's martyrdom. With trepidation, she raised her eyes to view a mournful, eight-foot tall prophetess being burned on a Tevinter pyre, directly above their heads. The sacrifice of Andraste had always terrified the younger Flora – especially when combined with the knowledge that apostate mages had been burned by angry villagers in the past.

Before Leliana could sit, Flora had shot upright as quickly as her belly allowed. She moved several desks over, relocating to a table beneath a far more harmless depiction of Andraste and Maferath getting their marriage blessed. Knight-Captain Gannorn and Chanter Devotia followed silently, unobtrusive as shadows.

The recruit sitting on the opposite side of the table – a ginger boy of perhaps sixteen – immediately pinkened and buried himself in his work, occasionally daring to dart little glances above the textbook.

Flora, reminded of when Alistair had been a similar recruit, smiled kindly at him. This only made the boy flush a deeper shade of crimson, clashing with his auburn curls.
"Right," Leliana breathed, settling on the bench beside Flora and rummaging in a leather satchel. "Happy with this seat?"

Flora nodded, resting an absent-minded hand on her stomach as the little creature rotated itself within her.

"Mm. Are we reading or writing?"

"Neither."

Leliana pulled out a sheaf of codex cards, crafted from thick vellum. Each one had an ornately calligraphed title, a sketched illustration and a small paragraph scribed near the bottom. Flora frowned at them in slight confusion; they looked more like playing cards than academic materials.

"I don't think I can read that writing," she said, doubtfully eyeing the ornately inked text. "It's a bit… swirly."

"The purpose is not for you to memorise the names, cherie," murmured Leliana, retrieving a folded square of parchment from the inside of her robe.

To Flora's surprise, this final item turned out to be a map, which Leliana proceeded to spread out across the desk.

It was a map unfamiliar to Flora, who had only ever seen a cartographer's depiction of Ferelden. She could recognise an outline which appeared to be similar to Ferelden, but it was smaller and tucked away to the south east. Other outlines crowded to the west and north, dotted with small and barely legible labels.

"Oh," said Flora, in sudden realisation. "Is this Thedas?"

When Leliana nodded, Flora gazed down at the map in fascination. She recognised certain place names – Waking Sea, Highever, Denerim – based on the shape of the words, but the vast majority were unfamiliar. She touched a finger to Highever, then slid it west to the cove where Herring lay.

"Alright, Florence – are you watching? I know you have a sound memory, and you must memorise this."

Leliana pointed to each crooked outline on the map in turn, her slender finger moving with slow purpose as she recited the country names.

"The Anderfels – Tevinter – Nevarra – Orlais – Ferelden-"

"FERELDEN!"

"Yes, indeed, Ferelden. The Free Marches – Antiva – Rivain. Can you point them out to me?"

Flora did as the bard requested, moving her finger from country to country.


She broke off, gazing with fascination at this oldest enemy of Ferelden. It sprawled out lazily across the south-western portion of the map, like a dozing lion.

"That's where you're from. Where's Vally-roo?"

"Val Royeaux. Here, just by the lake, see? Keep going."
"Ferelden – Free Marches – Antiva... oh! Zevran is from here. Is the climate better because it's further north? He always talks about the Antivan sun."

Leliana gave a little shrug, shifting her position on the wooden bench.

"I'm not sure. Parts of Antiva are very arid, and Rivain – just to the north – is all desert. So, possibly?"

Flora fell into melancholy silence, thinking on her old commander. Duncan had Rivaini parentage; evident in his rich ochre skin and coal-black eyes, as well as the golden ring looped through one ear.

"Show me one more time that you know where each country is, ma crevette."

After Flora had complied, Leliana reached for the sheaf of codex cards. With meticulous care, the bard proceeded to arrange them across the map of Thedas. Each card was inked with an illustration of an imperious looking face, either male or female; many of them clad in some sort of regal headpiece.

Flora recognised the face on the card set within Ferelden, feeling a twinge of sadness in her gut. She did not need to decipher the title to work out who this individual was: she recognised both the eager, enthusiastic stare and the characteristic Theirin jawline.

"This is King Cailan," she said softly, and Leliana gave a small nod.

"Oui, these cards are a little out of date – although still accurate, for the most part. They show the current ruling monarch for each country in Thedas. Let me show you."

Over the next few hours, Leliana meticulously introduced Flora to the great ruling houses of Thedas, and the countries under their domain. Flora recognised only one, Empress Celene of House Valmont; who had been the subject of some incriminating letters that they had discovered at Ostagar. Other dynasties – such as the Pentaghasts of Nevarra – were entirely unfamiliar to her.

Still, Flora listened dutifully to Leliana as the bard elaborated in hushed, purposeful tones, and did her best to memorise the flood of new information the best she could. To compensate for her illiteracy, Flora had developed an excellent memory, which she deployed now to assist her.

After Flora had correctly named the leading families of the Free Marches – from Aurum to Vael – Leliana decided that enough was enough for one day. Flora helped her to gather up the cards, a slight frown creasing her forehead.

"Thank you for the information," she said, earnestly. "But why am I learning about all the important families of Thedas?"

Leliana shot her a quick, darting glance; then flashed a similarly evasive smile.

"Because the world is far larger than what you know, Flora of Herring," the bard murmured, skilfully avoiding a direct answer. "And it's important that you learn about it. Who knows who you'll be meeting in the future?"

"Well, I hope someone with a nice, easy name," Flora said, gravely. "Like Vael. Not Pin- Pant- Pant-gust. PANTY GHOST."

"Pentaghast!"
OOC Author Note: OK, this is pure headcanon but I always envisioned Orlesian and Fereldan Chantries looking quite different. Orlais has a lot more money, and their Chantries reflect that – very gilded, ornate and decorative, with lots of marble and beautiful sculpture. Ferelden, being poorer, more rough and ready, has a more stark, stone and iron look to their Chantry interiors; a more natural appearance. In my head, anyway!

I think it's probably a good thing that Flora isn't able to have dreams any more – I do think that she would have suffered from some pretty bad nightmares, considering what she's been through. I don't know enough about PTSD to write about it in a story – it's a hugely difficult topic, and I wouldn't do it justice – but I thought I would just touch on it with Flora unable to stop herself from envisioning the pig as a soldier killed by the Darkspawn.

Oooooh, what could Leliana possibly be preparing Flora for? Well it's obvious, lol, considering the chapter title. Flora still doesn't have a clue, haha
After dinner, Flora and Leliana were sitting up on the high ramparts overlooking the ocean. At their backs, the sun was inching itself towards the Bannorn, leaving the sky in a blended smear of pastel hues. The deep glass-green of Amaranthine was desaturated by the lowering light, the horizon melding with the distant water until it was not clear where sea ended and sky began.

Leliana had her nose buried deep in a song-book; the evening service would begin in an hour, and she did not want a single erroneous word to emerge from her lips. Flora was resting her chin in her arms on the ramparts, gazing thoughtfully out at the unbroken expanse of water. There was a small flotilla of Marcher trade ships taking advantage of a westerly wind, and she squinted to see their flags.

"That's Kirkwall," she said with reasonable confidence, more to herself then anyone else. "The one with the red flag. Kirkwall's opposite Herring. I don't know what the others are."

Leliana gave a little shrug, immersed in her text.

"The navy banner on the end is Ansberg," came a gruff, northern voice from behind them. "The chequered one belongs to Ostwick."

It was the Templar Gannorn who had spoken; his eyes still sharp despite the iron-grey of his beard and close-cropped hair.

"Ansberg," breathed Flora, the name sparking recognition in her memory. "Oh, that's where Arl Eamon and Bann Teagan were raised! They have good horses there."

"Yes, their *Margravane* is well-known for possessing the best stables in Thedas," Leliana added, eyes still fixed on her prayer book.

Just then, there came the sound of hurried footsteps ascending the rampart stair; the distinctive thud of a man taking them two at a time. Instinctively, the Templars both turned around to face the steps, and Leliana's gaze lifted from her prayer-book, fingers sliding imperceptibly towards her dagger-concealing sleeve.

Flora, however, had other ways of recognising her former brother-warden's approach, despite them no longer sharing the connection of tainted blood. She knew the sound of his tread intimately; could identify his footfall from a crowd just by the sound of his boot striking the ground.

Sure enough, Alistair soon burst onto the monastery ramparts; face flushed and with the golden band of kingship lopsided on his head. His eyes swept the basalt walkway, focusing immediately on Flora as she beamed at him, visibly delighted. Immediately, relief crashed across the king's face, and he raised his arms as he strode across the flagstones.

"Sweetheart."

Flora scuttled, crab-like, across the ramparts and Alistair folded her into his arms, exhaling unsteadily.

"Are you alright?"
"I'm fine," Flora replied, as he drew back just far enough to look her up and down, anxiously. "How are you?"

"My brain feels like it's leaking out of my ears after sitting in a room with eight other men all day, but apart from that, I'm fine too. I've missed you."

Flora gave a little grimace of sympathy, reaching up to touch the dark shadows beneath her best friend's eyes.

"Poor Alistair," she whispered, thinking in some ways, you're as trapped as I am now. "You look tired."

Alistair smiled down at her, cupping the back of Flora's head and rubbing a thumb over her ear.

"I feel like I'm awake for the first time all afternoon, being with you. Hello, Lel - how's it been?"

Leliana smiled, waving at him over her prayer-book.

"How refreshing, to be so immersed in the Maker's bosom! I feel my faith revitalised, even during the few brief hours of our residence here at Revanloch."

In the distance, a great bell began to swing back and forth on its hinges, sending out an imperious summons into the dusk. Alistair continue to stare at the bard expectantly, and Leliana relented.

"And, of course, everything has been fine. Florence and I have spent the afternoon in the library, pouring over the great dynasties of Ferelden."

"Valmont, Pen- Pentaghast, Valisti, Vael," Flora repeated, dutifully. "Why do so many of them start with vuh?"

Both Alistair and Leliana waited – with baited breath - for her to augment the question with, and why do I have to learn about them?

But Flora had launched herself on a tangent, trying to remember how to spell Celene.

"S-A-L-I-N-E-"

"Not quite, ma petite. Ah, it is almost time for Complines."

Alistair grinned, and suddenly seemed a Templar initiate of fifteen again, instinctively turning his head towards the clarion call of the bells.

"Maker, it's just like the old days," he breathed, peering down into the inner courtyard to watch columns of young recruits streaming towards the main chapel. "I still remember all the prayers. Come on baby, Eamon said we should show our faces."

The main chapel of Revanloch was high-ceilinged and commanding; with flying stone buttresses and a massive stained glass window depicting the prophesied return of the Maker. The effigy of Andraste reared up at the altar like a particularly stern schoolmistress, the eternal flame blazing away in a sculpted iron brazier.

The entire populace of Revanloch had piled into the Chantry for Complines prayers; from the lowliest kitchen-servant to the Knight-Commander himself. The initiates were crowded on cramped
wooden benches in the back, all craning their necks to see towards the Royal pew. This separate stall had been reserved for the rare occasion when a Theirin would grace the Templar monastery with his presence. This had happened from time to time with Maric; never with Cailan.

The Royal stall, however, was not particularly comfortable – especially considering that it had to house the Knight-Commander, Leliana, Flora and her two Templars, and Alistair with his four Royal Guard escort. Two more Royal Guard had been relegated to the back benches, sitting uncomfortably amongst a horde of snickering adolescents.

The Chantry Mother began the service with the traditional incantation; which called upon those present to prostrate themselves wholly to the Maker. The congregation were expected to kneel, with exception being granted to those too ill, aged, or otherwise unable to descend to their knees.

Flora duly sunk downwards, gazing assiduously at the flagstones. Her weak knee gave a twinge of pain and she scowled, internally willing it to behave. Alistair narrowed his eyes sideways at her, mouthing something that she couldn't quite decipher.

"You don't have to kneel," he whispered, trying not to be heard above the Chantry Mother's sonorous tones.

He then said something that was drowned out by the general murmuring of the congregation. Flora blinked, unsure if she had heard him correctly.

"'You're too fat?'" she repeated, indignantly. "FAT?"

Alistair gaped at her for a second, then shook his head vehemently.

"No!" he replied, wide-eyed; his response muffled by the congregation as they rose to their feet. "I said: 'you can stand'."

The king looked affronted as he reached down to help haul his pregnant mistress to her feet.

"I'd never call you fat, Lo," he whispered indignantly in her ear as the Chantry Mother held out her arms, raising a beatific stare to the heavens. "Not in this Age, or the next. You're the most beautiful girl I've ever seen."

Leliana narrowed her eyes at both of them, managing to glower pointedly without moving her head. The Chantry Mother then turned her arms towards the vast effigy of Andraste, her heavy cream sleeves hanging down like wings.

"O, Maker's Bride!" she entreated, voice echoing to the vaulted ceiling. "As we prepare to read Your words, help us to decipher their true meaning so that we might serve You better!"

She turned around with hands outstretched expectantly, waiting to receive the Chant of Light, from which the reading would be taken.

A Templar emerged from a side passage, carrying the heavy tome reverently on an intricately-carved presentation board. Aware that the eyes of the congregation were on him, the young Templar raised his curly blond head and strode with militaristic precision towards the altar.

As Lieutenant Rutherford approached the Chantry Mother, his attention was diverted by the gathering of unusual guests in the front pew. Glancing sideways, he caught sight of a pair of pale grey, Mabari-hound eyes: meeting his like lightning arcing through a summer storm. As she recognised him, the girl with the storm-coloured eyes smiled; the wide mouth that he had dreamt about for so many months curving upwards.
The young lieutenant dropped both tray and tome, the heavy leather-bound book falling to the flagstones with an echoing thud that could have roused the Maker Himself. The initiates in the back rows snickered, nudging each other as the Chantry Mother hissed like an albino bat. Flora, who had not expected her smile of greeting to go awry, looked anxious.

Now a luminous shade of scarlet, Cullen Rutherford scrambled to pick up the Chant of Light, fumbling to return the book to its correct place on the tray. He presented it with head bowed to the Chantry Mother, rigid with contrition. She took it with a snort of disgust, silencing the giggling initiates with a sweep of her scathing glare.

"He's still infatuated with her, then," murmured Leliana, fondly. "Ah, the first tender follies of the heart can be enduring."

Alistair searched his memory, placing the blond Templar as the one who had been assigned to guard Connor during their stay at South Reach. He also recalled the lieutenant helpless in a desire demon's clutches in Kinloch Hold; and how Cullen had confessed a secret and hopeless passion for a certain young red-headed apprentice, who kept being expelled from class to clean the corridors. The lieutenant had known that Flora frequently broke curfew to sneak down to the kitchens, and that she used to regularly climb up onto the Tower roof, and had not reported either misdemeanour to his seniors.

Cullen, retreating to stand beside the brazier, darted another glance at the Royal stall. His stare moved discretely from the swollen-stomached Flora, to Alistair standing tall and crowned at her side. On the last occasion that they had parted, Cullen had rode back beneath the South Reach portcullis in a clatter of hoof-beats, dismounted haphazardly, and pressed an impulsive kiss to a gawping Flora's mouth. The young lieutenant had been convinced that he would never see this object of his youthful desire again; hence such uncharacteristic boldness.

Now, to Cullen's mild horror, Flora – or the Hero of Ferelden as she was now known – was standing before him, alive and healthy. He knew that she had killed the Archdemon, and had been told that her connection with the Fade had been severed. He had also heard the rumours that she was carrying the Theirin's child; gossip which was now quite obviously confirmed.

Alistair narrowed his eyes. Leliana made a rare error of judgement, patting him on the elbow.

"You don't need to be jealous of young Lieutenant Rutherford, Alistair," she whispered, reassuringly. "He wouldn't make advances on land already claimed by the king."

"No, no- " Alistair replied under his breath, his reply partly drowned out by some enthusiastic preaching from the Chantry Mother. "That doesn't bother me – Maker knows I'm used to people lusting after Flo – but wouldn't this Rutherford make a good guard for her while she's here? If he cares for Flora, he'd never let a shred of harm come to her."

Meanwhile, Flora knew full well that she owed Cullen both for his discretion at the Circle, and for his instruction in how to resist a silencing spell. The latter had saved her life during an attack by a Darkspawn necromancer, and she had never had a chance to thank him properly. She tried to catch his eye, but Cullen was now gazing fixedly at the vast, stern face of Andraste, his cheeks still pink.

The Chantry Mother finished her reading and made the gesture for a hymn, clearing her throat as she prepared to launch into the opening verse.

"Alistair, that would be tantamount to cruelty," Leliana retorted, turning her hymn book to the correct page. "You can't make the boy watch the object of his desire sleeping, undressing, washing herself in the bath. How is he ever supposed to overcome his longing if you flaunt her before him?"
Alistair grunted, reluctantly admitting that the bard had a point. The opening bars of the hymn rang out, and he duly joined in with Leliana's soaring soprano vocals.

Flora listened to her former brother-warden's rich, clear baritone and admired how well it melded with their bard's crystalline tones. She knew that nobody wanted to hear her frog-croak of a singing voice, and so opened and closed her mouth at random intervals, unable to decipher the words of the prayer book fast enough to mime correctly.

She was relieved when the hymn came to an end and the congregation sat. Her lower back was aching where the child put pressure on it, and her feet also had a tendency of swelling up in her boots when she stood still for too long.

The Chantry Mother advanced once more to the pulpit, her eyes burning with sacred fervour.

"Before we adjourn with a closing prayer," she began, clasping her hands so that her sleeves hung down like cream-coloured altar-cloths. "We must thank the Maker for His superlative generosity, with regard to our own dear Hero of Ferelden."

Still not used to the title, it took Flora a moment to realise that the priestess was talking about her. She looked up with mild trepidation, feeling Alistair stiffen against her arm.

"The lady Cousland once suffered from the terrible affliction of magic, constantly at risk from the malevolent forces of the Fade. As reward for her great service to our nation, the Maker purified the lady and purged her of this… abnormality. Let us all give thanks for His benevolence!"

Chapter End Notes

OOC Author Note: Aaah, poor Flo! Hearing her beloved, now departed spirits referred to as an affliction.
Memories of the Peraquialus

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Chantry Mother continued in similar vein for the next ten minutes, exalting the great generosity of the Maker for purging the contamination of magic from their Hero of Ferelden. Flora listened in silent horror as her beloved spirits – her Silver Knight and Golden Lady, who had sacrificed their own ancient existence to preserve their mortal ally – were described as a disease to be cured, an abnormality to be surgically removed.

If Flora had been raised at Highever, she would have raised her voice in indignation; interrupted the Chantry Mother with a loud and vocal objection, secure in the knowledge that she was a Cousland and therefore impervious to repercussion from squawking clerics.

Yet Flora had spent her childhood in Herring, where she had been expected to bite her tongue and defer to her elders. So, instead of protesting at the cleric's misguided sermon, she bowed her head and tried – in vain - not to snuffle. Tears began to run down her cheeks in silent, continuous streams, and she bit down on her lip to stifle a sob before it could emerge.

Alistair glanced sideways at the odd noise, eyes widening as he took in Flora's wet cheeks and damp lashes. Reaching out, he anchored her hand tightly in his, clasping their fingers together in the old fish-rope ritual.

"Sweetheart," he whispered, wishing fervently that he could embrace her. "My darling."

The service ended after the thanksgiving prayer; rows of relieved initiates filing out to retire to their dormitories for the night. The Chantry Mother disappeared with the Knight-Commander in a waft of cream linen and imported incense, with a gaggle of sisters following in her wake like geese.

Now that the vast majority of the congregation had departed, Flora let loose the plaintive wail that she had been struggling to suppress. Alistair drew her against his chest as she huddled on the bench beside him, wrapping his arm around her shoulder and murmuring in her ear. The Royal Guard and Flora's Templar guardians stood to one side, slightly awkwardly.

"My spirits weren't like a disease," Flora protested tearfully, as Alistair nodded and murmured soothing placation. "They've saved more people than... than I can count. They've saved your life."

"On many occasions, my love."

"They saved Ferelden. I couldn't have killed the Archdemon without them."

"I know, baby."

"And they've gone! They've left me."

"I know." Alistair kissed the side of her furrowed forehead, using his thumb to brush the tears from her lower lashes. "I know, my darling. They don't understand, you know how the Chantry is."

Flora sniffed, accepting a square of perfumed silk from Leliana and mopping at her eyes and nose.

"I wish I were still a mage," she whispered, glumly. "I was useful as a mage. I healed people. I cured the taint. I could've helped Ferelden recover!"
"You still can, love," Alistair said thickly, hating the sight of his best friend and lover so distressed.

"How?!"

Alistair shot a quick glance at Leliana, who shook her head a fraction. She's not ready for you to propose, the bard's blue stare whispered. She's still grieving the loss of her spirits.

"Well, by helping me with this… being king," Alistair said instead, bringing Flora's fingers to his mouth and kissing her bitten nails. "It helps me to understand things better when I explain them to you. In fact, can we go over what the Council discussed today? I want to hear your thoughts on the refugee situation."

Flora wasn't sure how valuable her contribution would be, but sniffled her acquiescence; after all, she did always want to help. Alistair drew her face up to his and kissed her on the mouth, heedless of their sacred surroundings and assorted observers.

There was one unsanctioned onlooker who was still hovering awkwardly near the pew, gloved hands tucked behind his back. He had waited patiently, shifting from one foot to another, as the Theirin comforted his pregnant mistress.

"Lieutenant Rutherford," Leliana said, a catlike smile in her tone as she rose to her feet. "My, it's been a while since we saw each other at South Reach."

Cullen nodded, swallowing his nerves as he bowed before the king and the girl who had risen from commoner, to teyrn's daughter, to Hero of Ferelden in the time that he had known her.

"Your Majesty; Flor- Lady Cousland," the young lieutenant corrected quickly, raising his face to hers. "May I have permission to… say a few words?"

"Lieutenant Rutherford," replied Flora, wiping her nose unceremoniously on her sleeve. "I asked you at South Reach to call me Flora."

"But-"

"You've known me since I was fifteen," Flora continued, patiently. "You've seen me dressed as a lemon for a Satinalia ball. You don't have to call me Lady-anything."

Cullen opened his mouth to protest, then his face contorted oddly as he realised that he was about to try and argue with the Hero of Ferelden; which seemed distinctly worse than just calling her by her preferred name.

"Flora," he said eventually, coughing to hide his embarrassment and gazing up at the moonlight filtering through the stained glass window. "I just wanted to congratulate – thank you for your bravery in killing the Archdemon and ending the Fifth Blight."

Flora smiled up at him, still slightly damp-eyed.

I made a promise to Duncan, in the Korcari Wilds. I kept it.

"You're welcome," she said inanely, for want of anything else to say.

Cullen glanced behind him, then lowered his voice and took a step forward. Heedless of the stares of Knight-Captain Gannorn and Chanter Devotia; when he spoke, the words emerged low and sincere.

"And… I'm sorry for the loss of your magic," the young Templar said, quietly. "You had a great –
a great gift. I still remember that ship you created for the Guerrin lad. It was the most beautiful thing I ever saw."

Flora swallowed, remembering how she had summoned a simulacrum of the Peraquialus in the courtyard of South Reach. It had been misting a fine drizzle, the real stars veiled by cloud; yet the cobbles had gleamed like they were cast from gold, reflecting the light from her counterfeit constellation.

"Thank you," she said, touched that this embodiment of the Chantry had dared to voice sympathy for the loss of her spirits. "I appreciate it. I hope I can visit Connor soon. How is he?"

"Doing well, my la- Flora. He's enjoying his studies, and the company of other children."

Flora smiled, suddenly feeling tears of a different sort prickling at the corners of her eyes. Seeing the Templar looking alarmed, she hastened to explain.

"Sorry. I'm not sad, it's… this." She pointed vaguely in the direction of her stomach. "It puts my body all out of balance."

Cullen glanced down at her protruding belly, then across at Alistair, then back at Flora.

"Congratulations, Your Majesty," he said dutifully, and Alistair seemed to swell an inch with pride.

"Thank you."

The young lieutenant made his excuses, stating that he had to supervise the younger recruits in the dormitories. As Cullen disappeared down a discreet side-passage, Alistair reached out to grip Flora's hand; squeezing her fingers affectionately between his.

"Let's go back up to your chamber."

A pair of Tranquil servants had been assigned to attend Flora in her quarters. Seeing Flora quail at the thought of being waited on, Alistair dismissed them both and built up the fire himself; having had months of practice while travelling around Ferelden.

Leliana perched herself at the writing desk in the corner, scribing the first of many letters that she intended to send during the month's confinement. This particular one was to Wynne, who was planning to visit the monastery before the week was out.

Alistair's Royal Guard were stationed in the corridor outside, glowering at passers-by though the thin slits in their closed-face helmets. Within the chamber itself, the two Templar conversed briefly before reaching agreement.

Knight-Captain Gannorn quickly and efficiently removed the outer layers of his armour, revealing a thin set of linens beneath. Without ceremony, he lowered himself to the pallet beside the door and closed his eyes. Chantry Devotia, who was apparently on the first shift of night watch, continued to stare impassively across the chamber.

Alistair and Flora sat together on the bed, he propped up against the cushions and she with her legs resting over his lap. Their boots stood neatly side-by-side on the flagstones, so not to mark the clean linen bedding.
Alistair was recanting the events discussed in the council meeting, while rubbing the day's stiffness from Flora's knee with expert thumbs, the leather strapping curled on the mattress. He had the notes he had taken during the meeting to one side for reference; glancing down at them on occasion to check certain points. Going through the items discussed – and simplifying the material so that someone with Flora's lack of political acumen could comprehend – helped to consolidate them within Alistair's head; aiding his own understanding.

Flora asked the occasional question for clarification; her brow furrowed in concentration as she tried to keep track of Ferelden's intricate statecraft.

"The frustrating thing is, baby, the Blight is over," Alistair said, grimacing as he reached for the leather strapping. "Yet the refugee ships keep leaving. How are we supposed to rebuild our country if half our population has fled to the Marches?"

He let out a short sigh, tying the strap around her knee with a quickness borne of long practice.

Flora, who had been down to the docks on several occasions to offer her services as a healer, remembered the miasma of bitterness and despair that rose from the huddled masses as they squabbled to earn a place on one of the departing ships.

"A lot of them are from Gwaren and Lothering," she said, recalling fragments that she had picked up from the queue of people waiting to be mended. "They have nothing to go back to. The land is poisoned."

Alistair gave a nod of acknowledgement, his fingers resting idly on her knee.

"I know, love. Wynne seems to think that the land will recover, based on previous Blights. But, it'll take years."

Flora gave a little frown of sympathy. Alistair, who did not want to overburden his sister-warden too much whilst she was dealing with the loss of her spirits, flashed a smile and leaned forward to kiss her on the cheek.

"Anyway, darling, have you thought any more about your feast? The armies have had their celebrations now, as have the nobility – soon, it'll be your turn."

Flora blinked: she had almost forgotten about the only boon that she had requested on ending the Blight successfully.

*I don't want a parade,* she had said, half-joking, months ago. *I don't want a big party. I want a FEAST."

"Is that actually going to happen then?" she asked, wide-eyed, and Alistair smiled at her.

"Of course, Lo! The Knight-Commander has already given permission for you to visit Denerim to attend, under escort. The castle chef is coming here to discuss your ideas, so start thinking about how many courses you can fit in that stomach, my love."

Flora bit absent-mindedly at her thumb-nail, brow furrowed. In the background, Leliana's quill scratched away at the parchment; the bard utterly absorbed in her own missive.

"Huh!"

Alistair pressed his lips to his sister-warden's ear, inhaling the familiar scent of her tangled, dark red mass of hair. She instinctively leaned into the kiss, tilting her head back against his shoulder.
The king's fingers, resting on his lover's strapped knee, inched upwards towards her thigh. Flora tended to favour knee-length tunics with boots and bare legs; especially in this summery eastern climate, where she found herself overheating rapidly. Alistair, on the other hand, simply favoured any outfit of Flora's that allowed him to gaze at her legs unimpeded.

Flora watched the progress of his hand with mild fascination, wondering when propriety would overcome desire. Alistair inhaled unsteadily as his fingers brushed the bare skin beneath the woollen hem of her tunic, then withdrew his hand with great reluctance.

"Give me a hug," he murmured in Flora's ear, glancing towards the stern face of Chanter Devotia. "Nothing improper about that."

The Templar was murmuring quietly to herself, eyes closed, clearly in the middle of some obscure incantation. Leliana was still scribbling furiously away at her letter to Wynne, facing towards the hearth to gain the best light.

Alistair leaned back against the headboard, holding out his arms expectantly. Flora eyed her brother-warden dubiously, but allowed him to manoeuvre her onto his lap; a shift in position made more awkward by her swollen stomach. Once she was settled on his thighs, he reached out to clasp his hands around the small of her back, thumbs kneading instinctively into the sore muscles.

"You're unique, Flora of Herring," he murmured, as she went as pink as the lieutenant from the Chantry. "It's no wonder that Rutherford chap is still infatuated."

"Actually," Flora informed him, solemnly. "There's another Flora who lives in the village, it's quite a common name up north. So there's two Flora of Herrings."

Alistair leaned forward, resting his chin gently on her shoulder. When he replied, his lips brushed slow and deliberate against her ear.

"But no one like you, my love."

Flora felt his breath hot against her skin, and was suddenly very conscious of her position straddling his thighs. When he kissed her, council notes discarded to one side on the blankets, she could taste the desire tart and longing on his lips. Against her better judgement, she let her former brother-warden's tongue gain entry to her mouth; where he proceeded to steal the air from her lungs within moments.

As they kissed with the slow, languid ease of familiarity and long practice, Alistair's fingers caressed her throat, tracing an arc over her throbbing pulse. His thumb moved down to stroke along her collarbone, edging aside the woollen neckline. Relying on her upper body to shield his actions, he reached discretely for the neatly tied bow keeping the front of the tunic closed. With Flora's guidance, Alistair found the correct lace and gave it a subtle tug, mouth still working hers; biting on the lower lip and suckling the tongue.

With the laces sufficiently loosened, it was relatively simple for Alistair to slide his hand inside the richly dyed lambswool. Flora inhaled unsteadily as calloused fingers stole over her naked breast, testing the ripeness of the newly swollen flesh with a soft squeeze.

He broke off the kiss just long enough to whisper in Flora's ear, unable to resist pulling gently on the lobe with his teeth.

"Let me know if I'm being too rough, baby," Alistair murmured throatily; recalling how she had told him that they were tender. "I just want to touch you for a little bit. Maker, you're gorgeous."
Alistair was as gentle as his word; and his care and discreetness awarded him several precious minutes of being to fondle his lover without interruption. It was the first time that he had touched her since before the final battle.

"Aha, perfect! I'll send this off with a servant," declared Leliana suddenly, holding out a wax stick close to the flames in preparation to seal her letter. "I wonder where the raven-coop is?"

Alistair, who had been enthusiastically tonguing his sister-warden's flushed nipple, reluctantly lifted his head. He pulled the laces of the tunic tight just as the bard turned around, waving the sealed envelope between elegant fingers.

"I have no idea," he replied evenly, remarkably composed considering the circumstances. "Any suggestions, Lo?"

"Nnh…"

Leliana immediately squinted in suspicion, seeing Flora slumped back against the blankets with a vague, slightly dazed expression scrawled across her face.

"I hope you two haven't been engaged in anything improper," the bard hissed, her duck-egg blue eyes wide and accusatory. "Florence is here for purposes of reflection, prayer and chastity. Not to be groped."

Alistair raised his eyebrows down at Flora, who assumed her best devout expression and gazed back up at him piously.

"Exactly," she said airily, with an air of virtue that had Alistair stifling a snort of amusement. "No improperness, please."

"Well, then," he replied, grinning and reaching for the abandoned council notes. "I'll leave you to reflect, pray and be chaste in peace, my little pilgrim."

At the prospect of her brother-warden departing for the night, Flora sat up anxiously; her pale eyes seeking out his. Alistair leaned forward and pressed his lips to her forehead, murmuring assurances that he would be back tomorrow evening.

"Promise?"

"I swear, Lo. Not even a Sixth Blight could stop me."

"Aah, don't even say it!"

Chapter End Notes

OOC Author Note: Poor Flo, she's far from over the loss of her spirits yet!
A short while later, the Chanter blinked and cleared her throat, standing up a little straighter. Flora offered the woman a slightly tentative smile, grimacing as her hairbrush worked through a fist-sized tangle.

"'The Imperium slept. In their lofty palaces, they dreamed of the Maker's Palace, golden and shining,'" replied Devotia, her strange violet-hued eyes gleaming in the firelight.

Nonplussed, Flora looked to Leliana for an explanation. The lay sister was massaging some perfumed Orlesian unguent into her skin with her fingertips, a small hand-mirror balanced on her knee.

"Yes, we are planning on retiring now," Leliana informed the Chanter, with a slightly irritable toss of the head. "Give us a moment."

Flora smoothed Alistair's shirt down over her thighs, settling back against the bed-cushions and yawning. Her brother-warden's spare tunics had been her nightclothes of choice during their travels; and wearing such now made her feel oddly close to Alistair, despite the four miles of distance between them.

Leliana moved about the chamber a few moments more, clad in a demure linen night-robe with a subtle lace trim. Once finished with her evening rituals, the bard dropped to her knees before the bed and began to murmur her prayers. The Chanter gave a small nod of approval from her position beside the door, arms folded across her armoured chest.

Flora listened absent-mindedly to Leliana's quiet devotions, feeling the little creature shift position within her belly.

Don't start getting too energetic now, she thought sternly to her own stomach. It's bed-time. Go to sleep.

Something – a rounded skull or the curve of a shoulder – nudged against her from the inside. Flora instinctively dropped her fingers to the firm mound of linen-covered flesh, returning the pressure.

I'm sorry that I denied your existence for so long, she thought remorsefully as Leliana clambered into bed beside her. I'm sorry for putting you in danger, though I don't regret it. I'm sorry that I didn't want you for such a long time. I thought a lot of bad things and wished that you were gone. I'm sorry.

The creature nudged against her palm and Flora slid her fingers further down to cup her stomach, feeling a sudden and unexpected surge of affection for the little creature lodged within her, which had – against all odds- clung so fiercely to life.

Leliana flashed Flora a brief smile, leaning across to blow out the candle.

"Goodnight, ma cherie. May the Maker watch over you as you sleep!"

Maker and Templars.
Flora smiled back at the bard, sliding down into the cushions and pulling the blanket up to her chin.

The fireplace gave forth a constant, low crackling; the splitting of wood and spitting of sparks forming a gentle accompaniment to Leliana's snoring. In the background, a westerly ocean wind howled through Revanloch's decrepit ramparts, whistling about the crumbling towers and rattling the windows in their loose-fitting frames.

Flora listened to Leliana's soft, even breathing as the lay sister slept curled beside her. The gleam of a silverite blade was just visible beneath the bard's pillow, and Flora resolved to thank Leliana once again in the morning for volunteering to join her during her confinement. Impulsively, she reached out and stroked the curve of Leliana's skull, smoothing down a stray strand of hair. Leliana grunted in her sleep, shifting slightly in response to the feather-light touch.

To Flora's annoyance, her body seemed to be conspiring with the little creature lodged in her belly, their joint aim to keep her awake. The baby kept nudging impatiently into her kidneys; her lower back ached and her neck was so stiff that she could barely move her head without a twinge of pain.

Too uncomfortable to sleep and missing her brother-warden's solid presence, Flora stared up at the wooden ceiling beams. She decided to count as high as she was able – Finian had once told her that he used to number horses jumping over a fence to encourage sleep. Unfortunately, she had forgotten what number came after twenty nine – thirty just sounded wrong – and gave up shortly afterwards.

Instead, Flora gazed up at the ceiling; mentally projecting the map of Thedas against the plaster and beams.

*The Pentaghasts of Nevarra. The Valmonts of Orlais. The Vaels of Starkhaven.*

By the time that Flora had finished recalling the name of each dynasty memorised earlier, the midnight change in watch was taking place.

Suddenly, there came the sound of footsteps from inside the room, and the shadows shifted against the wall. Flora squinted into the darkness, only to see Knight-Captain Gannorn advancing across the chamber.

Leliana, whose eyelids had sprung open on hearing the approaching steps, stayed awake just long enough to confirm the Templar's identity. Retrieving her hand from where it had slid beneath her pillow towards the blade, she rolled over and immersed herself in dreams once again.

Gannorn came to a halt next to Flora's side of the bed. Divesting himself of a glove, he reached his hand towards her face. With short, efficient and long-practised movements, he leaned forward to check her pupil and her temperature. Flora allowed him to touch her face unimpeded, more than used to these variant of Templar checks.

*It's pointless, anyway. My connection with the Fade is gone. I've as much magic as a dwarf.*

Once finished, the Knight-Captain gave a businesslike grunt and withdrew his hand. He made as though to return to his station beside the door, then paused abruptly.

"You weren't asleep."

Flora shook her head, then realised that it was dark and replied instead in the negative.

"Are you not tired? You were yawning throughout *Complines."

"My back hurts," she replied, slightly glumly. "It aches too much to sleep."
Gannorn paused, something indescribable flickering across his face. The next moment, he had retrieved several cushions from the foot of the bed and instructed her to lean forward.

The curious Flora obeyed, bending over as far as her swollen stomach would allow. The Templar positioned the cushions carefully at the base of the headboard, then requested that she return to normal position once more.

Flora did so, and was astonished at how the pressure on her lower back had been relieved.

"Oh!" she whispered, shifting against the cushions. "That's better, thank you. How did you – how did you know?"

The Knight-Captain made no reply for a moment, his gaze shifting towards the moonlit window. At first, Flora thought that the Templar would not deign to answer; then at last he spoke, his voice carefully neutral.

"I had a family, once."

A single, clean note of sadness rang through the seven syllables. Flora stared at the man for a moment, unsure what to say. Then the Knight-Captain gave a soft grunt and turned away, striding back into the shadows beside the door.

The next few days quickly fell into a similar pattern; Flora and Leliana both establishing the routine that they would follow for the next month. After breaking their fast, they would spend much of the morning in the draughty library, sitting at the reading tables and practising a variety of skills. To avoid raising suspicion, Leliana interspersed the study of the various Theodesian dynasties with more basic numeracy and literacy.

The bard need not have worried; Flora had never been formally tutored before, and was so delighted at the novelty of being educated that she did not deign to question why she was learning about the Orlesian occupation of Ferelden, alongside how to count to one hundred.

Lunch each day took place within the great hall, before two hundred whispering initiates. The novelty of having the beautiful Hero of Ferelden – a girl only a handful of years older than themselves – staying at the monastery, had not yet worn off. Hawk-like eyes followed Flora and Leliana's every move, from their entrance into the great hall to the setting down of forks at the end of the meal.

On the first day Flora had found this constant scrutiny desperately uncomfortable; by the third, she found it mildly disconcerting; by the fifth, she was able to mostly ignore it. Once again, Leliana waited with baited breath for Flora to enquire as to the reason why she needed to become so used to dining in public, yet Flora accepted it as she had done so many other changes in her life.

She and Leliana had also quickly grown used to the silent, constant presence of Knight-Commander Gannorn and Chanter Devotia. The two Templars followed ceaselessly in Flora's footsteps, flanking the doorway of whichever chamber she happened to be in, treading the corridors a handful of feet behind her. After a time, Flora barely even felt the heat of their stares; willingly submitting to their checks of her temperature and pupil-size. Each time that they confirmed that she had no connection with the Fade, a pang of sorrow twisted in Flora's gut.

Every afternoon, without fail, one of Flora's companions would arrive at Revanloch to spend several hours in her company. Knowing that Flora was confined within the walls of the monastery – and,
unlike Leliana, would not be immersing herself in prayer and reflection – they often brought something to pass the time together.

One such bright and sunny day, Teagan arrived at Revlanloch monastery with his saddlebag tucked beneath his arm. He passed the Royal Guard posted at the outer gate, and then the second pair flanking the internal doors; taking a deep breath of sunny, sea-scented air before stepping into the cool dampness of the monastery interior.

A young initiate showed the bann along the labyrinthine corridors, past a plethora of small study cells. Their footsteps echoed for dozens of yards down the corridors, the sound oddly muffled by the thickness of the stone walls.

The initiate gestured Teagan through an archway into an external courtyard; a small patch of sunshine within the musty enclosure of Revanloch. It had a small water fountain in one corner, and was lined with bushes half-wilting in the summer heat.

Leliana, clad in leathers rather than Chantry regalia, was perched on the edge of the water fountain and sharpening her blades. Flora was sitting at a small table in the shade, peering studiously down at a series of pebbles that she had arranged on the surface before her.

The bard, who had identified Teagan by his stride before he had even ducked out into the sunshine, greeted him with a regal Orlesian wave.

"Did you have a good journey, Teagan?" she called, not looking up from the whetstone gliding silkily over her blade.

"Aye," replied Teagan, glancing over to the two solemn-faced Templars posted several yards away. "Maker's Breath, this place is a soulless pile of rocks."

"Au contraire!" murmured the bard, with amusing piety considering the blade that she was currently sharpening. "It is full of soul, and devotion to the Maker!"

Teagan let out a dubious snort, crossing to Flora's side. She smiled up at him, squinting slightly against the brightness.

"Hello, poppet." Teagan ducked his head to kiss her cheek. "How are you?"

"Tired," Flora replied, honestly. "I'd forgotten what it was like to be woken up every few hours. It used to happen all the time at the Circle."

Teagan's brow creased as he took a seat at the small table, darting a pale green Guerrin stare across at the two impassive Templars flanking the doorway. They gazed back, silent and motionless; their gloved hands clasped before them like pious statues.

"Well, we can't have that, can we?" he murmured, resolving to mention it to Alistair on his return. "How is the babe?"

Flora reflexively glanced down at the swollen mound of her stomach, stretching the tunic's grey lambswool.

"It keeps nudging me," she said, slightly bemused. "Is it trying to... tell me something?"

Teagan, who was equally clueless when it came to such matters, gave a shrug.

"I'm not sure, petal."
"It means that the babe is large," Leliana called from across the courtyard, drawing her knife in an imaginary slash across an unfortunate opponent's throat. "It's growing quickly."

"Theirins do tend to produce large infants," Teagan added, reaching down to the leather saddlebag at his feet. "Maric was the size of a Mabari pup when he was born, and Rowan took a week to recover from the birth of Cailan."

Flora blanched several degrees, envisioning the additional months of growth that the child still had to come. The bann saw her eyes widen a fraction, and hastened to distract her.

"Anyway, I've brought this. Do you remember how to play?"

He lifted a polished wooden case onto the table, opening it up to reveal an ebon and ivory chessboard. The individual pieces were stored carefully in a carved holder to one side; their gleaming faces reflecting the afternoon sun.

"Oh," Flora breathed, reaching out to run her fingertip along the ridged surface of the counters. "I think I remember. These prawns are my favourite."

Teagan hid a smile, deftly arranging the pieces in their correct places on the board.

"Pawns."

They played several games as the sun inched its way towards the hills of the Bannorn. It soon became abundantly clear that Flora had no idea how to play – she slid her Chantry Mothers forwards instead of diagonally, and repeatedly tried to capture Teagan's king with her pawn.

On one occasion, she claimed to hear a dog barking in the passage and sent Teagan to investigate, only to quickly steal all of his most important pieces when his back was turned. Teagan returned to find half of his counters missing, and a small pebble where his queen should have stood.

"Where've my knights gone?" he demanded, in feigned outrage. "And my queen."

"They've been taken hostage by my prawn army," Flora explained airily, gesturing to where his counters were lined up neatly on her side of the board. "They are prisoners of war."

"I'm not sure those tactics are in the rule book," Teagan countered, raising one eyebrow.

"Well, I can't read the rule book!"

The bann laughed, his gaze settling on Flora as she sat opposite him, solemn and entirely unrepentant.

*She's guileless,* he thought, suddenly. *And charming in a way that wasn't learnt at court."

After Teagan had won three games in a row, Leliana laid down her blades and came to offer Flora assistance. The bard whispered instructions, using an elegant finger to sketch out potential moves; Flora followed the orders dutifully, and won the next two games.

Finally, Teagan and Leliana played each other; bann versus bard. It was a lengthy match, with the final winning move going to a triumphant Leliana. Flora applauded as the lay sister slid her queen across to join her king.

"And you didn't even need to sacrifice any of your prawns," she whispered, approvingly. "I wish I was as clever as you."
Leliana smiled, eyeing the ivory king and queen as they stood proudly alongside each other.

"These are beautifully carved pieces," she murmured after a moment, nudging the tip of her fingernail against the queen's finely hewn jaw. "Such intricate designs. This one has got the same cheekbones as you, Flora. In fact…"

The bard paused, her gaze sliding briefly towards Teagan before settling on their unsuspecting young Cousland.

"I'm going to name this piece Queen Florence. Since it resembles you so very much."

Leliana held her breath after delivering the seemingly innocuous statement, peering at Flora from beneath her eyelashes.

Flora appeared to be lost in thought, her brow furrowed deeply.

"Why is the knight counter just a horse?" she said after a moment, perturbed. "Horses can't use swords. Did the knight fall off its back?"

Teagan looked at Leliana, and the bard gave a mild shrug.

_She doesn't even register her own name being used in conjunction with 'queen'._

The daylight waned; the Templar initiates snuck surreptitious glances into the inner courtyard as they passed from drill to afternoon prayers. A servant came out with a tray of small pastries, blushing as the bann flashed her an appreciative smile.

"Alright," Teagan said, as the first ochre clouds of sunset crept across the horizon. "I should be getting back to the city."

He checked that each chess piece had been returned to its proper place, before closing the polished wooden case and sliding it back into his saddlebag. Flora pushed herself to her feet as the bann rose from the chair, wondering at the additional effort that this movement now took.

"Thank you for coming to visit me," she said, earnestly. "I appreciate it a lot."

"Of course, poppet," Teagan replied, slinging the leather pack over his shoulder. "We're all counting down the days until you return to Denerim."

"Me too," said Flora, solemnly.

This was not strictly true; she had some idea of the length of a _month_ (the time it took for a spratling cod to develop fins), but had only a vague conception of how many _days_ that consisted of.

"I'll probably pass Alistair on the way here. I'm glad to see you and the babe looking so well, pet."

A characteristic that had always set Flora aside from her fellow inhabitants of Herring, was her readiness to initiate contact with others. Teagan gritted his teeth as she embraced him without reservation, allowing his mind to wander for several moments. The drabness of Flora's soft grey tunic and the dishevelment of her braid only seemed to emphasise the striking artistry of her features; the pale eyes, the full, sulky lips, the rich, ox-blood hue of the hair.

_Still your nephew's lover_, the more rational part of his brain reminded him, sternly. _Carrying his child._

The distant, sonorous summon of the dinner bell echoed, rousing the bann from his reverie. A
constant attendant to the demands of her stomach, Flora withdrew and began to shift from foot to foot, impatiently.

Leliana walked Teagan as far as the archway leading to the main passage, conscious of her promise to never stray from Flora's sight. The lay-sister smiled and nodded at the Chantry officials they passed, mumuring to the bann from the corner of her mouth.

"She's half your age, you know. Literally."

Teagan grunted; he was well-cognisant of this particular fact.

"Why nurture a sapling that won't survive?" Leliana continued, and there was an element of kindness within her quiet reprimand. "It cannot be easy to desire that which will never come to pass."

There came a sudden crash of tableware from behind them, and both turned towards the source of the noise. An elven servant carrying a tray of silverware across the courtyard had been startled by a pair of high-spirited recruits; dropping the contents of her arms everywhere.

Flora, who had immediately gone to assist, was kneeling down with her head turned sideways against the cobbles, trying to squint beneath a decorative flower planter.

"I think the bowl's gone under here," she called, looking around for something to assist her. "I need something long and skinny to get it out! My arms are too short."

As a bemused Chanter Devotia drew her sword and strode across the courtyard; Teagan returned his gaze to Leliana, with a resigned shrug.

"If the Maker ever instructs you on how to abandon your desire for a sweet-hearted lass, with the guts to kill an Archdemon, and a painter's dream of a face," he replied, bleakly. "Do let me know; because I can't see any way out of it. Andraste knows that I've tried."

Just then, Flora let out a squawk of triumph; crouched on the cobblestones with the fugitive sugar bowl held aloft.

"Ha! Here you go." She used the hem of her tunic to wipe the dirt from the silverware, before handing it back to the startled elven servant. "Good as new. Well, apart from the dent. Just blame it on me, I always drop things."

Leliana let out a sigh under her breath, reaching out to put a hand on Teagan's elbow. Bann and bard shared a glance of mutual understanding; they had spent several nights whiling away the hours in the same bed, both fully aware that the other desired a different partner.

"Safe journey back to Denerim, Bann Teagan," she murmured, softly.

Chapter End Notes

OOC Author Note: How obvious are Leliana's hints? "I'M GOING TO CALL THIS PIECE QUEEN FLORENCE", and Flora is just like, clueless lol.

Poor Teagan! He needs to find a nice girlfriend, any ideas? Haha.
As the younger Guerrin departed, Flora noticed something tall and white on the courtyard table. Advancing, she realised what it was with a small grimace of dismay.

"Oh! Bann Teagan forgot one of his chess pieces," she breathed, picking up the elegantly carved figure and rolling it against the flat of her scarred palm. "What's this? The Chantry Mother?"

"No," replied Leliana, with an inward snort at the Fereldan noble's attempt at subtlety. "It's the queen, Florence. Why don't you… look after it until he visits next?"

If the bard had been looking for any flicker of realisation on Flora's face, she would be disappointed. Flora slid the piece into her pocket without a second thought, her ears pricking at the sound of the dinner gong.

The evening arrived with hushed gentleness, streaking the sky with hues of ochre, blush and apricot. Even the soft light of the waning day could not lend much beauty to the harsh edges of Revanloch. Some of its crumbling balconies and decrepit turrets were masked by the violet shadow, yet its underlying brutalist ugliness persisted.

Flora, who was from the equally offensive-to-the-eyes village of Herring, found the monastery's unapologetic drabness comforting. As she and Leliana returned to their quarters after dinner, the bard continued to contrast Revanloch to an abbey near Val Royeaux where she had once spent a summer. If the two Templars following silently in their wake took offence at the unfavourable comparison; they made no mention of it.

"Singing drifted through the air like perfume, from every open door and balcony at Hautefroide," Leliana reminisced, her spring-sky eyes hazy with memory. "The beauty of Andraste was reflected in every gilded statue and mirrored wall. One could have hosted a Royal ball in their great hall, and felt no shame at doing so."

"Did you ever go to any balls there?" Flora asked swiftly, having learnt that the best way to distract the bard was to question her about some glittering social facet of her past.

"Non," replied Leliana, wistfully. "The Maker's house should be no place for the Game; although I dare say more political intrigue has been brokered within their cloisters than the Chantry would like to admit."

As they turned the corner leading to their quarters, two upright figures clad in closed-face helmets caught their attention. They were garbed in the mustard and crimson livery of the Theirin dynasty, pikes held motionless at their sides as they stood guard.

Flora let out a reflexive squeak of excitement, since the presence of the Royal Guardsmen inevitably meant the presence of Alistair. Hearing the booted steps behind increase their pace to match hers, she strode down the corridor as fast as her stomach would allow.

The Royal Guard shifted their pikes from hand to hand in a sign of respect as Flora approached, then scrambled to open the door as she showed no signs of slowing down.

Alistair was waiting beside the window, hands tucked behind his back. The descending sun lit up
both gilded hair and golden band; adding richness to the natural tan of his olive skin. He was gazing down at the ocean below with a pensive expression, brow furrowed in a single crease.

As Flora entered, he turned around and the careworn residue of a day spent in meetings and council chambers seemed to melt from his face. He grinned reflexively, the green flecks in his eyes standing out like shards of bottle-glass.

"My darling girl."

Flora paid no heed to the Royal Guard, the Templars or Leliana; as far as she was concerned, she and Alistair were the only two people alive in Ferelden. Ignoring everything in her periphery, she crossed the room and allowed herself to be enveloped in his extended arms. He felt warm, and strong; and she could have cried with how much she had missed him during the past twenty-four hours.

Alistair held his best friend against his chest, feeling the steady throb of her sturdy workhorse heart. He buried his face in Flora's mass of half-loose hair, inhaling the familiar scent of the girl he loved. One hand slid down to stroke the firm mound of her belly, palm cupping the increasingly pronounced shape of their child. In the week that she had been at Revanloch, it seemed to have expanded several inches.

"Alistair," Flora said, and the king gazed down at her with bright, adoring eyes. "Bann Teagan forgot this piece of his chess set. Could you give it back to him?"

She slid a hand into her pocket and withdrew the carved length, holding it out to Alistair in the centre of her sunburst-marked palm. Alistair recognised the queen immediately, and hid a rueful smile at his uncle's attempt at subtle insinuation.

"Keep it, sweetheart," he murmured, closing her fingers over the piece. "You're the… queen of my heart, after all."

"And you're the king of my stomach," replied Flora, head turning to locate the source of a delicious, fresh-baked smell. "What did you bring me?"

"Scones," Alistair said, glancing briefly towards a cloth-covered basket. "But, I've brought you something else, baby."

Releasing her from his arms, the king strode over to the wicker basket. Feeling her knee give a small twinge of protest, Flora wandered to the window and lowered herself to the cushioned seat. Leliana, who was permitted to go elsewhere whenever Alistair himself was with Flora, had vanished off to conduct her own business; though Knight-Captain Gannorn and Chanter Devotia were a constant, stern-faced presence.

Flora peered up through the glass at the emerging moon, sliding out delicately from behind a lacy veil of cloud. The Amaranthine Ocean lost its rich, emerald-green sheen in the darkness; stretching out in an expanse of soft, desaturated grey.

When she turned back into the room, Alistair was holding an overflowing bundle of roses in his arms; several dozen blooms erupting from the restraining twine. Several stems fell to the floor as he approached her, his expression unreadable.

Flora blinked up at her former brother-warden in astonishment, watching as he sat carefully on the bench beside her with the bundle of flowers in his lap.

"Lo, do you remember when I gave you that rose from Lothering?" he asked, quietly.
Flora gave a wide-eyed nod; of course she did.

"In the inn, on the way back to Redcliffe," she replied, recalling how Alistair had withdrawn the stem hesitantly from his pack, cheeks flushed from something other than the heat of the hearth. "I was sad about not being able to set a fire in the hearth. You told me that you liked me for exactly what I was."

Flora had kept the rose alive for as long as possible with the help of her spirits, prodding new life into the wilting leaves and restoring colour to the fading petals. When it was beyond even her own prodigious skill, Flora had pressed it between the pages of *Exotic Fish of Thedas*; preserving it forever alongside the wax-paper dog that he had folded for her at Ostagar.

"I wanted you to have these," Alistair said, inwardly annoyed that he could think of no suitably poetic delivery. "Because I- I love you. And all the roses in Thedas wouldn't be enough to show you how much I love you, but… but I wanted to give you these anyway."

He trailed off, miserably aware of his own lack of eloquence.

Flora gazed down at the roses, spilling over Alistair's lap and onto the window bench. They were a haphazard collection – some were still tightly sealed in bud, others were overblown and spilling crimson petals onto the velvet. It was clearly no professional bundle purchased from a flower-seller. She envisioned her companion wandering about the gardens of the palace grounds, clumsily gathering blooms into a haphazard bouquet; more preoccupied with affection rather than aesthetic.

"They're beautiful," Flora replied, solemnly. "Thank you. And I love you too, more than anything in the world."

Alistair shot her the small, intimate smile that was rarely seen in public; the one that he kept just for her. Reaching out for Flora's hand, he lifted her fingers to his mouth and kissed them.

"Well, it occurred to me," he murmured, keeping hold of her hand as he lowered it. "That I've not done much in the way of… romance. I mean, the Blight just- sort of - threw us together and I… I never got to court you. In the way that a beautiful girl should be courted."

Flora gazed at him, slightly enthralled. In Herring, courtship was relatively unheard of – a boy and a girl spent a few hours behind a rock on the beach to see if they were compatible, then the boy would present the girl with a fish. If she chose, the girl could accept both fish and accompanying proposal; then they would get married the next time that a Chantry official paid a visit to their local chapel. It was entirely practical, rather than romantic.

"I don't really know what courtship is," Flora breathed. "But isn't it a bit late for it? I mean…"

She dropped her gaze to the swell of their child, and Alistair's bright hazel eyes softened; following her own.

"I'd like to do it anyway," he murmured, reaching out to stroke the hair away from her face. "It's what I'd do if I were a stable-boy and you a little fishwife, whom..."

*Whom I want to marry*, he thought determinedly to himself.

Flora looked around at the roses, spilling petals over the bench, and her heart suddenly throbbed with a single, hard pulse of affection.

"Thank you for the flowers," she said, leaning forward to kiss the coarse stubble of his jaw. "It's so kind of you. I love you."
Alistair smiled at her, a sudden spark of recognition flashing in his gaze.

"Oh, I meant to tell you," he continued, the edges of his mouth curling upwards in a grin. "You'll find this funny. The bards are already starting to compose their songs about the Fifth Blight – Leliana will have some competition, I think – and they're calling you the Flower of Ferelden."

Flora looked distinctly unimpressed, her brow creasing in a petulant fold.

"The flower?" she breathed, slightly indignant. "Why not the Fist of Ferelden? If I were the Fist of Ferelden, they could say that I punched the Darkspawn horde… that I fisted the Archde- well, maybe not."

Alistair was grinning widely, his fingers tightening around her own. Flora continued, grumpily.

"I'd rather be the Fish-lover of Ferelden."

The king let out a bark of laughter, reaching forward to gather her into his arms.

"You'd really want history to remember you as the fish-lover?"

"I don't particularly want history to remember me at all!"

"Well, I think it's too late for that, my dear."

Parting on this sixth night apart was no less difficult than it had been on the first. The smell of roses mingled with the cedar-scented wood burning on the hearth; as both former wardens clung to each other in the shadows, reluctant to separate. As he did each evening before departing, Alistair knelt before Flora and massaged the day's tensions from her sore knee.

"I'll see you tomorrow, my darling," he whispered throatily, so used to the ubiquitous presence of the Royal Guard that he barely noticed them crowding into the chamber.

"You won't be late? It starts at mid-day," Flora reminded him anxiously, fingers wrapping themselves in the edge of his gold-threaded tunic. "Please don't be late."

"I'll be early, Lola, I swear it," Alistair assured her, pressing a kiss to the top of her head before standing.

Tomorrow would be the burning of Riordan, the senior Warden who had leapt from the pinnacle of Fort Drakon and clung so heroically to the Archdemon's wing. He had sacrificed his life to ground the dragon; to rob it of the flight that gave it such an advantage in combat. At Alistair's request, the man's body had been transported to Revanloch; where the pyre had already been constructed.

Flora nodded, feeling a hard lump of sadness rise in her throat as she thought on the man whom she had first met in Howe's dungeon. Riordan had reminded her of Duncan in more ways that could be counted; and – like Duncan – he too had been taken from her prematurely.

Alistair looked hard at her face for a long moment, as though memorising its curves and angles. Then, on hearing Leliana approach with a gentle step upon the flagstones, he took his leave with aching heart.

That night, Flora slept fitfully; tossing and turning in a dreamless restlessness. It was not the child keeping her up - though her lower back was aching and sore – it was a general sense of dis-ease.
flagstones in gleaming array.

_Riordan is here, somewhere. In the monastery._

Flora sat upright, kicking the coverlet away with a petulant foot. The Templar Chanter Devotia was on duty – she stood stock still before the door; vigilant as the bodyguard of any paranoid Orlesian duchess.

‘And the Maker did send forth succour for his thirsty flock?’ the Chanter murmured, a slight upwards inflection at the end of the sentence indicating that this was a question.

"No, thank you," whispered back Flora, politely. "I don't need a drink."

For a moment she wondered whether to wake Leliana, but the bard looked so peaceful that Flora decided against it. Instead, she retrieved a woollen jumper from her pack to pull on overtop her knee-length nightgown - Ferelden nights were persistently chilly, despite the season – and found her boots beneath the bed.

While Flora made herself more appropriate for nocturnal wanderings, Chanter Devotia watched with increasing disapproval.

‘And the Maker walked the land/With Andraste at His right hand?’ she hissed, her meaning clear.

Flora, as unfamiliar with the Chant of Light as she was with the great Archons of Tevinter, blinked for several moments. Deciding that the Templar was probably not going to impede her progress, she took an experimental step towards the door.

As Flora had hoped, the Templar looked irritated but did not make any move to stop her. The Chanter merely let out a small sigh under her breath, and made to follow the young Cousland as she sidled down the passageway.

**Chapter End Notes**

OOC Author Note: I wanted to make a reference back to the rose-scene in this chapter! I do think that Alistair would want to try and do things 'properly' with regard to Flora. Although she's pregnant with their child, and they've done pretty much every sexual thing under the sun together; now that the Blight is over and they can relax a little bit, I think he would want to try and court her before he proposes. Or Alistair's interpretation of courtship, lol.

Lol at Flora feeling oddly comfortable within the monastery, because it's ugly and cold (like Herring), and everyone walks around with a scowl on their face (like Herring!)

So Riordan's funeral is tomorrow – it'll be Flora's first proper Andrastian funeral, and I thought it would be nice to contrast it with Cailan's funeral pyre at Ostagar. BUT! Before we get to that... Flora's nocturnal wanderings never go well, do they? And someone with distinctly malevolent intentions has managed to infiltrate the monastery…
Revanloch at night was not wholly different from Revanloch at day. The basalt corridors were still shadowed and cool, the goose-fat candles burning low in their scones. The initiates were asleep in their dormitories, and only the most dedicated of the Maker's servants would rouse themselves to perform the nightly service.

Flora no longer possessed the ability to visit the Fade at night, but she felt almost as though she were in a dream as she crept down the corridors. It was so quiet that her footsteps seemed deafening against the stone, and the sound of her own breath was amplified. In her wake, Flora could hear Chanter Devotia several paces behind; the disapproval emanating off the Templar in waves.

Flora made her way down one snaking passageway after another, unsure if she was even heading the right way. Despite having a good memory; living in one location for the majority of her life meant that she had not developed an efficient sense of direction. Alistair had done most of the navigating on their travels, and even then they had got lost on more than one occasion.

Finally, after almost ending up in one of the recruit dormitories, Flora stumbled across the main arterial corridor that ran the length of the monastery; a great high-ceilinged hallway from which a dozen smaller passages branched.

At the end of this hallway lay a set of vast double doors, a huge Maker's symbol emblazoned at their pinnacle. The closer she drew, the more Flora slowed; knowing that the monastery's Chantry lay behind those innocuous doors.

And in the Chantry-

Flora swallowed, coming to an abrupt halt beneath a great iron candelabra. The Chanter stopped behind her, letting out another small huff of irritation.

Caught in a net of indecision, Flora shifted from foot to foot, lifting her gaze to the Chantry symbol. The creature gave an impatient nudge against her stomach, and she dropped her fingers to smooth absent-mindedly over the fraying wool of her jumper. She was so preoccupied with her thoughts, that she barely noticed the flicker of movement in the shadows near the door.

Do you think I should stop dithering and just get on with it?

There was only silence in response.

Fine, then.

Taking a deep breath, Flora reached out and gave one of the vast doors an experimental push. It swung open easily, with a creak that seemed inappropriately loud considering the night's stillness.

The Chantry loomed upwards and outwards before her, stern and stone-wrought; with no sunlight to illuminate the stained glass windows. Dozens of candles blazed away in tall, free-standing candelabras, the eternal flame of Andraste burning away in continual tribute.

"Lady of Perpetual Victory, Your praises I sing," murmured Chanter Devotia, raising her fist to her chest in reverent salute.
Yet Flora’s attention was drawn neither to the great statue of Andraste, nor the impressive carved columns that lined the central aisle. Her gaze went straight to the stone plinth at the far end; upon which a familiar figure rested.

For a moment, Flora felt the stone flagstones lurch beneath her, as though she had attempted to stand up in a row boat. She put out a hand to a nearby pew to steady herself; inhaling a gulp of cool, perfumed air.

*Come on, Flora. That's your senior officer.*

*Deep breath, chin up, eyes straight!*

The journey down the central aisle seemed to take an Age. As she passed each pew, Flora reached out to touch their worn, wooden backs, assuring herself with each step that she was in the waking world, and not the Fade. Riordan's body was not going to contort itself into macabre shapes; it was not going to pose some innocuous question that disguised a demon's trick. It was merely a body; the spirit departed; the soul already dissolved through the Veil.

It had been a fortnight since the Blight was ended, and Flora knew that Riordan would not look as she remembered him. She was – had been – a healer, and understood well how death could change the flesh and form of a body. She and Sten had retrieved Cailan's wind-blasted corpse from the Darkspawn crux at Ostagar, and the king had been months dead by that point.

Yet, to her surprise, Riordan did not seem to be much changed from when she had known him. The senior Warden was clad in the Order's colours of navy and silver, his greying hair swept back beneath his head in a ponytail. His face was still, the cheeks a fraction more hollow; the skin had a slightly waxen quality to it. Flora wondered if there had been a method of preservation applied to the dead Warden, or if a Circle mage had performed some magic of similar effect.

Stepping up beside the plinth, Flora gazed down at her dead officer with a hard lump of sadness in her throat. For a moment, she envisioned Duncan lying there; his tan Rivaini features robbed of their richness.

*You were never laid out to rest. There was no funeral pyre, no memorial for you.*

Not wanting to dwell on what the Darkspawn did with the corpses of the dead, Flora reached out with a tentative finger and touched Riordan's cheek. His skin felt oddly leathery, perhaps as a side-effect of the preservation.

"Thank you," she said out loud, her voice echoing between the stone columns. "I couldn't have killed the Archdemon without you. I hope you're at peace. Thank you for... everything."

Unsure whether she was talking to Riordan or Duncan, Flora leaned forward and pressed her lips to the prostrate man's forehead; its creases smoothed out in death.

"Say hello to my spirits if you see them in the Fade," she whispered, feeling a single throb of longing deep in her gut.

"'*The Veil knows no uncertainty for Her/And She will know no fear of death.'"

The Chanter spoke quietly, letting a rare touch of sympathy tinge her words. Flora smiled at the Templar, surprised and grateful for the unexpected empathy.

"Sorry to make you walk all this way in the middle of the night," she said, apologetically. "I just wanted to... say goodbye privately. Before the funeral tomorrow."
Devotia inclined her head; it had been no problem.

Just then, the sound of footsteps echoed about the large, hollowed chamber. The young lieutenant Rutherford emerged from a small side-chapel, startling when he caught sight of them. Fortunately, this time, there was nothing in his hands that he could drop.

Flora spared one last glance down at Riordan's still, ascetic face, fixing it as best she could in her memory. She knew that tomorrow, the senior Warden's body would be consumed in an Andrastian pyre, his empty shell transmogrified into smoke and black ashes.

"This feels like four—five years ago, when we were at the Circle," Flora said at last into the reverent shadows, flashing a slightly wan smile at the young officer. "Remember when you used to catch me sneaking back from the kitchens at night? Well, I'm still sneaking!"

Cullen nodded silently, trying to avoid Chanter Devotia's violet-eyed glower.

"Sorry," he muttered, casting a curious glance over at Riordan's still body. "I didn't mean to disturb you. I was just… attending night prayers. I like to say my devotions when there's nobody else around."

"Don't be sorry," Flora countered, stepping carefully down from the raised stone platform. "It was me who disturbed you."

The eternal flame smouldered away behind her, bathing both plinth and low steps in shifting, ochre light. Flora had never had much of an opinion on this particular aspect of Chantry tradition before, but now she found herself irrationally glad that Riordan was not lying alone in the darkness.

"I'm going back to my room now," she breathed, apologetic. "I'm sorry for breaking curfew. Again."

The young lieutenant made a dismissive gesture, still self-conscious in her presence.

"You're not the only one here for night-prayer, I saw someone else a moment ago. Besides, the Chantry has no jurisdiction over you any more," Cullen replied, with a mild shrug.

"You could break every rule that Revanloch has, and the Knight-Commander could only grumble under his breath."

Chanter Devotia narrowed her eyes, murmuring under her breath in disapproval.

"'The Maker smiles not on an errant child/Who recklessly defies His teachings!''"

"Oh, no!" Flora hastened to reassure both lieutenant and senior Templar, her eyes wide at the thought of such rebellion. "I don't usually break rules. I usually do exactly as I'm told."

*Except have Leliana accompany me everywhere,* she realised, with a sudden twinge of guilt.

"I remember."

There was an odd, slightly wistful timbre to the young Templar's voice. "You never caused any trouble for us at the Circle. Just for your instructors."

Cullen had lost count of the number of times he had stumbled across the adolescent Flora while patrolling a corridor; scrubbing diligently at the flagstones with a damp cloth, or sneezing as she disturbed a month's worth of gathered dust with a broom. Well-meaning but both figuratively and magically illiterate, Flora had been expelled from the classroom more often than not.
"Well, it's hard to- " he began, and then something arced its way through the gloom of the Chantry; soft and silent as the swoop of some predatory bird. It only became visible as it caught the light of the Chantry flame, the silvered metal flashing bright and deadly.

Chanter Devotia - whose dour-faced piety hid a lethality unrivalled by any other Templar in the Order - withdrew her blade with a joyful singing of metal, whipping it up to deflect the thrown blade. Sword collided with knife, knocking its smaller counterpart from the air with a clash of metal that echoed around the standing pillars.

The blade fell to the floor, and there followed a moment of incredulous silence. Flora blinked at the knife as it lay on the flagstones, the silvered point coated with some sort of oily residue. It had all happened so quickly that she had not had time to duck, or even to flinch; had merely stood, gaping inanely, as death flew through the air towards her. For the first time in Flora's life, the spirits had not been able to summon a gleaming barrier in her defence.

"Wait, was that meant for me?" she asked, more confused than frightened.

Moments later, hurried footsteps echoed from the gloom-shrouded columns that lined either side of the main aisle.

"Lieutenant, guard her!" snapped Chanter Devotia, the urgency of the situation overriding her adherence to the Chant. "Find some cover!"

Cullen gave a tight nod, reaching out to grab Flora's hand and pulling her without ceremony behind Riordan's plinth.

"Get down," he hissed at her, the usual shy deference replaced with a vein of command. "Stay behind me."

Flora, still in mild shock, slithered down to sit on the tiles with her back against the plinth. It was far from comfortable, but she barely registered the cold seeping through the thin linen of her nightgown.

Did someone just try and kill me?

For the second time in her life – the first being when she had been Howe's prisoner, with the magic-blocking collar around her neck – Flora felt horribly vulnerable. She cringed back against the stone, staring up at the young Templar officer as he stood before her with sword drawn.

I can't defend us. I can't protect you. I'm useless!

For several moments, Flora folded her arms across her stomach, shielding the child resting in her belly with her own flesh and bone. On the one hand, she was used to being the prey of would-be assassins – thanks to Rendon Howe, she had become accustomed to having a target on her back – yet now she had the little creature to think of, and her own new vulnerability.

On the other hand, I'm still a Herring girl.

It was not an easy task to search the shadowed Chantry for interlopers – candles made little headway against the shroud of night, and the rows of parallel pews provided plenty of hiding places for a would-be assassin. Chanter Devotia, sword drawn, made her way down the central aisle; methodologically checking each potential refuge. Despite the full armour, her movements were as stealthy as Leliana's – a metal-clad predator, stalking between the pews in absolute, held-breath silence.

"Come out, you fish-bellied coward!" came a sudden bellow from behind her, and the Templar's jaw
dropped in consternation.

"If you've got a problem with me, say it to my FACE!" continued Flora, unsuccessfully grappled by a bug-eyed Cullen who was clearly reluctant to expend too much force in restraining her.

Managing to escape the young lieutenant, she scuttled around the plinth and spun her head from left to right; squinting into the shadows.

"Come out, come out and take me!" she demanded, the full northern patois of her voice echoing to the vaulted ceiling. "I'm not scared of you! I killed a dragon!"

"My la – Flora – please come back," Cullen begged, not wanting to pull too hard at her elbow. "Get behind some cover."

"I'm not going to hide!" the child of Herring retorted, following in Chanter Devotia's footsteps as the female officer put a despairing hand to her head. "I want to find this bottom feeder and GIVE THEM A GOOD KICKING."

Taking a deep lungful of air, she tilted her head towards the lofty ceiling.

"Come OUU-"

Her boot made contact with an object that scraped along the flagstones, and Flora abruptly cut off her own outraged bellow. Looking down, she spotted something small and round that glinted dully in the candlelight.

With a soft grunt of effort, she stretched her fingers down and retrieved the flat object, which appeared to be a metal token of some sort. The side facing her was blank, but she could feel an etched pattern pressing against her palm.

Turning the token over, Flora focused on the crudely carved symbol; her stomach lurching as she recognised the all-too-familiar bear.

*Howe. How?!

"Can ghosts throw daggers?" she asked to nobody in particular, feeling icy fingers of dread creeping up her spine. "Is it a GHOST?!!"

Just then, the main doors went crashing open and a contingent of Templars burst in; swords drawn and shields up. The Knight-Commander was at their head, a raised torch casting dizzying patterns of light over the flagstones.

"What in the Maker's name- ?!"

Chapter End Notes

OOC Author Note: Flora is still in the habit of talking to her spirits, even though she's never going to get any reply back! She also doesn't yet understand how vulnerable she is now – hence the recklessness displayed in this chapter. Flora's foolhardiness is one of her biggest flaws, and she's been able to get away with it because her spirits have
always had her back… but not anymore! Can you just imagine Cullen trying to drag her (except not DRAG her, because she's nearly five and a half months pregnant) behind cover, while Flora bellows obscenities like a true Herring girl?

I really didn't want this sequel to just be a happy-go-lucky "Alistair and Flora get MARRIED AND HAVE BABY AAAH SO CUTE HAPPILY EVER AFTER" story – I think that would be a bit naff! Hopefully that became obvious when I sent Flora off into confinement at the monastery right from the beginning – and now, it's clear that their problems aren't over! It's not going to be easy ride!

So, someone from the Howe family wants to take their revenge on Flora – after all, she did blow up Rendon Howe's head, lol – but who could it be? There are three possible candidates: Nathaniel, Delilah and youngest sibling, Thomas.
Some time later, a sulking Flora sat in the Knight-Commander's office, half-listening to him rant, but mostly watching a sly mouse skulk along the base of the far wall.

The Templar – incongruously clad in night linens - had spent the past hour pacing the length of his office; the relentless back and forth was dizzying to watch. He was fluctuating between disbelief at such a violation in security, remorse that it should have happened within his own facilities, and barely disguised trepidation about what the king's reaction might be. The entire monastery was in the process of being searched from top to bottom; from the depths of the underground cellars to the rookery in the crumbling northern tower. A raven had already been sent up to Denerim Castle, containing brief details of what had transpired.

There was an attempt on the lady Cousland's life. She is unharmed; the assassin has not yet been located.

Chanter Devotia, who had returned to her usual tight-lipped taciturn state, had brought Lieutenant Rutherford with her into the office. Cullen recanted the events that had transpired in the Chantry, first to a grim-faced Knight-Commander, and then once again to a scowling Gannorn and a horrified Leliana. The bard proceeded to berate Flora for a solid twenty minutes; finally threatening to handcuff the young Cousland's wrist to her own as they slept.

This lecture was the cause of Flora's sulk: she was used to being told off, but in this case, she did not feel as though she entirely deserved it.

"I just wanted to see Riordan," she muttered as the bard took a deep gulp of air. "Didn't do nothing wrong."

Leliana shot her an incredulous look, then imitated Flora's northerner's tongue with remarkable skill.

"'Come out you fish-bellied coward! Come out and face me... to my face!'"

Flora shot a slightly resentful glower towards Lieutenant Rutherford, whom she felt had been a little too detailed in his recanting of events.

"Ma petite, you have no shield!"

"I know."

"You are vulnerable. To say nothing of the child!"

"I know!"

Flora slunk down a little further in her seat, realising that she had indeed been in the wrong in this particular instance.

I can't be so reckless. I have no way to defend myself. Or Baby.

Just then, there came a minor commotion from the corridor. The Knight-Commander's head shot up in alarm and he had just enough time to brace himself behind the desk.
Moments later, the door crashed back against the stone and the king of Ferelden erupted into the chamber; incandescent with rage and fright in a way that Flora had never before seen. In what seemed like seconds, the room was full – Eamon was there in hastily donned clothing, as were both Finian and Teagan. Zevran slid in like a shadow in their wake, his expression dark and utterly humourless.

The Knight-Commander's chamber suddenly seemed very small, especially with Alistair's anger billowing outwards like some expanding volcanic mass. He swept his gaze across the chamber, fever-bright eyes settling immediately on his pregnant mistress as she sat glumly on a side-bench, legs sticking out before her and the hem of her jumper fraying.

In a heartbeat the new king was crouching before her, a greyish tinge beneath the furious crimson patches on his cheeks. Fingers came up to clutch at Flora's elbows, his frantic stare probing her own solemn expression.

"Flora," he breathed, a rasp to the edge of the word. "Are you alright, my love?"

She nodded, hoping fervently that nobody would inform Alistair of come out you fish bellied coward, come and face me to my face!

"And the child?"

Instead of a verbal reply, Flora took his hand and pushed the heel of his palm into her belly, letting him feel the little creature shifting against the confines of it's temporary home.

Alistair closed his eyes, exhaling in exhausted relief. Leaning forward, he pressed a hard and grateful kiss to her mouth; the mask of anger dropping once more over his features as he rose to his feet and turned towards the Knight-Commander.

"Ser, I entrusted you with my love and the mother of my child," he began, his voice dangerously low. "The most precious thing in the world to me. And – believe it or not - I thought that my Flora would be safe in a building filled with soldiers. Care to explain what the fuck happened?"

"Aye," added Eamon, equally grim. "There seems to have been a serious lapse in your security. I thought that all entrances were guarded?"

As arl, king and bann continued to loudly interrogate the sweating Knight-Commander, Zevran took a seat on one side of Flora, while Finian lowered himself to the bench on her other flank.

"Thank the Maker that you're alright, Flossie," breathed Flora's brother, smoothing down a strand of russet hair with trembling fingers. "Fergus has gone back up north to check on Highever. If he was here, he'd be tearing this hideous building apart brick by brick to find this deviant."

Flora gazed up at her former brother-warden, who was clearly building up towards some great Marician outburst of wrath as he towered over the Knight-Commander. Alistair was visibly struggling to restrain himself, fists clenched at his sides and colour flooding the back of his neck. A vein throbbed in his temple, pulsing hard and visible.

"It's a disgrace," he was snarling, letting the full force of his rage wash over the three Templars. "An absolute fucking disgrace. What kind of – incompetent idiots are you training here?"

To Flora's dismay, Finian now rose to his feet and joined in the angry interrogation, determined not to let little sister down in elder brother's absence. Flora's eyebrows shot to the ceiling and she leaned back against the stone wall, wishing fervently that she had just stayed in bed.
Would they have just come for me when I was sleeping, then? That's no better.

"Mi sirenita."

She glanced to where Zevran perched on the bench beside her, his usually lithe and sprawling frame suffused with tension. There was none of the customary relaxed ease about his face; no playful smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. Instead, the elf's expression seemed fixed and grim as a death mask, the tiny creases at the corners of his eyes made deeper by such steely rigidity.

He spotted her looking and made a contorted effort that was supposed to be a smile. Reaching up, he touched her cheek gently with a deft, tan thumb; tracing the outline of the delicate bone.

"Are you well, mi lirio Rialto?"

She nodded gloomily, Herring stoicism rising to the fore even during these dire circumstances. Zevran let out a little exhalation under his breath, reaching for her fingers and giving them a squeeze.

"Is there any indication as to who could be behind this?" Teagan demanded, in an effort to channel the king's anger along more productive lines. "I'm just at a loss to suggest who would want Flora dead. The people adore her; she's just ended the Fifth Blight, for Maker's sake!"

This, at least, she could answer. Flora stretched out her hand into the room, showing the flat metal token in her palm. Alistair strode over, taking the coin and squinting at the symbol etched on the copper surface.

The moment that his eyes fell on the crudely-carved bear, his skin diffused into a mottled patchwork of grey and pink; lips drawing back over his teeth like a guard-Mabari spotting an intruder.

"Howe?"

Although Flora had had the same incredulous reaction within the Chantry, hearing somebody else say the name out loud made the situation seem grievously real. Her throat constricted, and for a moment she could almost feel the anti-magic collar tight around her neck.

"But… but Howe is dead," Alistair continued, in tones of throaty disbelief. "Months ago."

"He has three grown children," Teagan murmured, his expression grim. "The eldest hasn't been in Ferelden for years – I believe he's in the Marches, squiring for one of the lords there. There's a sister, who's up in Amaranthine. And--"

"The lad, the one about Florence's age," finished Eamon, grimly. "He slipped the guard and vanished a month ago. Thought he was fleeing the Blight."

There was a heavy silence, and Alistair clenched the coin so tightly in his fist that it dug red marks into his skin.

"Well, I did kill their dad," Flora offered, in a small voice. "I'm not surprised they want to… to kill me."

She grimaced, recalling the feeling of Howe's hands on her waist; his livery lips on hers; the taste of his brains in her mouth after she'd broken his skull into pieces.

"It's hardly the same!" Finian's voice rose in indignation, his remaining eye widening. "Howe betrayed our family and had our parents murdered in cold blood. He kidnapped you, Floss; he was going to Tranquilise you and flaunt you as some sort of… twisted trophy bride!"
Flora flinched; the memory of being instructed to wash Howe's wrinkled back somehow worse than the one where she had shattered his head with her expanding shield.

Alistair exhaled unsteadily, the rage subsiding quickly to a raw, sour-edged fear. He crossed to where Flora was sitting on the bench and knelt before her, touching the side of her face as though to confirm yet again that she was whole and unharmed.

"Flora, I couldn't cope if anything happened to you," he said, bleak and matter-of-fact. "I'd... I'd go mad, I know it. I can't live without you."

Flora lifted her hand to rest her palm against his, unsure what to say in response to this hopeless prediction.

Meanwhile, Zevran had wandered across to where the knife lay on a Chantry plate; the crudely hewn blade incongruous against the gleaming silver. He ducked his head to sniff at the clear liquid coating the dagger point, then dabbed at it with the very tip of his finger. Touching the end of his tongue to the poison, the elf squinted in concentration; mentally running through his catalogue of toxins.

"This is not the concoction of a skilled assassin," he said at last, drawing the attention of the others in the room. "Everything about this attempt seems clumsy and amateurish. The blade is blunt, for a start."

"I agree," Leliana chimed in immediately, her pale blue eyes meeting his own. "Besides, I doubt that any assassins' guild would take a contract on the Hero of Ferelden. No amount of gold would be worth the backlash."

Zevran gave a slight nod, sliding the blade into a discrete pocket within his tunic. There was none of the usual humour within his tone as he spoke, his coal-black irises seeking out Alistair's own with steady purpose.

"Alistair, I will make some enquiries," he murmured, softly. "I have eyes and ears beyond the city walls; and my hand can delve into farther and darker places than even the reach of a king."

Alistair inhaled, gratitude breaking through the storm clouds massing across his face.

"You'll find out who did this?"

The elf inclined his head in assent, as the rest of the room fell silent.

"I will find them, amor, and when I find them, I shall endeavour to restrain myself. I imagine that you would want to enact your own punishment upon such a villain."

"Well, they're a traitor," Alistair replied, without pause. "Any crime against Flora is a crime against Ferelden itself. They'll get a traitor's death."

A grateful Finian reached out to touch the elf's sleeve as he passed; Zevran let long, deft fingers drift over his lover's knuckles.

Flora, who was not happy at this new turn that the evening had taken, gazed at her Crow with solemn-faced disapproval. The corners of Zevran's mouth turned upwards, and he caught her hand to kiss her curling fingers.

"Why are you pouting, mi reina?"
She frowned; she could not quite articulate why she was afraid. The elf read the anxiousness writ plain across her fine-boned face, and leaned down to press his tattooed cheek to hers.

"Be careful," Flora said gravely, as the elf smiled ruefully to himself. "And… thank you."

"No need to thank me, carina. I cannot have knives being flung at mi sirenta, hm?"

Returning upright, Zevran swivelled his dark gaze across to where Alistair hovered.

"I'll send some enquiries off now with the ravens," he murmured, soft and reassuring. "And see you before I leave on the morrow."

"Thank you, Zev."

Once Zevran had gone, Alistair turned back to the Knight-Commander; his expression steely.

"I don't see why I shouldn't take her back up to the palace now," he said, blunt as a neglectful headman's ax. "The Divine has already confirmed Flo's status, which will be good enough for the Landsmeet. Half of the banns have already asked me why she's not back yet."

"Alistair, think a moment," murmured Eamon, low and thoughtful. "Denerim Castle is far larger. It's more public. There are nearly a thousand people passing in and out of its gates daily."

"Arl Eamon is right," added Leliana, quietly. "The monastery is still more secure. Easier to guard."

Alistair ground his teeth together, the green flecks in his hazel eyes standing out stark in the light from the hearth. He lowered himself to the bench beside Flora, taking the spot recently vacated by Zevran.

"Then… then I want the number of Royal Guard posted here doubled," he said, the fear congealing sourly in his stomach. "The number of patrols to increase. I want extra guards outside her room at night."

"I'd stay, but I can't wield a blade," Finian interjected, with a grimace of frustration. "My coordination is still poor. If only Fergus were here-"

"Alistair, I'm happy to relocate my own sleeping quarters down here," Teagan interrupted, softly. "I'll need to be in the city during the day, but the journey isn't long."

Alistair's face brightened immediately, his gaze swivelling across to the younger of the Guerrin brothers.

"You'd do that, uncle?"

Teagan gave a brief nod, a wry smile curling the corner of his mouth.

"Thanks to your sister-warden, my brother's and my nephew's lives have been saved; and not only Redcliffe, but the whole of Ferelden preserved. I could spend the rest of my life repaying a debt like that."

Not all of Ferelden was preserved, Flora thought as she blinked thoughtfully back at the bann. Not Lothering. Not South Reach

Alistair rose to his feet to thank his uncle, his gratitude effusive. To a sweating Knight-Commander's relief, the king seemed somewhat placated by these new arrangements.
"Alright. It's decided, then."

Chapter End Notes

OOC Author Note: Alistair is not a happy bunny, lol! Although it's good that he doesn't blame Flora for wandering around at night – he recognises that she's perfectly entitled to wander around wherever she likes, and it's the responsibility of those running the monastery to keep her safe.

Flora referring to the child as Baby is a slight step up from little creature, haha
On the Hunt

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Since Riordan's funeral was scheduled for the next morning – and dawn was only a few hours away – it was decided that Alistair and his contingent would stay the rest of the night at Revanloch.

Safely relocated in the guest quarters, Flora sat up against the pillows and gazed around in mild amusement at the new sleeping arrangements. Chanter Devotia lay snoring on the pallet beside the door, while the Knight-Captain glowered into the shadows from nearby. Gannorn had not stopped frowning since the debacle in the chapel; he had deeply disapproved of Flora's nocturnal wanderings.

Teagan was making himself comfortable on a pallet before the hearth. Unlike his older brother, who was accustomed to the luxuries afforded to his status; the bann was well-used to sleeping in more humble circumstances. During the defence of Redcliffé, he had spent a week sleeping on the unforgiving surface of a Chantry pew.

"This is like being back in a Circle dormitory," Flora said into the shadows, sneezing as she caught scent of one of Leliana's more pungent unguent creams. "At Kinloch, there were eight of us to a room."

"Maker's Breath, Lel," Alistair muttered, stripping down to shirt and smalls without ceremony beside the bed. "What's that stuff you're putting on your face? It smells like what I use to clean my sword."

The bard sniffed, replacing the lid on the small pot and placing it delicately on the side-table.

"Well, excuse me if I don't want the stresses of the Blight to leave permanent indentations on my forehead," she retorted, clambering into bed beside Flora and pulling the coverlets up to her chin. "You'll regret not following my skincare regime, Alistair, when you look forty years old by next Satinalia."

"Good," replied Alistair frankly as he lifted an arm for his former sister-warden. "I need to look older. Did you see this beard growing in, Lo?"

"Mm," Flora replied, grateful for the solid muscle of her best friend's chest against her back. "I like it."

Alistair kissed the top of her head, wishing for a single, fervent moment that he could stay curled up in bed with Flora for the next three and a half weeks.

"I can't be the only man on the Royal Council without facial hair."

Down on the floorboards, Teagan eventually managed to find a relatively comfortable position. Leaning over on one elbow, he paused before blowing out the candle; a rueful smile pulling at the corner of his mouth.

"Alistair, this is only going to fuel more tavern songs about you. In bed with two beautiful redheads?"

Alistair's ensuing flush was hidden by the shadows, while Flora sat up and made wide eyes towards Teagan. The bann let out a soft, quickly muffled bark of laughter, reaching for a nearby tankard.
"Sorry, poppet. I thought you'd gone to sleep."

Flora slid back down into Alistair's arms, tucking her head beneath his chin. His fingers felt warm and rough against her own; the calloused skin a legacy of years grasping a sword hilt. He moved his other hand beneath the blankets, edging his fingers underneath her Theirin-crested nightshirt.

For a moment, Flora wondered at his boldness – surely he wouldn't attempt anything with Leliana beside them, two Templars at the door and his uncle on a bedroll by the hearth? and then his palm slid around her belly, cupping the firm mound of flesh. With gentle, wondering fingers, he explored the shape of the child that they had inadvertently made together; his breath warm against the back of her neck.

Flora settled back into the circle of his arms, grimly resolving that she would be less reckless in the future.

*It's Alistair's baby too. I have to look after it.*

Meanwhile, Alistair was breathing unsteadily, clutching his lover beneath the blankets as a myriad of increasingly terrible scenarios ran through his head. First, he pictured the assassin's blade plunging into Flora's heart as she lifted helpless fingers to her ravaged breast. Then he pictured a pair of gloved hands emerging from the shadows, only to slip a garrotte silently around her slender throat.

An arrow fired from the ramparts as she went on one of her nocturnal wanderings.

*Poison secreted into her flask; no way to neutralise it.*

Terror gripped Ferelden's king and he drew Flora even closer; a soft groan sliding from between his lips. He wound his fingers in her nightshirt, in the thick tangles of her hair, anchoring his sister-warden to his side.

Curious, she twisted her head to gaze up at him, her pale eyes reflecting the dim embers in the hearth. Alistair leaned forward and put his mouth to Flora's ear, his heart thudding painfully against his ribs.

"I wish we could just leave, baby," he whispered, directing his words away from where Leliana lay snoring on Flora's other side.

"Leave? Leave where?" Flora's reply was interspersed with a yawn.

"*Anywhere.* Somewhere where you'd be safe. It's *my* fault that we have to stay here; this blasted crown."

Flora pushed herself up on a sleepy elbow and pressed her lips to his cheek, hoping to lend her brother-warden some reassurance.

"We're not going anywhere," she whispered back, sternly. "We don't run from Howes, Alistair."

Alistair gritted his teeth; he would have praised such bravado if it had come from anybody other than his pregnant and utterly defenceless mistress.

"But I need to keep you safe," he said forlornly, aware that Leliana was probably listening to every word. "Even the thought of you being hurt – of being in pain – it kills me, Lo."

"Well, *don't* think about it then," Flora replied, with Herring practicality. "I have a lot of people around me who won't let me get hurt. Like Leliana."
"That's if you actually bother waking me up before you go on these little night-time wanderings," hissed the bard, shooting Flora a malevolent look through the darkness. "Ensure that you do so next time, ma petite!"

The next morning dawned grey and drizzly, dampness hanging over Revanloch monastery like a shroud. It seemed fitting weather for a funeral; the sky an insipid grey and veiled in clouds. The sun itself refused to show its face, as though aware that the mortal remains of Ferelden's last senior Grey Warden were being sent to the Maker that evening.

In light of the previous night's breach of security, the Knight-Commander had posted more Templar soldiers to each entrance and exit; as well as increasing the frequency of patrols. This only heightened the similarity of Revanloch to a particularly ugly prison; the rampart walls seeming all the higher for the armoured men atop them.

Zevran took his leave from king and Cousland beneath the lofty stone archway that marked the main entrance into Revanloch. Chilly rivulets dripped from the damp Chantry banners hanging overhead; puddles expanding beneath the boots of the grim-faced Templars posted at each gatepost.

The elf hated the rain – especially the cold and misty Ferelden drizzle, so unlike the humid showers he was accustomed to in Antiva. There was no shelter to be found beneath the archway; the stone was so old and crumbling that rainwater dribbled through regardless.

Flora, a northerner who barely noticed the rain, was standing anxiously in the middle of a puddle. Alistair was at her side, the water-soaked fur collar of his tunic plastered unpleasantly to the back of his neck.

"And you'll send word the moment that you find anything?" he clarified, hazel eyes fixed earnestly on Zevran's own ink-dark stare. "Even the most minor clue. I want to know which Howe sent this assassin, and where I can find them."

"Naturally, mi rey," murmured the former Crow, shooting a malevolent look up at the rain-sodden sky. "I do not expect it to be an overly difficult task. Are you sure you would not prefer a head sent to you in a box?"

Alistair appeared to consider the possibility for a moment, before gritting his teeth and replying in the negative.

"No," he said, reluctantly. "I want to question this whoreson myself. Make an example of him. String him up from the palace wall by the bollocks, ideally."

Flora glanced sideways at her kind-hearted brother-warden; who occasionally displayed the ruthless streak that manifested in all Theirins. At times like this, the vein of Marician brutality was laid bare, sharp and silvered, beneath the gentle chivalry of his outer demeanour.

"Zev," she said, returning her attention to the elf. "Please, be careful. I don't want you to get hurt because of me."

Zevran almost laughed out loud at the thought of suffering injury from an assassin who could not even hit a defenceless and motionless target. Catching sight of Flora's solemn, anxious expression; he suppressed the smile before it could pull at the corners of his mouth.

"I promise I will be exceptionally careful, mi reina," he replied, with a gravity to match hers.
"You don't have to do this if you don't want to!"

This amused the elf, a soft, throaty-edged bark of laughter escaping his throat as he injected deliberate casualness into his response.

"Ah, but I must continue to make myself *useful* to you, *eh, mi sirenia?* Otherwise, you may decide that I am no longer worthy of association."

The brilliance of the smile that followed - dazzling white teeth set against rich tan skin – was an attempt to disguise the melancholic timbre of the elf's words. It took Flora several moments to comprehend Zevran's meaning; but when she eventually did, her eyes widened in bemusement.

"'Useful to me'?" she repeated, slightly, incredulous. "You're my friend. You don't need to be *useful*. You could sit around like a *jellyfish* all day, and I'd be grateful for your company."

Zevran looked at her for a long moment, something heated and indecipherable in his dark stare. There was a slight gleam to the rich mahogany of his iris that he quickly hid with another charming grin; extending his arms as a distraction.

"Here, *nena,*" he declared, brightness in his voice to disguise a tremor of emotion that only the likes of Leliana would have been able to perceive. "Unlike your brother-warden, you are not yet so intimidating that I am afraid to embrace you."

Flora let him fold her against his chest, the elf standing just tall enough to rest his chin atop her head. She gripped his leathers, the material fitted too tight to his skin for her fingers to gain much purchase. She felt Zevran exhale, slightly unsteadily, one hand coming up to cup the back of her head.

"I promise you, I will find out who did this," he murmured into Flora's ear, lips brushing her hair. "I've buried two people close to my heart already; I won't do it again."

Unbeknownst to Flora, the elf's eyes had lifted to Alistair, who was standing patiently to one side. A silent bolt of mutual understanding passed between them; two very different men united in perfect accord.

*I'll find the Howe that did this.*

*And I'll keep her safe.*

Accompanied by the expected pat on the rump, Zevran gave Flora a peck on the cheek and released her, the laughing brightness settled back over his face once more.

"Alright, *mi amors,* I will send news very soon. *Mi florita,* take care of yourself, hm? And I hope, Alistair, that you can find a few quiet moments together in a dark cupboard or lonely pew. *Te veo luego, queridos.*"

A flush rose beneath Alistair's olive cheeks as Flora smiled, slightly vaguely, unsure what the elf was alluding to. As Zevran swung himself swiftly onto the saddle, she was distracted by an odd sense of melancholy that pulled at her heart.

This strange wistfulness congealed into a more tangible dejection as the elf steered the horse's head towards the coastal track that led back towards the city. It was more identifiable in this solid state, and Flora subsequently swallowed the lump that rose in her throat.

"All our friends are going to leave, aren't they?" she said quietly, watching horse and rider shrink as they rode into the distance. "They all have their own lives to live. Wynne might go back to the
Circle. Morrigan to the Wilds. I'm sure Leliana has got plans for her future, once she's finishing babysitting me."

Alistair gave a nod, injecting cheeriness into his reply.

"I can't wait to exchange letters with Morrigan. I bet she'll be an avid correspondent!"

Flora made no reply, dropping her gaze glumly to her boots. Alistair glanced at her for a moment, then slung his arm around her shoulders and drew her to his side.

"I'm sure that they'll be back to visit, my love. Once you've gone through something like the Fifth Blight together, well – those bonds are not easily broken."

He planted a kiss on top of her head, and she pressed her cheek to his arm, grateful for the reassurance.

"Besides, I'm not going anywhere; I'm stuck in Denerim. It should be me worried about you leaving, my darling!"

Flora turned an appalled face on him, grey eyes even wider in her indignation.

"Where would I go, without you?" she demanded, mildly incredulous.

A beaming Alistair gathered Flora up in his arms, intending to ignore the frowning presence of Chanter Devotia and Knight-Captain Gannorn and kiss his best friend until the last scrap of air had been stolen from her lungs.

For several moments, the king embraced his mistress beneath the stone archway; the crumbling edifice of Revanloch rising up around them as the gulls shrieked and wheeled in the air overhead. The drizzle continued unabated, a cloud-shrouded sky casting Ferelden in muted tones of ash and stone. In the distance, the city of Denerim could just be glimpsed clinging to the clifftops; the Royal Palace perched on its high, supervisory ridge.

Flora smiled up at her brother-warden, her mouth tender and flushed after his ardent attention. Alistair reached down to touch the side of her face, inexplicably fixated on the dimple that creased her cheek. He was about to duck his head to kiss her again, when the sound of approaching hoofbeats drew his attention.

The Royal Guard stationed at the gate posts stiffened, the keener-eyed soldiers spotting the glint of armour and weaponry. There were a group of five or six riders – mostly men, save for two – heading towards the monastery; sporting no discernible banner to declare their allegiance.

Flora, who had slightly better eyesight than Alistair, squinted at the garb of the soldiers sat astride the saddles, her brow furrowing.

"Alistair," she said, slowly. "Is that… are they wearing…?"

As the mounted party drew nearer, Alistair inhaled a sharp intake of breath; his own hazel eyes widening as he took in the navy and silver striped tunics.

"Maker's Breath," the king said, astounded. "Is it – are they Grey Wardens?"
OOC Author Note: Orlais Wardens here to party! Where were you two weeks ago when the Darkspawn horde were marching on the city?! Lol. I imagine they're going to have a looot of questions! But yes, they've arrived to attend Riordan's funeral. We're going to meet their Commander, and Clarel, and the Orlesian Warden Origin who's going to take over the Ferelden Wardens – since both Alistair and Flora aren't technically Wardens any longer.

I imagine that Zevran always would try and make himself useful to a Warden and companions… since he was brought up to always be valuable/serve a purpose. I think he's probably not used to someone wanting his company!
For the best part of a year, Flora and Alistair had known themselves to be the last Wardens in Ferelden. Even when Riordan had joined them in Denerim; it had still just been the three of them pitted against the swelling mass of the Darkspawn hordes. Although Flora had known that there were Grey Wardens outside Ferelden, she had not quite been able to comprehend their existence.

Now they stood together beneath the crumbling entrance to Revanloch with the sea-gulls wheeling and shrieking above them; watching the soldiers dressed in silver and blue ride ever closer on the cliff-top road.

The Royal Guard, who had gripped their pikes in readiness at the approach of an armed party, glanced sideways at their king; waiting for his instruction. Stunned into silence, Alistair made a quick gesture for them to stand down.

The riders came to a halt, their weary horses bearing the signs of a long journey. The deferential Chantry stable boys came scuttling out to take the reins; sneaking glances at the silver griffon emblazoned on the soldiers' breastplates.

Their leader, a man in his forties with tousled tawny hair and sharp, whisky-brown eyes, dismounted with a grunt onto the gravel. Despite the fine lines of age cobwebbing the corners of his mouth, the man moved with a militaristic precision. Beside him, a sinewy, strong woman with greying hair cropped close to her skull dropped to the ground, calling out something in an unfamiliar tongue to her companions.

Flora felt Alistair stiffen reflexively beside her, drawing himself up to his full six foot and several inches in height. The Royal Guard stationed at the gates of Revanloch came to flank the king, their eyes keen as blades behind their closed-face helmets.

"They're Orlesian," Alistair murmured, watching as the stable boys led the horses away. "That's a Val Royeaux accent."

Flora gazed at the strangers, thoughtfully. She had only ever known a handful of Orleans – their companion Leliana, whom Flora adored without reservation, and Arl Eamon's highly-strung wife Isolde, whom Flora was mildly terrified of.

The other Wardens seemed to defer to the man with tousled golden hair, the fine lines trellised across his face a contrast to the raw power of his muscular body. The commander strode forward, coming to a pause just before Revanloch's crumbling entrance. The Royal Guard tightened their grips on their pikes; inching a fraction closer.

"Your Majesty," the Orlesian declared in mellifluous tones, inclining his head in courteous acknowledgement of Alistair's golden band. "I am Yvon Cuvillier, Warden-Commander of Orlais. This is my lieutenant, Clarel de Chanson."

He gestured to the lean woman at his side, who bowed her shaven head with an easy confidence.

Alistair returned the greeting neutrally, his instinct to welcome fellow Wardens tempered by his position as political leader of a rival nation. Flora, meanwhile, was oscillating between delight and disbelief; still not quite able to comprehend that other Wardens even existed.
Where were you three weeks ago?! she wanted to demand, biting her lip to stop herself from blurt the question out. When the Darkspawn were swarming the city walls?

Yvon glanced from Alistair to Flora, and it was clear that he had no idea who she was. His gaze returned to the king, and he cleared his throat.

"Your Majesty," the commander said, clearly accustomed to speaking with royalty. "May we first congratulate Ferelden on the defeat of the Fifth Blight? If your borders had not been sealed, Orlais would have been quick to offer assistance."

Flora thought privately that they could have come anyway; after all, had Riordan not managed to infiltrate the country? The next moment, she realised that the senior warden had been captured after mere days by Rendon Howe, and had subsequently spent months in captivity.

Alistair inclined his head with a grunt, his nostrils flaring in displeasure at their failure to acknowledge Flora's presence.

"We received a letter from our brother, Riordan, who perished during the efforts to defeat the Archdemon," Yvon continued, earnestly. "We have official business with the lady Florence Cousland, whom we understand stuck the final blow."

If the commander was perplexed as to how exactly the lady Cousland had survived after delivering the death-blow, he hid it well. However, what was apparent was that he had no idea who Flora was. Yvon Cuvillier had looked at her and seen merely a teenaged girl - visibly weighed down with child - and proceeded to dismiss her as some mistress of the king. Flora's diminutive frame - and the beauty that seemed to have been cultivated by luxurious years spent in silken, perfumed halls - further denied her identity.

The drizzle increased in tempo and ferocity; one of the junior Wardens nudged his companion and muttered something about Fereldan weather.

"Well, no official business is going to be conducted today," replied Alistair, a steely vein running through the words. "The lady Cousland and I will be attending Riordan's funeral, which you're… you're welcome to attend. And I also want to get her out of this rain."

There came a clatter as a startled Warden in the rear of the group dropped his sword onto the flagstones. Yvon's tawny eyebrows shot upwards into his hairline as he surveyed Flora.

"You're the lady Cousland?" he asked, the disbelief shot clear through the enquiry. "You!?"

Flora was already used to such a reaction, and no longer found it insulting. She confirmed her identity with a nod, sensing Alistair shifting from foot to foot beside her. It was clear that he was indignant on her behalf, but taking his cue from her on how to react.

"Mm," the youngest Cousland replied, amiably. "Hello."

The Orlesian Warden-Commander glanced at his second, Clarel, who looked equally dumbstruck. Alistair let out a small sound of impatience under his breath, and this seemed to break through Yvon's cloud of astonishment.

"Apologies, my lady," the senior Warden replied, forcing some steadiness back into his voice. "It's just – I was not expecting you to be so… so young. And – forgive my forwardness – are you with child?"

Flora nodded, and the man's tawny eyes widened even further; disbelief writ naked across his face.
"Forgive me," he repeated, struggling to keep the incredulity from infusing his reply. "I... I have... many questions."

"Which can wait until tomorrow," interjected Alistair, firmly. "I'm sure they've got rooms within the monastery to house you. Come on, my dear; let's get out of the rain."

Flora could feel the eyes of the half-dozen Wardens fixed between her shoulder blades as she let Alistair steer her back towards the monastery. Knight-Captain Gannorn and Chanter Devotia followed several yards in their wake, quiet and watchful.

"They were looking at me like I had three heads," Flora said, feeling rivulets of water from her rain-soaked hair dripping down the back of her neck. "Everyone always looks so confused when they see me. I don't know what they were expecting?"

"Someone ten feet tall," Alistair replied more cheerfully, happier now that they had sought sanctuary from the rain. In truth, Revanloch's interior was almost as damp as its exterior. "Who shoots flames from their eyes, most likely."

Flora blinked, quiet for several moments as she envisioned herself in such a terrifying format.

"I wouldn't have fit in the tent," she said, at last.

"Eh?"

"I wouldn't have fit in the tent if I were ten feet tall," Flora repeated, patiently. "I would have slept with my legs sticking out of the tent flap. You know, when we were travelling around. Creatures of the night would have CHEWED on my feet."

Alistair grinned down at his former sister-warden. Impulsively bending to close the foot between their heights, he pressed an affectionate kiss to the top of her head.

"And we couldn't have had that," he murmured, glancing down appreciatively at Flora's booted knees beneath her tunic. "Not... not when those lovely legs should be wrapped around me instead."

Unfortunately, Alistair's deliberate lowering in tone was not quite muffled enough to avoid detection. Even as Flora cackled at him, they heard a cough of menacing disapproval from behind.

"'And the magisters did look upon, with lustful eye/That which ought to remain sacred and inviolable,'" intoned a stern Chanter Devotia.

Alistair shot a look of mild alarm over his shoulder, eyebrows rising as he took in the Chanter's scowl.

"I have to ask," he said, earnestly. "Are you related to Chantry Mother Philippa, of the Bournshire monastery? Just because she used to glare at me in exactly the same way when I was a recruit there."

The Chanter narrowed her eyes, clearly unappreciative of Alistair's flippant retort.

Flora was trying not to laugh - she admired her best friend for his quick wit in such circumstances, since she never could think of anything clever to say – and then her gaze fell on the pair of vast wooden doors that marked the entrance to the monastery chapel. She envisioned Riordan lying alone on his cold slab near the altar, and swallowed a small lump of sadness that rose suddenly to her throat.

Alistair glanced down at his lover, then bowed to press softer, kinder lips against her forehead.
"Right," he murmured, quietly. "Let's get ready."

Death in Herring came frequently enough that it was not especially commemorated. Although – thanks to their resident mender – disease and injury were not a concern; the sea claimed its fair share of souls each season. In addition to the tithe it took from the men of the northern coast, bodies from broken ships often washed up on the Hag's Teeth reef; like some macabre reverse offering.

If the sea did deign to return a body, then there was no question of burning the traditional pyre – driftwood was kept as fuel to stave off the cruel bite of winter. The romantic notion of sending a corpse off to sea in a burning vessel was to be found in legend only; boats were a precious commodity.

Instead, brief prayers would be muttered for the dead within Herring's diminutive, sandy-floored Chantry. A more formal service might occur if there happened to be a visiting Sister present, but this was a rare occasion. Bodies were wrapped in rope to keep their limbs from flailing, then taken unceremoniously out to sea in the bottom of a fisherman's craft. Once they had reached the deep waters beyond the reef, the body would be weighted with rocks and lowered into the Waking Sea. This was far from a Chantry-sanctioned burial, but the grim-faced villagers of Herring had scant time to spare for tradition or sentiment. Flora was therefore unused to the elaborate ritual associated with Chantry funerary tradition.

Up in the chamber, she had been astounded when Leliana had informed her of the necessity of changing clothing. The bard had donned a crimson robe, the colour so rich and deep that it almost appeared black against the candlelight; with a sheer black veil worn over the upper part of her face. Her lips, painted scarlet to match her robe, shone rich and lustrous against the plain material.

Flora, who had lived in one threadbare woollen jersey for the majority of her childhood, found the concept of donning mourning clothes a novelty. She had reached for her only piece of dark clothing – a navy tunic edged with olive – and Leliana reached out to stop her.

"It is tradition for women associated with royalty to wear pale colours in mourning," the bard murmured, her expression obscured behind the veil. "Here, ma petite, let me help you into this."

This turned out to be a robe, to Flora's dismay. It was a pale dusky pink, unapologetically feminine and the antithesis of her usual plain, austere choice of dress.

"Do I have to wear it?" she complained, even when Leliana was drawing the laces closed at the back. "How am I royalty?"

"You're Alistair's... mistress," Leliana countered, reaching for the hairbrush and working it through the tangled length of Flora's hair. "You're carrying his child. People will have expectations."

Flora sighed, eyeing her reflection dubiously in the warped surface of the mirror. She could just about glimpse the two Templars flanking the door – as usual, they had watched her wash and dress with a detached, cool professionalism.

"Everyone always has expectations of me," she replied, gloomily. "Nonstop, ever since I left the Circle. I'm sure I'm going to do something stupid and let people down."

Leliana let out a tsk of disapproval under her breath, letting Flora's hair hang loose in thick, dark red ropes.
"Have more faith in yourself, ma crevette," she murmured, retrieving the sheer veil and bracing herself for Flora's vociferous opposition. "Let me put this on, and don't protest."

To Leliana's surprise, the young Cousland was unusually placid, letting the bard anchor the veil to her hair with a myriad of pins. The gossamer-light fabric fell over Flora's face; and Leliana wondered at the lack of protest as she went to retrieve the matching pale slippers.

A moment later, the bard's eyes narrowed in suspicion, and she twitched the veil aside.

Flora beamed, a cheese sandwich lodged firmly between her teeth.

"This thing would have been useful," the Cousland replied, her mouth full. "For secret snacking in class at the Circle. I could eat a three course dinner under here."

"Florence! If you get crumbs on your gown… I despair. Don't touch anything!"

A short while later, Flora took one look at the pretty, embroidered silk slippers, and flat-out refused to wear them. Leliana, in the face of such mulish obstinacy, decided not to press the issue. Instead, Flora retrieved her own beloved boots; in which she had walked across half of Ferelden without a single blister.

"From the knees up: princess. From the knees down: peasant," Leliana retorted, glancing quickly at Flora to see how she would respond.

Flora looked supremely un-bothered, unceremoniously hoisting the skirt up around her thighs to tighten her knee-strapping. Leliana groaned, dragging a hand over the sheer veil masking her face.

"Please don't hoick your skirts up like an employee of the Pearl," the bard begged, reaching out to flatten an errant strand of Flora's hair. "You aren't showing off your wares, you're a lady."

"Madame du Poisson!" Flora said, remembering the cognomen that Zevran had ascribed to her during their infiltration of Denerim. "Ha!"

"Oui, come on then, Miss Fish."

Chapter End Notes

OOC Author Note: So Leliana is trying her best to slooooowly make Flora more comfortable with becoming Fereldan royalty, haha! Flora still really, really hates dresses – nobody wore dresses in Herring. So impractical!

Bit of trivia: white was the colour of mourning for Medieval noblewomen and queens.

I made up Yvon Cuvillier, since I don't think Clarel was Commander of the Orlesian Wardens in 9:30 Dragon. I heard she goes a bit crazy in Inquisition?
Chapter Notes

The strange quartet – bard, lady, and lady's Templar escort – began to make their way through Ravenloch's labyrinthine passages. The guest quarters were located in a separate wing to the main chapel, and just as they reached the gallery between east and west, the bells began to ring overhead.

A flock of sparrows soared from the belfry in alarm as the seven great bells rocked back and forth; emitting the low, sonorous ring of mourning. Their plaintive clamour was taken up by the smaller bell-towers, until the entire monastery seemed to reverberate with metallic dissonance.

Flora was suddenly grateful for the veil over her face, not entirely sure that she would be able to maintain her solemn composure in the hours ahead. She had managed to refrain from dwelling on Riordan's funeral up until that point; deliberately distracting herself with thoughts of assassins and Orlesians, Madame du Poisson and glowering Templars.

Yet now, with the clarion cry of Revanloch's bells ringing about the mouldering corridors, Flora had no choice but to turn her mind to upcoming events. She had never been to a proper Andrastian funeral before, and was not wholly sure what it entailed.

_The only pyre I've ever attended was that of Cailan. And that wasn't exactly a Royal send-off; it was us huddled around a bonfire built from the broken remains of Ostagar._

_Afterwards, she and Alistair had lain together for the first time; gritted teeth on a damp bedroll, the ashes of a dead king still caught in their hair._

Now they were parting ways for a final time with Riordan, the senior Warden who had almost come to represent Duncan himself in Flora's mind. She recalled first meeting the Highever native in Rendon Howe's dungeon; where Riordan had been held for six months after crossing the Fereldan border to investigate rumours of a Blight. Despite his weak and half-starved condition, he had offered her words of comfort on that terrible first night; and launched himself in vain at the guards when they had come to deliver her to the Templar's lyrium brand.

_I'm sorry, Riordan_ she thought to herself guiltily, falling slightly behind Leliana as the bard glided in stately manner down the corridor. _I shouldn't think of you as another Duncan. You were a great man in your own right._

Flora bowed her head, gazing at her booted feet as she followed in Leliana's wake. She could hear the Templars several yards behind, their metal-clad footsteps echoing against the flagstones.

Alistair was waiting outside the entrance to the chapel, clad in dark leathers and sporting an uncharacteristically sombre expression. Duncan's sword hung at his side, the silverite length gleaming despite the encompassing gloom.

"Everyone else is inside," he said, his gaze falling on Leliana. "They won't start without us."

The king ducked his head to peer around Leliana's velvet-clad form; eyes widening imperceptibly as he took in Flora standing quiet and miserable on the flagstones.

Striding forward, Alistair lifted the veil to see his former sister-warden's face, pressing a kiss to her lips as her sad grey eyes settled on him.
"You look beautiful, Lo," he murmured, nudging Flora's cheek affectionately with a thumb. "Are you alright?"

She nodded, not quite trusting in herself to give a verbal reply. Alistair's eyes searched her face a moment longer, fingers lingering against her cheek; then he let the veil fall and offered her his arm.

"Ready?"

Although Flora was not quite sure what she was ready for, she gave a nod regardless, tightening her grip around his elbow.

Then two Templars were opening the doors and the great, hollow expanse of the Chantry billowed up before them. It seemed darker than usual; the candles failing to make much headway against the persistent gloom. At the far end, beside the altar and Riordan's plinth, Andraste's flame burned in defiance of the darkness.

As they proceeded down the central aisle, Flora realised the cause of the additional layer of shadow. The stained-glass windows lining the walls had been shrouded with thin grey veils, allowing only a fraction of the weak Fereldan sun to filter through. The purpose was seemingly to focus the audience's attention on the eternally smouldering brazier at the end of the aisle; which cast an inconstant, flickering warmth over the faces of those sitting in the front pews.

There were just over a dozen people in attendance; all of whom rose to their feet at Alistair's entrance. The Orlesian Grey Wardens – headed by the lion-headed Yvon and his second, Clarel – were clad in full silver and blue regalia; expressions solemn as they gazed upon their fallen brother-warden. Both Guerrins were there, clad in muted tones of their family livery. Finian stood at Teagan's side, his remaining eye swivelling anxiously towards his sister. Knight-Commander and Chantry Mother were already standing at either side of the plinth; the former having regained some measure of composure after suffering Alistair's incandescent wrath the previous night. Flora's vision was not impeded by the veil, but she clutched her best friend's arm with increasing tightness as they headed towards the altar.

Riordan's body looked much the same as it had done when Flora had visited him the previous night. Irreparable damage had been done after he had leapt from Fort Drakon's highest tower, sacrificing his life to bring the dragon to the ground; the cobblestones had broken near-every bone in his body. Yet despite the massive internal injury, his face appeared grave and peaceful, greying hair brushed neatly around the stiff collar of his tunic.

Alistair felt his former sister-warden's grip tighten on his arm, and reached up with a hand to provide an additional layer of reassurance. His large palm, strong and calloused, settled securely over Flora's fingers, anchoring them together.

The Royal pew at the front had been left empty in preparation for Ferelden's king and his mistress. Flora glanced to one side as she sat down, noticing Arl Leonas standing in the shadows of a nearby pillar. He nodded softly in greeting and she blinked at him through the veil; unsure whether or not she was allowed to wave.

The next moment, the arl shifted slightly and Flora caught sight of a short, stocky figure at his side. Her eyes widened as she recognised Oghren, dressed in his best attempt at formal wear. The dwarf's orange hair had been parted in the centre and slicked down, his moustache neatly combed. Sensing Flora's stare, Oghren raised a subtle hand to her, lifting his chin. Flora smiled at him, inexplicably touched by the dwarf's presence.

The Orlesian Warden-Commander bowed his head to acknowledge Flora's arrival; fascination
visibly writ across his refined, fine-lined features. Flora knew that he would be confused on no less than three counts: on her survival – she had slain the Archdemon and survived, she had no discernible aura of taint, and she had seemingly defied the Order's curse of underlying infertility.

The Chantry Mother gestured for them all to sit, ascending the low pulpit to begin the service. As she began to intone the opening verses of the Chant, Flora let the familiar words wash over her; stifling a yawn beneath the veil.

_I wonder if Riordan had a family? Oh, he said that he did, a long time ago. I suppose they aren't around any more, then._

_I wonder if Duncan had any family?_

_Stop thinking about Duncan_, she told herself firmly, missing the chiding reprimand of her spirits. _This is to remember Riordan._

The Chantry Mother began a sermon on how the souls of the faithful were drawn to the Maker's side, like a fisherman pulling in a net. Even this marine reference was not enough to gain Flora's attention; she spared the regally clad priestess a brief glance before musing on Riordan once again.

_He found the Grey Warden cache in the city. He made Alistair and I look the part; it was the first time we had worn the silver and blue since Ostagar._

_I think it was the first time that anybody really took me seriously, when I came downstairs in the breastplate and the tunic._

The crowd replied with the expected responses, their voices echoing to the shadowed ceiling. Flora, less accustomed to such a formal service, did not join in – neither, understandably, did Oghren. Despite his unfamiliarity with Chantry tradition, the dwarf was standing stiff and straight-backed, his gaze clear, and unclouded by drink.

Alistair was also only half-listening to the words. He had heard the rites for the dead a dozen times over the past few weeks, while attending the great pyres on the Alamarri plains. His mind was on Duncan; the corners of his mouth turning down as he recalled that his commander still had no marker or memorial to commemorate his passing. Grimly, he resolved to speak to Eamon about the possibility of such after the funeral.

At the prompt of the Chantry Mother, the attendees rose to their feet once again. As she began the opening bars of a hymn, Alistair glanced down at his best friend as she stood dutifully at his side. Although the veil concealed much of Flora's face, he could just see the pale grey eyes and grave turn of the lips; her natural solemnity serving her well in this instance. He saw her mouth opening and closing and knew that she was miming, to spare those around her the trauma of listening to her tuneless voice.

Alistair suddenly felt ashamed of all the times that he, Leliana and Zevran had teased Flora about her singing; even to the point when they had fashioned ear plugs from scraps of cotton. Flora had been genuinely shocked to learn that her voice was so grating – it seemed that the villagers of Herring had never informed her of such.

Ducking his head and pressing his lips to the silk tulle of the veil, Alistair whispered throatily in Flora's ear.

"You can sing too, sweetheart."

"Nobody wants to hear me singing," she whispered back, then smiled briefly up at him. "And I don't
know the words."

The king gazed down at her, realising suddenly that he could – so easily! - have been attending Flora's own funeral service, if circumstances had been but a little different. Fear clamped his belly like a vice, and he put an arm around his lover's shoulders, drawing her close to his side and pressing another kiss to her veiled head. Flora reached up and wound her fingers into Alistair's own; as always, ready to anchor herself to him without question.

The hymn came to an end, and those gathered to pay their respects to Riordan sat down once more. Flora fidgeted on the bench, unable to get comfortable on the unforgiving surface of the wooden pew. Her lower back was aching, a sharp muscular pain that dug uncomfortably into the base of her spine. She shifted from one side of her rear to the other, bending forward slightly in a vain attempt to appease the throbbing.

The Orlesian Warden-Commander rose to his feet at the Chantry Mother's encouraging gesture, striding towards the plinth with sombre expression. After gazing at Riordan's still face for a long moment, he turned towards the small gathering and cleared his throat.

"Warden Riordan has answered the highest calling asked of any member of our Order," he said, the words emerging coated in honeyed Orlesian tones. "By giving his life in the fight against the Archdemon, he has guaranteed his place by the Maker's side."

Flora swallowed, suddenly feeling a lodestone of sadness forming in her belly. She was uncertain whether it was due to her own grief over the senior warden's death; or a deliberate prodding of her humours caused by the babe.

Stop unbalancing me, she thought furiously to her abdomen. I don't want to cry. I'm already in pain because of you.

"Riordan joined the Wardens of Orlais because he wished to do his duty by Thedas," Warden-Commander Cullivar continued, his voice reverberating over the audience. "He knew that the threat of a Blight overwhelmed any petty division of country border."

"Typical Orlesian, to refer to a border as petty," Eamon murmured in Teagan's ear, as the younger Guerrin gave a soft grunt of agreement.

Flora let her eyes drift sideways to the other Wardens, still fascinated by their very existence. Yvon's lieutenant, Clarel, was sitting as though she were still standing, her spine so rigid that it did not touch the back of the pew. Her hair was cropped so close to her skull that the pink skin showed through, and her face was ablaze with conviction.

The Orlesian Warden-Commander continued to talk, but his accent was so heavy and his voice so formal that Flora was unable to understand half of what he said. Wishing to distract herself from her aching back, she let her gaze meander past Clarel, across to the only other female Warden in the Orlesian company. This woman was some years younger than her counterpart – possibly in her mid-thirties – and very tall, matching Arl Leonas in height. She had a lean, sinewy build and a hawkish face; her features striking rather than conventionally beautiful. Long, dark hair was restrained by a tight, precisely wrapped bun, and an envious Flora wondered as to the secret of such control.

She returned her eyes to Riordan, focusing on his calm, waxen face. It was odd to see him clean-shaven, since the Warden had always had a layer of dark stubble covering his cheeks and jawline.

I suppose hair stops growing after you die, she thought, wincing slightly as the pressure on her spine increased. Ow, stop it! That really hurts.
Yvon returned to his seat, head bowed respectfully. Leliana rose to her feet, gliding like a dancer across the flagstones. Her stately passage drew all eyes to her; the bard well-aware of her audience as she slid the veil back to reveal her face.

"This is a centuries-old mourning song," the bard murmured, the Orlesian in her dialect emphasised in the presence of her countrymen. "It was first rumoured to have been sung after the martyrdom of Andraste Herself. Please, stand with me."

The congregation rose to their feet in dutiful response. Flora felt her knee give a twinge of pain; simultaneously, the stone ceiling lurched in a sea-swell of dizziness. She gulped and closed her eyes very tightly, the Andrastian flame a glowing blur behind her eyelids.

When Flora opened them again, the world had righted itself and Leliana had begun to sing. Her sweet, mellifluous voice echoed about the Chantry, rising to the vaulted ceiling and lifting the small hairs on the necks of her audience.

"'No harp delights with glad music; no good hawk now soars through the halls, nor swift horses clatter in courtyards…'"

Leliana really does sing beautifully, reflected Flora as she shifted from foot to foot in an effort to relieve the soreness of her ankles. Her voice is lovely enough to penetrate the Veil. I hope Riordan can hear it, somehow.

I hope he's proud of Alistair and I.

Why do I feel like I know he is?

To Flora's slight surprise, she felt the delicate silk tulle of the veil sticking to her cheeks. Lifting her fingers to touch the skin, she realised that she was crying, though she had barely felt the tears slip from beneath her eyelashes.

Grateful for the cover provided by the delicate material, Flora sniffed as quietly as possible; just about resisting the urge to blow her nose on fine-spun silk that was probably worth more than the collective value of Herring.

Standing at Flora's other side, Leonas glanced down at her; narrowing his eyes to squint through the gauzy surface of the veil. Without drawing attention from those around them, the arl retrieved a square of linen from his sleeve and pressed it onto Flora's free hand. Taking it gratefully, she blew her nose surreptitiously beneath the filmy fabric.

As Leliana finished the last poignant refrain, she made an elegant bow to Riordan's prone body; gliding gracefully back towards the pew as though each foot was barely making contact with the ground.

The Chantry Mother lifted her arms reverently towards the Andrastian pyre, and this gesture seemed to draw the ritual to a close. Eamon rose to his feet, the other nobles present followed suit.

"The pyre will be lit at sunset," the arl murmured in response to a question from Leonas. "We'll have time to return to Denerim and meet with the stonemasons about the rebuilding of the guild-house."

Trying to avoid a repeat of the dizziness from earlier, Flora lifted herself more cautiously from the bench. Her attention was caught by the Orlesian Wardens, who were walking en masse towards the plinth.

"What are they doing?" she whispered, directing the question towards Leonas. The arl was adjusting
the bandages that still covered his maimed hand; a souvenir of the final battle against the Darkspawn.

"They're serving the final watch," the arl replied, watching the Wardens kneel in a circle around their dead brother's plinth. "It's a form of military tribute. They'll remain there, keeping vigil, until the pyre is lit at sunset."

Flora stared at the prone figure of Riordan, ignoring the low conversation of those around her as they made ready to leave. For a moment, she fancied that she saw a faint mirage of Duncan's body, superimposed over his dead counterpart's features.

"I want to do it," she breathed, eyes wide. "I want to do it, too. The final watch."

Chapter End Notes

OOC Author Note: Goodbye Riordan! I always felt a bit bad that you couldn't remember the characters who died in game with some sort of memorial, lol. Isn't that ridiculous!?

I wanted to show Oghren being more interested in the Wardens, since he ends up joining them! I want to try and do more with him in this story, I feel as though I neglected him in The Lion And The Light!

We also meet the Orlesian Warden in this chapter – the one who is going to take over the Ferelden Wardens! It's the tall woman with the dark hair.

The quote from Leliana's song is actually from Beowulf! It's much too beautiful to have been written by me, lol!
Alistair turned to gape at his lover, his brows rising in consternation. They were standing before the Royal pew in Revanloch's Chantry, the Orlesian Wardens already gathered in a circle around their dead brother's plinth. They were preparing to undertake the final watch, a vigil which would last until Riordan's pyre; and Flora had just declared her intention to join them.

"My heart," the king said eventually, nonplussed. "Sunset is ages away. You'd miss lunch, and dinner."

"And you can't kneel on a cold floor for hours," added Leliana, sternly. "Not in your condition. You're five and a half months gone with child."

"But I was – am – was the Warden-Commander of Ferelden," protested Flora, stubbornly. "I ought to do it."

An incredulous Alistair stared at his former sister-warden, then made a pleading gesture towards Finian.

"Finn, can you say something? It's freezing in here. Flo can't kneel on these tiles until sunset."

But Finian had been watching his sister closely through his remaining eye, and recognised the belligerent obstinacy settling on her features; strong enough to be glimpsed even through the veil. Flora, usually sweet and pliant as an amiable young sapling, was known to dig her heels in on rare occasion.

"Then I'd stoke up Andraste's Flame a little higher," he replied, in rueful tones. "I recognise the look on Floss' face – the same one as our mother used to get when Father suggested that we host a Satinalia ball for all the knights. Stubborn as a mule."

Eamon looked to Teagan, who gave a helpless shrug. Just then another strongly-accented voice piped up, offering unexpected support.

"Eh, I'll do it wi'ye, lass. I liked Riordan – man could 'old his drink. Nice ter say goodbye."

Flora smiled at Oghren, who had manifested before her with a clear determination in his small, clever eyes. For once, the dwarf's breath did not reek of ale.

"Thank you," she said, pointedly ignoring the others. "I want to say goodbye to Riordan properly, too."

And to Duncan.

With a slightly belligerent lift of the chin, Flora swivelled on her heel and ascended the shallow series of steps upon which the plinth rested. There was a space near Riordan's feet that was unoccupied, and she prepared to lower herself to the tiles.

Before she could work on the logistics of kneeling – robe, weak knee and belly combined to make this task more difficult - there was a hand at her arm, strong fingers gripping Flora's elbow to help lower her to the flagstones.
"Careful, sweetheart."

At first, Flora thought it was Oghren who had assisted her, but when the voice spoke; she recognised the familiar, clipped drawl. Despite the childhood spent in a stable, there was an unmistakeable thread of aristocracy that shaped her best friend's words; elevating his speech from the common masses.

Alistair smiled ruefully at his former sister-warden, taking to his knee at her side.

"I haven't done one of these vigils since I was a Templar recruit," he murmured, with a wry twist to his mouth. "Should be an interesting experience. It's nearly eight hours until sunset, you know."

Flora blinked at him through the sheer veil, and Alistair's voice softened slightly. He reached out to touch her cheek, thumb brushing over the translucent silk tulle.

"But, you're right. I want to pay my respects to our – to our senior officers."

Both of them.

Oghren took to his knee at Flora's other side, and she thought that she had never seen the dwarf look so earnest; without a whisker of joviality on his moustachioed features.

The prospect of remaining in one place for eight hours was not too insurmountable. On occasion in the Circle, Flora had hidden in cupboards or behind library shelves for similar lengths of time to avoid classes and irate Templars. In Herring, she had also spent full days sitting beside dropped lines, waiting for a bite.

Now, she found a position that was reasonably comfortable – kneeling down, with her stomach resting on her thighs and her head bowed.

In small groups the others drifted from the Chantry; leaving behind Flora's Templar watchers (not overjoyed at the prospect of spending the next eight hours in one place), and Alistair's Royal Guards (who felt a similar sentiment). After quietly working out a rota of shifts, the door swung shut quietly behind booted feet; and then there was naught but a weighty silence and the uneven of air.

Flora closed her eyes and let her mind blossom with memory; first of Riordan, and then Duncan, the two men blurring together until they became a strange hybrid.

Little sister. You have a great gift.

I made the right decision taking you from the Circle.

She remembered when she had first met Duncan, that terrible afternoon in the Circle when Jowan had lost all sense and control, and revealed himself as a maleficar. Flora had barely noticed the Warden-Commander's presence, she had been preoccupied with shielding the defenceless Tranquil and shock at Jowan's folly. It was only afterwards, when the blood was being mopped from the tiles, that Flora looked up to see the stranger staring at her; his dark eyes bright and thoughtful.

"You're a talented healer, little one," he'd said, the words ever-so-slightly accented. "And that shield was an exceptional piece of casting. It was… artistry."

He had Rivaini heritage, she would find out later. They found magic beautiful in Rivain.

"But I can't do anything else," Flora had replied, too shy to meet his gaze. "I can't fight. There's… there's something wrong with me, I'm flawed."
"I see no flaw in you, child. It seems to me as though the Maker has granted you a... a rare talent. A talent that could help to save this nation."

And it had helped to save the nation, Flora reflected to herself, awed at her old commander's prescience. If not for my spirits, we would have died a hundred times over. At Ostagar, when the ogre attacked us at the top of Ishal. At Redcliffe, when the undead poured forth from the castle. Roasted by dragon fire at the Temple of Sacred Ashes. Blasted apart by Zathrian in the heart of Brecilian. Torn apart on the ramparts by the Archdemon's teeth. How many assassins' arrows would have met their mark without the barrier? How many blades sunk into vulnerable flesh?

You were right, Duncan. I hope you can see how right you were.

Say hello to my Silver Knight and Golden Lady if you see them. Tell them I miss them, every day. I miss you, too.

One of Flora's feet began to tingle and she tucked it beneath her rear, surreptitiously. She opened her eyes, relying on the gauzy organza veil to disguise her curiosity, and glanced quickly to either side.

The Orlesian Wardens were as still as statues, kneeling before their fallen brother. Even the slight draught blowing through the columns – Flora had learnt that there were always draughts at Revanloch, even if it were not particularly windy outside – did not disturb their inert reverence.

Flora slid her gaze sideways, to where Oghren was slumped with his eyes closed. For a moment, she thought that he had fallen asleep; then a slight shift in the dwarf's movement proved her wrong. She wondered idly what had provoked this sudden fascination in the Wardens, but was pleased that Oghren had found an interest that was not at the bottom of a bottle.

On her other side, Alistair was kneeling with an easy grace borne of many years of practice. His face was uncharacteristically grave, his lips moving silently as he murmured fragments of half-forgotten Chantry prayers. Flora knew that he had first volunteered to stay for the vigil to keep watch over her, unwilling to leave Flora in the very spot where an attempt on her life had been made.

Now, looking at the focused reverence on her best friend's face, Flora guessed that Alistair appreciated this chance to reflect on both Riordan's sacrifice and Duncan's death. It was not often that the king of Ferelden could be left undisturbed for an extended period of time; and ever since Ostagar, they had barely had a moment of peace to mourn their ill-fated commander.

Flora lifted her eyes to Riordan's body, letting her memories flood her mind and distract her from her aching spine.

You're the only Grey Wardens left in Ferelden? You and the lad – was it Alistair?

You've gathered the armies?! Just the two of you – a pair of warden-recruits?

Riordan, if things had gone just a little differently, it would have been you who had gathered the armies. It would have been you who was named the Hero of Ferelden, not me.

Though you probably would still have ended up on this plinth, most likely.

Kneeling on the cold tiles with the baby shifting impatiently in her stomach, Flora promised herself fervently that she would campaign for Riordan to also be named as a Hero of Ferelden.

I don't even deserve it. It wasn't me, it was my spirits. I was just their tool. No one praises the rod for catching the fish.
The hours passed by, each one seemingly longer than the last. The echo of a gong rang in the distance, marking the lunch hour. Patches of coloured light from the stained glass windows moved slowly across the flagstones; mirroring the leisurely progress of the sun as it inched along its bow-shaped arc.

Flora had long since passed the point of feeling hungry. Her feet and legs were numb – she didn't know whether it was from cold, or from kneeling down for such a protracted period of time. Rather unfairly, the ache in her lower back had not been masked by the numbness – it had grown more pronounced; a dull throb which gnawed at the base of her spine. The only benefit to kneeling with neck bowed was that it helped to keep the blood flowing to her brain; diminishing the light-headedness that Flora had felt since the morning.

Her stomach rumbled on cue with the dinner gong, and she felt the little creature shift against her kidneys, prodding her with a small foot.

_Sorry_, she thought, miserably. _I'm really hungry too. Can't you just… chew on my insides for nourishment?_

_Actually, don't do that. That sounds really painful, and you're hurting me enough._

_I feel like volunteering for this might have been a bit of a mistake. I don't need to do this to remember Riordan, or Duncan._

_Well, too late now. How much longer?_

As subtly as possible, Flora angled her gaze up to the stained glass window depicting Andraste leading her armies into Tevinter. Unfortunately, it was east-facing and no hint as to the sun's position could be gleaned from the leaded aperture.

Suddenly, Yvon murmured beneath his breath and rose to his feet; lifting his eyes to the ceiling. The other Orlesian Wardens followed suit, inclining their heads in turn towards Riordan's prostrate body. Oghren also clambered to his feet, far less gracefully, his stumble giving an ostentatious rumble.

"Cheers," he said to the dead Warden, head swivelling in pursuit of dinner. "For the… dragon."

Alistair rose up with a slight grimace, glancing down at his veiled lover as she remained kneeling with bowed head. He stretched his arms, rubbing the stiffness from his elbows.

"How did I do this every week when I was fifteen?" the king murmured under his breath, then stood up straighter as the Orlesian Warden-Commander turned to him.

"Your presence here is appreciated, your majesty," Yvon Cuvillier said quietly, bowing his lion-like head. "And the lady Cousland. I see that she is still paying tribute to our fallen brother."

The kneeling Flora stared gloomily at the flagstones, watching the progress of a small spider as it crawled along the base of the plinth.

The moment that the Orlesian Warden-Commander had left with comrades in tow, she shoved the veil back over her face and elbowed Alistair in the shin.

"Help me up!"

"What?" said Alistair, distracted by Chanter Devotia's unrelenting glower.

"Help me up!" hissed Flora. "My legs have gone to sleep; I can't move!"
Alistair dropped his attention to his best friend, then frowned; his handsome brow creasing.

"Sweetheart," he breathed, reaching down to haul Flora gently to her feet. "Maker's Breath, you're as white as a sheet. And you're frozen – ah, I'm such an idiot! Why did I agree to this?"

"I'm just hungry," replied Flora, wondering at how the stained glass windows were blurring together into a kaleidoscope of muted colour. "I think… I think- I need to eat something."

Then the world lurched beneath her, and she slid slowly into unconsciousness.

Chapter End Notes

OOC Author Note: Vigils are not designed for pregnant women, Flo, get with the program! Does anyone even say that anymore, lol? I bet Alistair is good at just kneeling in place, from his decade spent in the Chantry.

Anyway, Flora has still not got over her minor obsession with Duncan, haha.
When Flora opened her eyes, the ceiling overhead was low and crossed with wooden beams. She *recognised* these beams – she had tried to count them one night while trying to sleep – and realised that she was back up in the guest chamber. Chanter Devotia was glowering down at her from the end of the bed, her strange violet eyes narrowed.

"It's a miracle," Flora said wonderingly to the disapproving Templar. "I've *transportationed* myself from the Chantry up to here!"

The incredulous Chanter shook her head slowly from side to side.

"Flora!"

Alistair, who had been pacing the length of the room, shot to the side of the bed and crouched down; his hazel eyes blown wide with fear and distress. Flora sat up against the cushions and gazed at him, wondering why her knees were so stiff. He reached out and touched her hair and her face with trembling fingers; the crown set to one side on the mattress.

"Are you alright, sweetheart?" he breathed, the words emerging constricted from his throat. "Is it the baby? Maker's Breath, this is my fault, I should never have- "

"The baby is fine," a nonplussed Flora replied, feeling it nudge irritably against her spine. "Why am I up here?"

"Of course the baby is fine," came an exasperated voice from the doorway. "The silly child decided to spent all day bent in half, without eating. She's fainted, that's all. And it's nobody's fault but hers!"

"Wynne!" Flora breathed, delighted. "Wynne, you've come to visit me. I thought you'd *forgotten* about me."

The senior enchanter rolled her eyes, crossing the room with a rustling of her maroon Circle robes. She sat on the edge of the bed, leaning forward and fixing the Cousland with her sternest expression. Simultaneously, her lined, elegant hand disappeared into the depths of her robes and withdrew an apple.

"Eat this."

"Shouldn't she have something more substantial than *fruit*?" Alistair asked, anxiously pleating the blanket into folds. "Shouldn't she have some meat?"

The senior enchanter shook her head, watching Flora take an obedient bite.

"No, she needs something sweet. What *possessed* you, Florence, to go without food for the best part of the day?"

"I wanted to do it. The vigil," she replied, through a mouthful of fruit. "To comm- comm… commemoo… *remember* Duncan and Riordan."

"You've *commemorated* them enough by defeating the Archdemon," retorted Wynne, briskly.
"Finish that apple."

Flora took another bite, heaving herself over on the mattress as Alistair collapsed onto the bed beside her, boots and all. The king of Ferelden let out a sigh, dragging his hand over his face.

"That's two heart attacks you've given me within the space of a night and a day, Lo," he murmured, grimacing. "First, the assassin, and now with this fainting-"

"And I thought life might get boring after the end of Fifth Blight!" Flora finished, swallowing the last bite of apple.

Alistair groaned, unable to see the humour in her response. He pressed his lips to her ear, clutching a fistful of the pale silk of her dress.

"Sweetheart, you need to take more care of yourself," he said, and there was a raw note of pleading in his tone. "For you, and for the baby."

Wynne, nostrils flaring, did not place much stock in Alistair's form of berating. Like many other grown men, the king was clearly unable to be overly stern to a beautiful woman. She, on the other hand, had no such issue.

"Your spirits are gone, Florence," she said bluntly, as Flora's face fell. "They're gone, they're never coming back, they are never going to look after you again, and so you need to start taking some responsibility for your own health."

Flora bowed her head, miserably aware that Wynne had an extremely valid point. The senior enchanter continued, in slightly kinder tones.

"I don't mean to be cruel, but you need to think of the child, whose well-being is now entirely dependent on you. That means sleeping enough, eating regularly, and not kneeling in a freezing Chantry for eight hours!"

Alistair, who felt sorry for his former sister-warden, put an arm around her shoulders. Wynne shot him a glare, and he immediately took it away again, forcing sternness into his voice.

"Wynne is right, my darling - I mean, Florence. I'm going to have to… put my foot down, here."

"Put your foot down on what?" Flora replied, perplexed. "On the floor?"

"I'd wager that they don't have that expression in Herring," the senior enchanter said, a wry smile curling the corner of her mouth. "Anyway, don't sulk, Flora. We're just concerned for your health. That's all."

Alistair returned his arm about his best friend, kissing the side of her ear. Flora leaned her head against his shoulder, then let out a strangled squawk.

"Riordan's pyre," she said, suddenly. "Did I miss it?"

Knight-Captain Gannorn, stationed near the window, took a glance out of the warped glass.

"They're just setting it up in the courtyard," he stated, flatly. "I imagine it'll begin soon."

Alistair opened his mouth to protest, but Flora was already un-entangling herself from his arms, retrieving a woollen jumper to pull on over the filmy silk of the dress.

"Darling, maybe you should rest," Alistair began, without much hope.
As expected, Flora shot him a slightly withering look.

"I want to say goodbye," she said, her tone inviting no dissent. "I feel fine, don't worry."

Alistair glanced around, then snatched up a bread roll left over from the breaking of their fast.

"At least eat this on the way down," he implored, clambering to his feet and smoothing out his rumpled tunic. "If the baby has inherited our appetites, it'll want more than just an apple."

Prepared to acquiesce on this matter, Flora took the bread roll and bit into it.

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The sun had disappeared beneath the low hills of the Bannorn, faint ghost-like sketches of constellations emerging star by star from the pallid dusk. Despite the rapid encroachment of summer, Ferelden evenings were still chilly enough to warrant sleeves and outer layers; especially for those situated on its coastline. The gulls wheeled over the crumbling turrets and towers of Revanloch, calling out to each other as they eyed the odd collection of people gathered in the courtyard below.

Although the Chantry officials had been responsible for supervising the mass pyres on the Alamari plains; it had been several months since the last burning at the monastery itself. The pyre had been built up in the central courtyard, a meticulous arrangement of kindling and larger logs. Riordan, clad in full armour, had been placed amidst the branches; his face waxen and stiff.

The Orlesian Wardens were present amidst the crowd, as were many nobles from Ferelden's Landsmeet. Eamon, Teagan, Leonas and Finian were amongst those who had returned; accompanied by several of the commanders from the disbanded Ferelden free army. Lyna Mahariel had returned to the forests with the Dalish, but General Aeducan was present, alongside First Enchanter Irving.

Loghain, with a pronounced limp and leaning heavily on a wooden stick, had also come to attend Riordan's departure. Escorting him by two Royal Guard, he had been brought down from Denerim on a litter; not yet able to ride a horse with his wooden limb. He had greeted Flora with reserved cordiality, granting Alistair a stiff nod. Flora had been oddly gratified to see him – after all, he was technically the only Fereldan Grey Warden in existence, and it seemed fitting that he should be present.

"I bet you could kick someone really hard with that foot," Flora offered, eyeing the iron-capped wooden limb affixed to Loghain's knee.

"Aye, lass," he replied quietly, the northern cadence of his accent reflecting her own. "Any suggestions as to targets?"

"The assassin who tried to throw a dagger at me," replied Flora immediately, and Loghain's lip curled in contempt.

"Bad enough to attack a defenceless girl," he muttered, shifting his weight onto his good leg. "Worse to attack one heavy with child."

Flora grimaced, and then the Chantry Mother cleared her throat, raising her arms to the skies and speaking in beatific tones.

"O Maker, we commend this soul into Your keeping. Guide this man to Your side; where he may know eternal rest, untroubled by care or affliction."
Leliana murmured a quiet prayer to herself, bowing towards the pyre with experienced reverence. Six Templars, each one clutching a burning torch, stepped forward.

Alistair glanced around to locate his lover. She was standing nearby, having turned away from Loghain at the sound of the Chantry Mother's words. Her eyes were narrowed as she squinted at Riordan's face, and Alistair knew that she was trying to inscribe every plane and angle onto her memory.

Suddenly, struck by a sudden impulse, the king drew Duncan's sword; which he had carried on his belt since Ostagar. Stepping forward, he ascended the low platform upon which the pyre was built, leaning forward to place the Warden-Commander's sword on Riordan's chest.

"Meet the Maker as a warrior, brother-warden."

He returned to Flora's side and she stared at him, her grey irises wide and placid as the Waking Sea after a storm.

"I don't need Duncan's sword to remember him," Alistair murmured to his once sister-warden. "It belongs with Riordan."

Flora nodded mutedly, gazing at the length of silverite as it lay on the senior warden's chest. Instinctively, she reached out and met Alistair's hand already stretching for her own; their fingers wrapping together in practised intimacy as the Templars stepped forwards, touching their torches to the pyre.

The wood must have been doused in some sort of incendiary fuel, since it flared up immediately with a heat and brightness that made those closest to it take a cautionary step back. The flames rose around Riordan's body, engulfing it in seconds. Billowing smoke began to belch upwards as the pyre consumed its offering; ashes and sparks carried towards the well of the night sky.

*I remember you were kind to me in the cells of Fort Drakon,* Flora thought, tremulously. *You told me as much as you could about Duncan. I'm sorry that I always asked more about him, than about you.*

She felt a great swell of sadness rise up from her belly like an unseasonably high tide. Unable to help herself, a sniffle escaped her throat; the tears blossoming on her eyelashes and dripping in thin rivulets down her cheeks. She could taste the woodsmoke on her tongue, prickling sharp and acrid against the back of her throat.

Beside her, Alistair - who had presided over a dozen pyres in his capacity as king over the past few weeks - gazed sombrelly into the flames. Regret was writ over his handsome features, memories of his old commander flooding his mind. So absorbed was he in his own reminiscence, that he did not immediately notice his companion's distress.

Finian, who found his limited vision distorted by the heat and smoke rising from the pyre, had averted his stare away. Noticing Flora's pale face, he gave her an anxious nudge.

"Floss?" he breathed. "You alright, Flossie?"

"Just the smoke," she croaked back thickly, voice even hoarser than usual. "In my… in my eyes."

Her reply was half-masked by the crackling from the pyre as the flames chewed their way through the fuel.

Alistair glanced down at his former sister-warden, then inhaled sharply. Repositioning himself behind Flora, he slid one arm around her waist and the other just beneath her breastbone, drawing
her back to his chest. Flora leaned against the familiar muscle of her best friend's chest, grateful for his closeness.

*So much for never crying in public,* she thought gloomily to herself. *Now it's happened twice in one day. And you've fainted.*

*How much of this is caused by you, little creature? I never used to be so unbalanced. My Herring-dad would be horrified at such shrimpy behaviour.*

At a couple of inches over five foot, Flora's head was too low for Alistair to rest his chin on. Instead, he bowed his face to kiss her hair, tasting ashes on his tongue. He was reminded suddenly of Cailan's pyre, which had been constructed far more amateurishly than this one. The wood had been damp – there was still snow on the ground at Ostagar, despite it being spring everywhere else in Ferelden – and Wynne had needed to use her own magic to accelerate the flames. There was no danger of a slow burn here – the wood was driftwood, dried out and stored in waterproof containers. The pyre flared up fast and fierce, a mass of pure white heat burning at its core.

Parting that evening proved to be harder than ever for both parties involved. A miserable Flora was desperate for her once brother-warden to stay; yet knew that he needed to return to Denerim, that his stabilising presence in the city was vital in this post-Blight uncertainty.

Alistair, meanwhile, was terrified by the possibility of more assassins, and was also keenly aware of his best friend's distress. He implored both Leliana and Teagan to keep an eye on Flora – fluctuating between instruction and plea – though none of their assurances seemed to assuage his concern.

After promising that he would be back tomorrow evening, the king took his leave with tears in his eyes that were not caused by the wood smoke.

Back up in the bedchamber, both bard and bann demonstrated consummate skill in distracting Flora from her own dolefulness. Leliana sang a motet of northern songs from Ferelden's wildest coastline, several of which Flora half-remembered from her decade spent in Herring.

Teagan then produced a book that he had managed to source from Maker-knew-where, with the alluring title: *Sea Creatures Of Tevinter Legend.* He spent a laborious hour puzzling over the first entry alongside Flora; demonstrating remarkable patience while translating words such as *hydra* and *mythological*. By the time that they had finished the *Minrathous Melusine*, Flora was dozing off; her head bowed low over the page.

Teagan gently extracted the book from her fingers, manoeuvring himself off the bed and stretching his cramped limbs. Shooting the two Templars at the door a slightly wary look, the bann made for the cabinet to pour himself an ale.

*Easier to think of the lass as a niece doing this,* he thought to himself ruefully, unplugging the bottle. *By the time that we reach the end of the book, hopefully it'll put an end to those dreams about her that I really ought to confess to a Chantry Mother.*

Leliana, leaning forward to melt the end of her sealing wax in the fire, cleared her throat pointedly. The courteous noble handed the bard the first beaker, pouring himself a second before taking a seat beside the fire.

"So: three remaining Howes," Leliana began steadily, her voice echoing about the chamber.
Teagan raised his eyebrows, glancing towards where Flora was curled up against the cushions. The bard made a soft, dismissive noise; waving her hand.

"Oh, she won't wake up; the child sleeps like the dead. A product of communal quarters, I believe. Anyway, I am unfamiliar with the Howe clan – would you enlighten me? Who do you believe is foolish enough to take out a contract on the widely-adored Hero of Ferelden?"

Leliana's brow creased in a single line; clearly not wholly comfortable with admitting her ignorance.

Teagan downed his ale in a single long draw, setting the beaker down beside the hearth.

"I don't know what his children have heard," he said, frankly. "The Landsmeet know what Howe did to the Couslands. They also know what he planned on doing to the lass, thanks to Loghain. But I'm not sure if the news has spread beyond Denerim."

Leliana finished her drink with more delicacy, her fine-boned face contorted in thought.

"I met the daughter once – Dolores, Delilah, something like that," Teagan continued, his voice quiet. "She seemed reasonable enough. Has the news of Flora's condition spread yet? I can't imagine that a woman would take out a contract on an expectant mother."

Without comment Leliana elevated her shoulder elegantly, inspecting the gleam of her silvered bracelet in a shaft of moonlight.

"The news has reached as far as Val Royeaux, at least," she murmured, with a coordinated lift of the eyebrow. "I have it on good authority that a set of platinum baby spoons are making their way across the Frostbacks at this very moment; each one engraved with Celene's insignia."

Teagan let out a snort that came out a fraction louder than intended.

"Platinum baby spoons," he repeated, incredulous. "Orlesians! Sorry, no offence meant."

The bard waved her hand in a manner that meant *none taken*, the corner of her mouth curling ruefully.

"If there is a Howe out there with ill intentions towards our future queen," she finished, lowering her voice as Flora yawned and shifted in her sleep. "I have faith that Zevran will uncover them. Beneath the lechery and the witty banter, lies a… *consummate professional.*"

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Chapter End Notes

**OOC Author Note:** Aaah, so it's goodbye to Riordan! He was a cool character, despite having about six lines, lol. Oh well, he had a lot more than that in my story. Anything to bring in more northerners into my story! I don't know why I love the whole regional differences thing in characterisation – oh actually I do know, it's because I'm a proud Welsh girl living in London!

So Loghain's got a false leg now – I think he's going to get a cool, Ambroise Pare one in
Ambroise Pare was a French battlefield surgeon and medical pioneer!

I love the idea of Celene sending this ridiculous, over the top baby present! There's also another gift from Val Royeaux winging its way over the Frostbacks, this one for Flora.
Awakening in the night with a dry throat, Flora yawned in a deeply unladylike manner; glancing over to where Leliana lay curled catlike in the blankets at her side. Careful not to disturb the softly snoring bard, Flora moved the furs aside and swung her legs out from the bed. Her foot proceeded to make contact with something soft and unexpected.

There came a quiet grunt from the darkness below, and Flora reflexively lifted her hand to summon light to her fingers. Of course, nothing came; and she had to resort to squinting through the shadows. "Oh," she breathed apologetically as the Bann of Rainesfere gazed blearily up at her. "Sorry. Did I tread on your face?"

Teagan, stretched out on a bedroll on the floorboards, yawned and gave an amiable shrug. "It's alright, poppet. You weigh as much as a Mabari pup; I doubt you'd have done much damage."

Flora sat up and gazed down at him anxiously, noting the position of the bann's sleeping mat directly alongside the bed. Anybody who wished to reach her would have literally had to step over him; she caught sight of Teagan's sword resting surreptitiously at his side.

"I'm actually small but dense," she mumbled, distractedly. "Especially with this, this-"

Flora made a vague circling gesture towards her belly.

"Alistair tried to carry me back up here earlier, you know, like he always does when he thinks I'm tired?"

"Mm."

"Well, he was sweating by the time we got to the stairs," Flora whispered, resting her chin on her elbow and widening her eyes at Teagan. "He had to use both arms to carry me down the corridor. He never usually needs both arms! I'm a porker."

The bann let out a muffled bark of laughter, using his sleeve to catch the majority of the sound before it could disturb the bard.

"Anyway," Flora continued, apologetically. "I'm sorry for treading on your… on your face, or your stomach, or your… wherever."

"It's fine, Florence. Are you alright?"

"Just going to get a drink."

"Stay there, I'll get it. Water?"

"Mm, please."

Flora lifted her legs back up onto the bed, adjusting the strapping around her weak knee as she repositioned the blankets. Using shafts of moonlight to navigate, the bann crossed to the side-table and poured out a tankard of water; as well as another weak ale for himself.
"Thank you," Flora said as he handed her the tankard, before settling back down against the bedroll. "I'm sorry that you have to do this – guard me. I'm sure you'd rather be in a warm room, with a comfortable bed and- " she remembered an off-hand comment that Teagan had made some weeks ago – "and winches."

The bann stifled another snort of laughter, grateful that he had just swallowed a mouthful of ale. Beside the door, Chanter Devotia gave a soft sniff of disapproval.

"It's... quite alright," he replied gravely, trying his best to keep a straight face in the darkness. "The, ah, wenches will just have to do the best they can without me."

Flora rolled over onto her stomach, found this too uncomfortable and relocated to her hip; the child nudging her too persistently to allow sleep.

"When I was pretending to be a winch – remember, when I was Madame du Poisson at the Pearl? – I thought that the workers there were very kind. And discreet. It wasn't them that got me caught by Howe."

She rubbed an idle hand over her stomach, feeling the little creature press a shoulder or the curve of a rump against her palm.

*I didn't know you existed then. I'm glad I didn't know when I was captured in Fort Drakon; I didn't need anything else to worry about.*

Shifting position, Flora felt something drop from the pile of bedding. Blinking, she peered down to see one of the cushions half-hidden under the bed, and made a quick, futile swipe with her fingers. This only succeeded in batting the cushion further into the dark recess.

"Stay there, petal. There we go, lean forward."

Flora *leaned forward* obediently, feeling the cushion slide into place against her lower back.

"Thank you," she breathed, feeling the ache in her spine abate a fraction. "For being so nice to me."

"It's my pleasure," replied Teagan quietly, quashing his own selfish feelings with a wistful grunt. "After all, since I count Alistair as a nephew, you're... you're almost like my niece."

Without gleaning his meaning, Flora smiled at him, catching a yawn in her elbow.

"Night, Bann Teagan."

"Night, Flora."

"Don't let the weever fish bite."

"Weever fish?"

The next week passed without incident, Justinian sliding slowly towards Solace with mellifluous ease. In the coastal city of Denerim, Alistair grew reluctantly accustomed to council meetings that lasted eight hours; still new enough to politics that he mostly listened and took notes while Eamon led discussion. Yet the nobles of the Landsmeet learnt quickly that this new Theirin was not to be underestimated. Unlike Cailan, who often neglected matters of government to pursue his own personal follies, Alistair Theirin saw each meeting through to its end; unaflraid to insist on further
clarification of any issue if required.

At the end of one such meeting, Bann Alfstanna - the Landsmeet's nominated representative in the king's council – petitioned Alistair as to the standing of the lady Cousland. A newly-arrived letter from the Divine had confirmed Florence Cousland's severance from the Fade, endorsing the judgement already made by Ferelden's Grand Cleric and Templar Knight-Commander.

"The people want to see their Hero," the bann stated flatly, her clever, wrinkled eyes seeking out Alistair's own. "They're pestering their local clerics for news. Why don't you bring her back from that ghastly mausoleum tonight?"

Alistair gritted his teeth, hand curling measuredly against the round wooden table. By mutual agreement with Eamon, they had agreed not to share news of the attempted assassination; at least, not until Zevran had returned from his investigations. As much as Alistair was desperate to retrieve his lover from the gloomy clifftop monastery, he knew that there was logic behind her continued stay there – it was far more secure than the very public Royal Palace.

"Florence is still recovering from the battle with the Archdemon," the Arl of Redcliffe interjected smoothly, seeing Alistair at a loss for words. "She needs peace and quiet, and Revanloch can provide it. Besides, her victory feast is next week, and she'll be returning for that. The people can see her then."

Alistair nodded in silent, gloomy agreement with his elder uncle; hoping that his impatience for the session to be ended was not writ too plainly across his face.

The final item on the agenda was Alistair's coronation, which was now only mere weeks away. Delegates from the different nations of Thedas would start arriving in the upcoming days, and would need to be accommodated and catered for sufficiently. The assumption was that Alistair would wed his Cousland bride on the same day.

As this was mentioned, Alistair shifted uncomfortably in his seat, a slight grimace contorting his handsome features. The sharp-eyed Alfstanna spotted his momentary discomfort, and a single greying eyebrow rose skywards.

"Is the lady Cousland aware of her upcoming wedding yet, Alistair?"

The following silence proved answer enough, and the bann snorted wryly.

"Does the poor girl know that she's betrothed?"

"I'm… working on it."

Unaware that the cloth-workers of Denerim were currently puzzling on how best to incorporate the Theirin lion with the Cousland laurel; the future Queen of Ferelden had spent the recent days at Revanloch immersed in quiet gloom. Riordan's funeral had renewed Flora's grief at the destruction of her spirits, and she had been thoroughly miserable for the past week.

Wynne had stayed for three days; skilfully distracting Flora from her sadness by avoiding the topic of magic entirely. They spent hours in the library, working on both general literacy and Flora's knowledge of the dynasties of Thedas. Both Leliana and Wynne waited with baited breath for Flora to ask why she was learning about the history of Orlo-Fereldan relations; but the question never seemed to come.

"Does she think that Alistair will keep her merely as a mistress forever?" Leliana breathed quietly, the two women watching Flora as she poured over a book of Theodesian maps. "Even when she
births a prince or princess?"

Wynne gave a shrug, flashing Flora a quick and reassuring smile as the young Cousland glanced round.

"Over the span of a year, she's gone from mage, to Warden, to Cousland," the senior enchanter murmured in response. "I don't think a further elevation of rank has even occurred to her."

"But does she not realise what Alistair is doing?"

Alistair – true to his word – had arrived at the monastery every evening without fail. Without any prior experience to inform him, he had nevertheless done his best to court his former sister-warden; as would be expected for any young noble seeking a girl's hand in marriage. He had brought Flora even more flowers, until the room overflowed with vases. He had found a large conch shell on the Palace beach and given it to her; beaming as she held it to her ear with a squeak of delight.

He had also meticulously found out each of her peculiar dietary cravings – the earth-covered turnips, bowls of cream and mint sauce, smoked haddock slathered with jam – and brought it down from the Palace. On one evening, Flora - almost tearful at the sight of so much appealing food – confronted him as to why he was being so generous.

They were both up on the ramparts overlooking the Amaranthere Ocean, the ochre light from the setting sun spilling over the crumbling stone. Leliana had vanished to give them a fraction more privacy – although naturally the two Templars were still present, standing quietly a dozen yards away.

"I don't understand," Flora breathed, reluctantly tearing her eyes away from the basket of dirt-caked turnips. "I haven't done anything. Why are you rewarding me?"

"Hm, sweetheart?"

"Is it my birthday?"

"No, love. Still a fortnight away."

"Is it Satinalia?"

"Not even close!"

Flora looked bemused. "Then WHY?"

Alistair wanted nothing more than to ask her then; to drop to his knees and take her hand, and ask the question that had been burning in his mind since South Reach.

Marry me, he thought, desperately. I want to be a husband to you. I want you as my wife.

"Flora..." he began tremulously, then trailed off, a lonely seagull calling out as it wheeled overhead.

Before finishing his sentence, the king reached out and took Flora's hand, lifting her curling fingers to his mouth and kissing them. His lips landed, half-consciously, on the finger that bore the Cousland ring; the one which housed the vein to the heart.

"Well, I'm courting you, aren't I? I want to do this properly, Lo. Everything was so rushed, during the Blight."

Flora stared at him in perplexion, her brow furrowing. Then there came a small flicker of realisation
in the depths of her pale irises, brief as lightning across a winter sky; her eyes widening imperceptibly.

"Alistair," she said, her voice small. "Do you -?"

Alistair stared down at his best friend, willing her to say the words; to voice the question that had been on the tip of his tongue for weeks.

"Flora, I-"

"Unbelievable!"

Leliana erupted onto the ramparts, storm-clouds massing on her flushed features as she stalked past the Templars.

Flora blinked as though awakened from a daydream, turning to face the bard as Alistair muttered under his breath.

"I agreed to lead a seminar with a dozen initiates on the parallels between the Canticle of Erudition and the Canticle of Exaltations," the bard fumed, grasping the crumbling stone battlements and glowering down at the rocky beach below.

"Sounds fascinating," replied the king drily, accepting that the moment with Flora had vanished. "Let me guess: they didn't turn up to discuss the Chant?"

Leliana snarled quietly to herself, sweeping her fingers down to scoop an earth-covered turnip from the basket. With an eloquently uttered curse in Orlesian, she hurled the unfortunate vegetable over the ramparts. Flora stifled a squawk of dismay, biting her lip as she watched her snack disintegrate into pieces against the rocks below.

"Non!" the bard retorted, irritated. "They spent the hour trying to look down the front of my robes, interspersed with inane questions about Darkspawn. Darkspawn!"

Alistair had to stifle a guffaw, while Flora looked suitably indignant.

"How audacious," she breathed, outraged on Leliana's behalf. "When you were trying to educate them, too!"

"Exactly!" replied Leliana with a small huff, tossing her short, auburn braids. "Alistair, stop laughing."

Despite his levity, Alistair was reluctant to leave his sister-warden that evening; half-tempted to lift Flora onto his saddle and bring her back to Denerim. His logical mind waged a fierce internal debate with his heart, pointing out the flaws in such an impulsive plan.

The Royal Palace is a public building. It has two dozen entrances; more back passages and hidden doorways than are shown on any map. It's not as secure as Revanloch.

A light evening drizzle accompanied the setting sun; the puddles in the courtyard lit in gold and bronze by the waning rays. The king kissed his mistress once more, one palm resting on the pronounced curve of her stomach as he extracted the promise he received every evening.

"Stay with the others tonight, darling."

"I will!"
"Wake Leliana and my uncle if you want to go anywhere."

Flora nodded, although she had not been on any nocturnal wanderings since the assassin in the Chantry.

Alistair stared down at her a moment longer, then glanced around.

"Maybe I should walk you back to your chamber – Lel is up there already."

"I'll be fine," Flora reassured him, gesturing towards the two Templars standing several yards away. "They're still here."

This did not wholly satisfy Alistair, but he gave a tight nod, bending down to kiss her once more.

"I'll see you tomorrow, my love."

The inhabitants of Revanloch had almost grown used to Flora's presence as the Hero of Ferelden – after all, the Blight was three weeks in the past, and had never reached their enclosed little world anyway. However, she was still a beautiful girl, and one not covered by the austere and modest robes of a Chantry sister. The giggling recruits had been warned not to approach the lady Cousland directly, but their eyes still followed her about like cats after a fishmonger's cart.

Flora could feel stares prickling between her shoulder-blades as she passed through the inner courtyard; muffled comments half-hidden behind hands. It was something she had grown reluctantly accustomed to – attention was never something that she sought, but it had been thrust inadvertently upon her during the Fifth Blight.

With the footsteps of Knight-Captain Gannorn and Chanter Devotia echoing against the flagstones behind her, Flora was just about to ascend the steps leading to the east wing when a low, accented voice caught her attention.

"Lady Cousland?"

It was Yvon Cuvillier, Commander of the Grey in Orlais. His tousled, leonine presence stood out starkly against the damp stone of Revanloch; and he bowed towards Flora with the finesse of any Val Royeaux courtier.

"My lady, I have some… questions. Actually, _many_ questions. Do you have a moment?"

Chapter End Notes

OOC Author Note: I'm sure the Orlesian Warden has questions, lol – like HOW are you UP THE DUFF? HOW did you survive the ARCHDEVIL? HOW is this immature nineteen year old the WARDEN-COMMANDER?

Poor Alistair has got himself into a bit of a situation – everyone is assuming that he's getting married to Flora, the coronation/wedding is going ahead… and Flora has no idea, lol. It's because Alistair a) has no experience b) has romantic notions about courting Flora in the traditional way; which is why he hasn't actually proposed to her yet. Which is a slight issue because the coronation is in three weeks time!
The Orlesian Warden-Commander gazed at Flora, his tawny eyes steady and biting. Flora came to a halt in the corridor, her heart sinking. She had a distinct feeling she knew what the matters for discussion pertained to – the slaying of the Archdemon, the cleansing of the taint, and the preposterous roundedness of her belly. She also guessed that the man had tactfully restrained himself from making such enquiries after Riordan's funeral; but Flora's dolefulness could not shield her indefinitely.

Flora therefore took a deep breath and gave a small nod, following Yvon Cuvillier into a side-chamber that she had never noticed before. It reminded Flora of a Circle classroom – rows of wooden desks, a teacher's lectern at the front, and bookshelves lining one wall. Incongruously, several of the Orlesian Wardens had already taken seats at the initiate desks – Yvon's shaven-headed lieutenant was present, as well as the angular woman with the grey-streaked bun. The seated Wardens rose to acknowledge her, and Flora felt as though she were a teacher arriving to deliver a lecture.

Stifling a laugh at such a ludicrous prospect – she was well aware of her own limited intellect – Flora took the seat that the Orlesian Commander pulled out for her.

Yvon Cuvillier then went to close the door, and Knight-Captain Gannorn let out a soft grunt of warning.

"It stays open," the Knight-Captain stated, flat and uncompromising. For the first time, Flora was grateful for the ever-present Templar guards.

The Warden-Commander made to protest, then inclined his head slightly.

"Fine. Lady Cousland, I should like to clarify a few things, if I may. Would you be amenable to some… questions?"

She gave a gloomy nod, hoping that the mask of solemnity on her features hid her trepidation. Behind her, Gannorn made a small gesture to Chanter Devotia. The female Templar gave a slight grunt, slipping from the room with surprising subtlety.

Yvon paused before speaking, glancing down at Flora with a faintly quizzical expression.

"Forgive my ignorance," he murmured, changing his mind about taking a seat and pacing the length of the classroom. "I'm afraid that communication between branches is poor at the best of times, let alone during a Blight. You were recruited by Duncan, a year ago?"

"Almost a year," Flora corrected, counting back through the months on uncertain fingers. "In the autumn. I don't know exactly when. I came to Ostagar about a month before – before the battle."

Before the majority of the Ferelden Wardens were obliterated.

"And you gathered the armies – two junior recruits – and won the support of the Landsmeet," Yvon continued, one golden eyebrow rising incredulously. "And then you slew the Archdemon, and instead of dying; both you and King Alistair were cleansed of the taint."
"I cured Alistair beforehand," Flora mumbled, cringing inwardly as she recalled her brother-warden's shock and furious indignation. "I didn't want him to risk taking the final blow. He would've done, to save Ferelden."

The angular woman, too tall for the initiate's desk, was scribing Flora's responses on a roll of parchment.

Yvon gave another nod, making a visible effort to stem the flood of questions as they bubbled up within his throat. His eyes fell on Flora's hand, resting idly on her belly in a way that she never would have dared to do when her condition was still a secret.

"I must beg forgiveness once again," he asked, quietly. "Rumour travels on the fleetest of wings, and no faster than within the streets of Val Royeaux. That is the king's child, yes? The former Warden, Alistair?"

Flora nodded, feeling the little creature nudge against her kidneys.

Yes, we are talking about you.

"But – how is this possible?"

"I'm- I was an… unusual mage," she replied, deciding that the more she explained, the less she would be questioned. "I couldn't really do much, but I was – I was a good healer. I had spirits that helped me. My body – it cured poisons. I could cleanse the taint, with their help."

You kept the vein of Darkspawn ichor in my blood so that I could kill the Archdemon and end the Blight. Once the dragon was dead, your last action was to remove the taint as you left me.

"I can't feel her," Clarel spoke up, bluntly. "I couldn't feel the king, either."

Yvon inhaled, shaking his lion-like head in wonder. He did take a seat then, his powerful frame incongruous behind the recruit's desk.

"So that's how you were able to conceive," he said at last, his voice soft and wondering. "You understand it is unprecedented, yes?"

Flora nodded, shifting position surreptitiously against the unforgiving wooden seat.

There followed a pause for a long moment, the bell for the final evening service echoing in the passage outside. Flora could hear the distant sound of a chattering crowd making their way towards the Chantry, and thought that she would rather sit through two hours of prayer than continue with this polite interrogation.

"And these spirits were destroyed when you slew the Archdemon," Yvon said eventually, tapping his fingers against his knee. "Instead of yourself."

Flora nodded once more, feeling a bolt of guilt ricochet around her skull at the destruction of her spirits. Instead of speaking, she held out her palms; showing the patches of white, sunburst-shaped discolouration.

"I have marks on my back, and my leg too," she said, remembering her obliterated *Peraquialus* freckles with a small jolt of sadness. "I don't think they'll ever go away."

Yvon reached out and took Flora's hand, fascination momentarily overcoming his propriety. His eyebrows rose as he gazed at the strange, pale markings, extending in curlicues across the surface of
her skin; a soft, astonished murmur in Orlesian slipped from his lips.

"Right," he said abruptly, collecting himself and returning upright. "Thank you for your assistance, lady Cousland. Now- "

The Orlesian Warden-Commander turned to his captain and the rest of his Wardens, clearing his throat.

"The Fifth Blight may be over, but Ferelden's Order must be rebuilt. There'll be pockets of Darkspawn that need to be monitored; even leaderless, they still pose a threat to rural communities. I suggest we create a command structure from within our own Val Royeaux ranks. The Orlesian Wardens can afford to be divided, our numbers are strong enough- "

"Well, that wouldn't be very considerate," came the protest from a wide-eyed Flora. "Their poor feet. Their blisters."

There followed a moment of confused silence, as Yvon Cuvillier turned to look at her. Flora blinked back at him, innocuous.

"What do you mean, my lady?"

"From having to walk all the way to Ferelden, then turn around and walk all the way back to Val Royeaux," she continued, placidly. "Or perhaps it's the poor horses I should feel sorry for?"

"Why would they be walking back to Val Royeaux?" the lion-headed man replied, confused.

"After being stopped at the border, of course," Flora replied, patiently. "Ferelden admits no foreign force without permission from its king, and I don't see Alistair here, do you?"

She was now standing, her pale eyes cold as a winter sea, the imperiousness of a Cousland writ across the fine-hewn features that had always set her apart from the other inhabitants of Herring. For a moment, she envisioned herself back in the Landsmeet chamber, confronting another soldier who had made the mistake of dismissing her in the way that middle-aged men tended to dismiss young, attractive women.

"Also, I don't remember being consulted on this," Flora continued, unimpressed. "I called the armies, I killed the Archdemon. I'm still the Acting Warden-Commander of Ferelden, and when someone replaces me; it'll be someone who Alistair and myself feel is best for this country. We will, of course, consult with Orlais," she added, with a small and humourless smile.

Yvon gaped at Flora, who stared back at him with the arrogant, well-hewn profile of a scion of Ferelden's most ancient dynasty. He had made the mistake of judging Florence Cousland based on her youth, her wide-eyed beauty, and her quiet grief after Riordan's funeral. This sudden flash of sheer, blunt defiance came as a shock.

"Loghain Mac Tir will need to be involved too," Flora added, slow and unblinking. "He's recovering from injury, but he's capable and he values this nation's security above no other."

Yvon, astonished, gave a wordless nod. Flora rewarded his compliance with a patient smile.

"The next time I see the king, I'll let him know that you would like to discuss this," she said, kindly. "We'll sit down together and come to some sort of arrangement."

"Yes, my lady," Yvon replied, eyebrows now lodged in his hairline. "I… I apologise for my presumption."
"Hm," said Flora, already tiring of the conversation. "We'll talk about this tomorrow, then."

Her stomach rumbled and she turned towards the exit, trying to ignore the twinge of pain from her knee.

Leliana was standing in the doorway – the Chanter had clearly gone to fetch her – and a beam was curled across her face from ear to ear. On hearing that Flora had been corralled into a classroom by the Orlesians, the bard had scuttled down the corridors in readiness to launch an indignant rescue.

Yet she had arrived just in time to hear Flora's solemn, polite and incontestable response; the young Cousland calmly rebuffing the commander's attempts to seize control of the Ferelden Wardens.

Leliana slid her arm into Flora's, steering her away from the classroom and towards the staircase that led to their guest quarters. The Templar guard followed in their wake, stoic and silent.

After ascending the stone steps, they turned into a damp, labyrinthine passage lined with moth-eaten tapestries. Now confident that they were out of earshot, Leliana kissed Flora on the cheek; inordinately and inexplicably proud.

"Well done for resisting his cajolment, ma petite. The Cuvilliers are known for their persuasive tongues; and I know it is your instinct to do as you are told. I hope he did not try and intimidate you in any way?"

Flora gave a little shake of the head, feeling her knee give a more persistent twinge just as the child dug an elbow or a knee into the base of her spine.

"Ouch. No, I… I don't think he did. Or if he tried, I didn't notice."

Leliana smiled, withdrawing the key from her sleeve as they approached their quarters.

"Regardless, it seems that you maintained both poise and bearing in the face of his interrogation. Well done, ma crevette."

Flora smiled vaguely, thinking that Leliana seemed almost disproportionately pleased at this small defiance.

The bard was indeed delighted, although for more significant reasons.

_If she can stand up for herself against Orlais now; she can stand up for Ferelden as queen._

The next afternoon brought a most unexpected visitor. Flora and Leliana had been sitting at the table in the inner courtyard; the one separated from the training area by a high, ivy-covered wall. They could hear the rhythmic sounds of wooden swords beating against shields as the initiates practised drill; accompanied by the irate bark of an instructor.

Leliana was reading from a small book of Chantry homilies, her lips moving silently as she recited them out loud. As a special concession, the bard had been granted permission to lead the Sunday service; and was determined for it to be both an enlightening and spiritually invigorating experience.

Flora had the cards of Theodesian leaders spread out over the table before her; reminding herself of the names of each nation's leader.

_Celene Valmont I._
She pressed a fingertip curiously against Celene's face, tracing the chiselled angles of the high cheekbones. The Empress had been depicted holding a golden mask in one hand. stylised feathers extending swan-like back from her ears.

"Why do Orlesians like to hide their faces?" Flora asked after a moment, her brow furrowed.

Few topics of discussion could distract Leliana from her piety, but the bard's adopted home was certainly one of them. She lowered the book of prayers, a wistful smile pulling at her lips.

"Ah, but many sports require facial protection, do they not? In jousting, a guard is worn, in fencing, a lighter cover. Orlesian politics is a sport like no other; and the masking of the face adds another layer to the Game."

Flora wrinkled her nose; such subterfuge was the antithesis of crude Herring bluntness.

"I wonder if I'll meet any more Orlesians," she wondered out loud, tracing the neatly inked flowers on the edge of the card. "I don't suppose they come to Ferelden very often."

"Well, you would if you went to Orlais," murmured Leliana, lifting a delicate porcelain teacup between equally elegant fingers. "Say, if you visited Val Royeaux."

Flora looked almost comically astonished, her pale eyes widening.

"Leave Ferelden?" she breathed, taken aback. "Why would I ever want to do that? And why would I go to Val Royeaux of all places?"

"Why, accompanying Alistair, of course," countered Leliana, smoothly. "If he ever decides on a state visit."

"Oh," replied Flora, slightly nonplussed. "Because I'm his mistress?"

Leliana raised her eyes above her teacup, pupils glinting like a silverite blade catching the sun.

"The Hero of Ferelden deserves more than to be a mistress, hm?"

Flora peered back at the bard, slightly confused. Leliana kept her gaze, steady and even; this time offering no distracting comment or skilful turn of conversation.

"Alistair will have his own card made soon, to replace that of his brother," she continued, quietly. "I should think he would wish for you to be drawn alongside him."

Leliana's slender fingers made a sweeping gesture, encompassing the various empresses, archons, kings, queens and dukes of Thedas. Flora stared down at them, a slow, primordial thought stirring deep within her mind.

"Leliana," she breathed, in a voice that was little more than a whisper. "Does- does Alistair…?"

Just then, a most unexpected visitor entered the small courtyard; bulky enough to seem overly large within the confines of the stone walls. The Templars escorting him were wide-eyed, trying to hide their astonishment. Even the steely Knight-Captain Gannorn and Chanter Devotia, incongruously flanking a large potted plant, were unable to arrest a flinch of shock.

"My lady," squawked one of the young guards. "This Qunari claims to know you?"
OOC Author Note: STEN has come to visit! Haha, he's come to deliver some home truths about Flora's new role, lol. I like this chapter because we get a brief bit of the 'old' Flora – the defiance, the standing-up to her 'superiors' that happened in several key moments in The Lion And The Light (in the Grand Chantry with Loghain, and again in the Landsmeet Chamber). Flora has been far more quiet and malleable so far in this story – she's still coming to terms with the loss of her spirits, her silent coaches – but never fear, that stubbornness and occasional eloquence is still there!

Not really so much of an 'interrogation' after all - Yvon Cuvillier is a political creature, knows that Flora is Alistair's lover, and doesn't want to cause a diplomatic incident by traumatising her, lol.

Haha, Flora keeps ALMOST understanding what Alistair is preparing to do – propose – and then gets distracted by something!
Flora rose to her feet, transparent delight suffusing her features.

"Ste-e-e-n!" she bleated, scuttling across the worn cobbles. "Sten, I thought you'd gone back to… to wherever you're from!"

Flora came to a halt before the lofty Qunari, shuffling from foot to foot. It was clear that she was desperate to throw her arms around his waist – Flora had always been liberal with her physical affection – but likewise knew that Sten would not suffer such a display of sentiment.

Sten gazed down at her with the impassivity of a rock face, his crimson eyes utterly unreadable.

"Clearly I have not gone," he replied, disapproving of the question's redundancy. "I am here. I intend to remain here until the investiture of Ferelden's leader; and then return to Par Vollen with my report."

Flora smiled vaguely up at him, and the Qunari narrowed his stare; both of them fully aware that she had no idea what investiture meant.

"You've grown larger since last I saw you," Sten said after a moment, lowering his gaze further to the swell of the child pressing against her woollen tunic. "Soon, you may be as wide as you are tall."

"Good," replied Flora immediately, her expression earnest. "My feet hurt all the time; I'd love to roll everywhere. Like a BALL."

The Qunari let out a grunt, striding past her into the centre of the courtyard. He swept his ashen, assessing stare around the crumbling walls; appraising the monastery's general decrepitude. Leliana, who had returned to the table with her book of homilies, gave him a beatific smile of greeting.

"I noticed seven serious flaws in this building's security as I was escorted here," Sten said at last, and Leliana's ears pricked up.

"The north tower and the portcullis near the drains?"

The Qunari nodded, and the bard gave a soft cluck of satisfaction under her breath.

"So, I hear that Howes are after you again. How is it that you seem to launch straight from one peril to another?"

This was from Sten, who had returned his stare to Flora. The Par Vollen native had clearly learnt the habit of rhetorical questioning during his sojourn on the Ferelden mainland.

"I don't know," replied Flora, slightly gloomily. There had been no more attempts on her life – clumsy or not – over the past week; the monastery bristled with more guards and patrolling soldiers than the Royal barracks.

Sten grunted, lifting a strong arm behind his back. Lifting Asala from between his shoulder-blades, he let the vast greatsword rest carefully against the edge of the table. Instead of his own life-weapon, he withdrew a slender dagger from his pack. It was cut from silverite, the blade itself curved
wickedly to cause maximum damage.

"Without your magical talent, your survival in an attack is not guaranteed," he stated, without emotion. "I… should not wish to see the warrior who felled the Archdemon, silenced by a clumsy amateur. I will show you a few counters that even the simplest and most incompetent children could master."

Flora, temporarily enchanted by his description of her as a warrior, took a moment to register what the Qunari was offering.

"Oh!" she said at last as he glowered at her, expecting a reply. "Thank you! I am an incompetent child."

Unfortunately, Flora proved not to be a master with the dagger. Her natural lack of grace, combined with the cumbersome swell of her belly, a stiff knee and sore feet; all conspired to sabotage her efforts. Leliana watched from her position at the table, unable to stop from grimacing. The two Templars looked on without expression; though a momentary spark of compassion had flickered across Chanter Devotia's face as Flora dropped the dagger for the tenth time.

Gritting her teeth against the pain in her lower back, Flora bent over and retrieved the blade.

"You know, there was someone else who tried to teach me how to use a dagger," she offered casually, sweat pouring down her forehead. "Leliana, remember the Rivaini lady from the Pearl? Zevran's friend."

Leliana snorted; she remembered very well.

"I think she was perhaps more successful at teaching you other things though, eh, ma petite?"

Flora let out a cackle, running her thumb idly over the grooved end of the dagger.

"That was a good night," she breathed, wistfully. "Although I did get kidnapped by Howe's men the next morning."

"Which will happen again if you have no way to defend yourself," snapped the Qunari, demonstrating a singular lack of patience. "Desist with these attempts to distract me."

Flora wiped the end of her sleeve over her forehead, making an effort to mop up the sweat.

"Alright," she said gamely, her feet throbbing inside her boots. "Let's keep going."

An hour later, the gloomy courtyard was losing what little sun it had managed to glean. As the sun lowered itself into the Bannorn, the temperature dropped and a chilly breeze began to explore Revanloch's labyrinthine corridors.

Flora's attempts to master Sten's dagger had proved in vain. Whatever elegance she demonstrated through dance was not mirrored by her normal movement; and this inherent lack of grace, combined with her physical restrictions, served to undermine all her attempts to wield the blade.

The Qunari, making a swift assessment of the situation, reached out to intercept Flora as she went to retrieve the dagger for the fifteenth time.

"This has been a wasted endeavour," he stated, with characteristic, brutal honesty. "Instead, I suggest
you focus your efforts on your new role."

"My – my new role?" Flora asked, uncertain.

"Producing the next leader of this nation," Sten clarified, making an irritable gesture towards Flora's swollen stomach. "In your current condition, it is all that you can contribute to this society."

To the Qunari, who lacked any semblance of Theodesian social niceties, this was a mere stating of the fact. To Flora, it was a condemnation of her inadequacy, now that she was trapped in only a single realm.

_The only time I'll ever go back to the Fade – and possibly see my spirits again – is when I die._

Sten's right; I can't do anything without my magic. I am useless! All I'm good for now is… giving birth.

Flora felt the tears rising before she could arrest them; streaming down her cheeks like a broken dam. Letting out a choked sound of distress, she scuttled between the old basalt pillars and back into the shadowy depths of the monastery. The two Templars glanced at one another wordlessly, then turned to follow her.

A crease formed in the centre of Sten's brow; the only indication of his confusion. He turned to look at Leliana, who was gathering up her book of homilies and tea paraphernalia, with a scowl writ across her features.

"Why is she caterwauling like an infant?" the Qunari asked, nonplussed. "I only stated the truth."

Leliana let out a small huff of displeasure, turning her pale blue stare on Sten as she made to follow in the wailing Flora's wake.

"Sten, remember when you lost your sword?"

"Obviously."

"How did you feel?"

"Maimed."

Leliana gave a little exasperated _huff_, shooting him a final glance over her shoulder.

"Well, that's how Flora feels, without her spirits. And unlike your sword, there's no way for her to find them again."

The bard left the Qunari in the courtyard, looking as thoughtful as she had ever seen him.

As the last egg-yolk sliver of the setting sun disappeared behind the distant hills, the party from the Royal Palace arrived at the monastery. Stable boys came rushing out to take the horses – they had tossed dice beforehand to see who would get the privilege of leading in the king's steed. Alistair and Teagan, escorted by a discreet contingent of Royal Guard, made entrance into Revanloch monastery; the Knight-Commander hurrying down from his study to greet them.

Alistair gave the greying Templar a stiff nod, not quite ready to forgive him for the previous week's grievous broach of security.
"Anything unusual?" the king asked in place of a greeting; his hazel eyes sharp and clear as Ferelden ale.

The Knight-Commander shook his head, falling into step alongside Alistair.

"No, your majesty. I've had guards stationed at the gate-posts day and night, and they report only the usual visitors."

Alistair shot a quick glance at his uncle, who let a shoulder rise and fall in grim acceptance.

"Hopefully your elven friend will return with news," the bann offered, quietly. "Set an assassin to catch an assassin, if you will."

Alistair let out a grunt of frustration, nostrils flaring.

A pair of excitable initiates rounded the corner before them, chattering away with practice wooden swords bundled in their arms. As they caught sight of the king of Ferelden – six feet and three inches of leather clad, fur trimmed muscle, the gold band squarely atop his lofty head – they gaped in alarm and promptly dropped the swords.

Alistair, wondering if he had ever been so young and naïve, bent to help them gather up the swords. The slightly braver of the two offered a squeak of gratitude, a flush rising to their hairline.

Leliana was waiting outside the doors to the Chantry, her arms folded grimly over her chest. Chanter Devotia stood beside her, stern and impassive as the Qunari.

"Alistair," she warned, the years spent in Val Royeaux shaping her distinctive tone. "She's not very happy."

"What do you mean, not very happy?"

"She's been crying, de temps à autre, all afternoon."

Alistair's brow creased in dismay, feeling his stomach drop unpleasantly within his gut.

"Why? I should have been told," he protested, one hand reaching to shove open the door. "I could have come earlier."

"Sten said that her only purpose was to birth an heir for Ferelden."

Beside him, Alistair heard Teagan let out a soft groan, the bann shaking his head slowly from side to side. The king himself flinched, part in disbelief and part in sorrow for his former sister-warden; who had not yet found her place in this post-Blight world.

"My poor girl," he said at last, hand resting motionless on the wood. "Is she in there?"

Leliana nodded, gesturing with an elegant hand.

Tactfully, Teagan murmured that he would take his paperwork up to the guest quarters. Alistair gave a distracted grunt of acknowledgement; shoving open the doors with an impatient elbow and stepping forward into Revanloch's Chantry. The doors closed behind him with a dull thud, and the king inhaled a lungful of damp, musty air.

The sacred space was near-deserted, the echoes of a thousand prayers and hymns clinging to the great stone arches that spanned the ceiling. The empty pews stretched out towards the front altar, where the Andrastian flame smouldered away with a soft, potent murmur.
Knight-Captain Gannorn was standing beside one of the pillars, hands behind his back and stance very stiff. It was clear that the Templar intended to maintain a professional distance from his charge; even if she were distressed and weeping.

Flora sat hunched over in one of the pews – not the Royal pew, since she would not presume to sit there without Alistair – with her shoulders drawn up and her head hanging low.

Alistair, feeling his heart rise painfully into his mouth, made his way down the central aisle. To his surprise, the Knight-Captain bowed his head, withdrawing wordlessly to the rear of the Chantry. The next moment, the wooden doors shut softly in the older man's wake.

Flora barely looked up as Alistair sat on the bench beside her. She had recognised his tread on the tiles, knowing the press of boot against stone as well as the sound of her own contracting lungs.

"Sweetheart," he breathed, and then said nothing more, reaching out to turn her face towards his. Flora let her mournful stare settle on him, cheeks mottled with the remnants of tears. Her boots lay discarded to one side, her bare toes brushing the cold tiles.

"My feet hurt," she whispered evasively after a moment, her voice even throatier than normal. "They ache. And I… I can't make the pain go away."

Alistair stared at the girl who had shaped his life and saved his nation, whose mooring ropes had come adrift with the loss of her spirits. He didn't know what to say to her; wasn't sure what words could possibly soothe such a gaping wound.

"Here, baby," he said thickly at last, unable to adequately articulate the emotion swelling in his throat. "Let me rub them. It might help the soreness."

Flora blinked at him, and Alistair took her silence as acquiescence. Reaching down, he lifted her feet gently up onto his thighs, frowning at their coldness. Unsure if he was even doing the right thing, he drove his thumbs in small circles over the sore flesh; pressing against the joints and kneading away the tightness with his curled knuckles.

"Your feet are half the size of mine," he commented after a few moments, sliding his palm beneath the pale, pink sole. "Does this feel any better?"

"Mm."

Flora nodded, bowing her forehead against his shoulder.

The moonlight – Ferelden's moon was far more luminous than its insipid daytime counterpart – shone through the stained glass windows; illuminating the leaded fragments in tones of dove-grey and silver.

Alistair ran his calloused thumb over her toes, the acoustics of the Chantry taking his soft words and throwing them between the damp pillars.

"My feet are huge," he continued, with a rueful smile. "Remember, I could never find boots to fit when we were travelling? I bet you don't miss having to heal all my blisters."

The king bowed his head and pressed an impulsive kiss to her toes. The next moment, he heard Flora sniff, and wet her dry lips.

"I'm not good with a sword, like you," she whispered, miserably. "I'm not a ferocious lady, like Leliana. Even if you took Wynne's magic away, she'd still be the most cleverest – clever – person in
Ferelden. What… what am I without my spirits? I can't do anything."

Alistair paused for a moment, his thumb idly circling the delicate bone of Flora's ankle. She hung her head, miserable in a way that she had not been since the Templars had first taken her from Herring.

"Darling," he said eventually, the words emerging soft and earnest. "You're only nineteen years old. If you want to learn how to wield daggers like Leliana, or to write books like Wynne – you have decades to learn how to do it. Look at how your reading has improved over the past six months."

Flora gave a begrudging nod; she could see his point. Alistair squeezed her heel gently, gratified to feel the warmth returning to her skin.

"And at the moment, you're still the kindest and bravest girl I know," he murmured, suddenly feeling the tears prickling incongruously in the corners of his own eyes. "Your spirits didn't give you those qualities. They were attracted to you because of them."

Flora turned her face up to his, and because she held her brother-warden's opinion in such high regard, she allowed herself to take some comfort from his words. She reached out to touch the side of his handsome face gently, barely sparing a glance to the regal band resting on his coppery hair.

Alistair stared back at his companion, wondering at how the moon filled her pale irises with silvered light; the gold fleck left by the Archdemon gleaming like a coin dropped to the bottom of a fountain.

"Merciful Andraste," he said wonderingly after a moment, eyes dropping to the solemn, full curve of Flora's mouth. "You're growing into such a beautiful woman, Lo. I'll be the envy of every man in Thedas, walking into a room at your side."

Flora kept her solemn gaze fixed on him, grave and steady. Her fingers wandered down his jaw, feeling the neatly trimmed hair he had cultivated in an effort to look older. After tracing the strong angle of his chin, she let her thumb move upwards, brushing over the deceptively arrogant Theirin lip.

Alistair let out an unsteady exhalation as she touched his mouth, as though he had been holding his breath since leaving the Royal Palace. His eyes dropped to Flora's foot resting atop his thigh, then slowly moved upwards; along her bare calf, up to where her navy tunic had been rucked above her knee. He stared at the inches of revealed skin, eyes heavy-lidded and burning with something indescribable.

With one hand resting possessive on her thigh, Alistair twisted his head around to scan the pillared recesses of the Chantry. The chapel was empty; the only movement coming from the shadow cast by Andraste's flickering pyre. The moonlight trailed ghostly fingers across the face of the Maker's Bride, the lips of the statue almost appearing to move in its shifting essence.

Alistair turned back to his best friend, who was sitting motionless on the bench beside him; her face cast in silvered tones by the muted light.

OOC Author Note: This is the second time that someone has tried to teach Flora to use a dagger, and – just like the first time – she's completely useless! She's just not a weapons-orientated person… at least she's always up for a try, though, lol. I don't think Sten was being a dick particularly here, I think he was just being honest!

I hope people aren't getting too annoyed with Flo for still grieving over her spirits – the loss was profound, and I wanted to communicate the seriousness of it.
The Sacred and the Profane

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Flora shifted her weight, leaning forward on Alistair's thighs as her bare toes brushed the cold tiles of the Chantry floor. The swell of her belly – the child that they had made together – pressed against the contrasting tautness of the king's muscled abdomen. She reached out to trace the outline of her brother-warden's face with two fingers, drawing them together along his strong jaw.

Alistair gazed down at her, feeling an incongruous surge of tenderness to complement the tendrils of lust sprouting in his belly.

*We made this baby at Ostagar,* he thought, suddenly. *I had her over and over, on that mouldering bedroll in the ruins of the Wardens' quarters; and twice in our own tent the next morning. I couldn't keep my hands off her. I still can't, five months later.*

*I wonder which coupling led to my seed taking root?*

Seeing a glazed expression settle over Alistair's face, Flora decided to take matters into her own hands. Leaning forward, she cupped her palms against his cheeks, pressing her lips to his. Herring locals were virtuous folk, but they found the Maker in the great vastness of the sea, the howl of the wind over the dunes, the swell of relief when the boats returned safe. Therefore, Flora had absolutely no compunction about initiating intimacy in the man-made construction of the Chantry.

Rousing himself from his reverie, Alistair let out a soft murmur of approval into her mouth. Their lips parted wet against each other; tongues moving with languid and renewed familiarity as he reached up to tangle fingers in her hair.

When they parted at last, flushed and breathless, Flora could feel his arousal pressing urgently between her thighs. Beads of sweat had broken out on Alistair's forehead, and he was gazing fixedly down at her chest.

Looking down, she realised the cause of his fascination. Her nipples were taut against the soft wool of her tunic; undeniable proof of her own arousal. A throaty sound escaped Alistair's throat as he stared, transfixed, one hand moving to the laces crossed across her chest. Fortunately, Flora had not used one of her indecipherable fisherman's knots to fasten the garment closed. One gentle pull at the end of a lace and the material opened itself up; the fabric folding outwards to reveal her bare breasts.

Barely daring to breathe, Alistair reached out to cup one full handful tentatively in his calloused palm. He remembered her mentioning some days ago that they were tender, and took especial care to be gentle. His tongue moved with feather-light grace, laving delicate circles across each swollen mound; tasting her nipple rather than suckling enthusiastically.

Flora curled her fingers into the leather of Alistair's tunic, desperate to anchor herself to him before she slid from his thighs into a helpless puddle on the tiles. Her hips were pulsing, instinctively angling her pelvis towards her brother-warden's abdomen; heat licking through her veins like a mage's electricity. The small, still-rational part of Flora's mind warned her that she ought to be quiet—after all, they were in a monastery— but it was fighting a losing battle against the encroaching tide of lust.

It had been a month since they had last lain together. During the weeks of chastity, Alistair had
nurtured the memory of his lover's quiet, helpless sounds of pleasure, letting them resonate about his skull as he thrust grimly into his own fist.

Now the object of his fantasies was panting soft and wanton against his ear as he lapped at her nipple, the sound so alluring that he wished he could bottle it.

"More," she whispered hoarsely, her wide eyes fixing his with mingled desire and helplessness. "Please."

For a single moment, the rational part of Alistair's mind reminded him that they were in a Chantry – a sacred space where he should not be harbouring a single lustful thought, let alone enthusiastically fondling his best friend as she straddled his lap on a bench.

Unfortunately, Alistair's hands had a will of their own, driven by something other than reason. Glancing down, he saw Flora's tunic bundled up around her waist, his fingers already at the laces of her smallclothes. She shifted impatiently on his lap, letting his desirous hands divest her of her undergarments.

The moment that Flora's smallclothes dropped down her calf and onto the tiles, Alistair abandoned caution to the wind; angling her on his thighs so he could better look at her.

"So beautiful, Lo," he murmured, thickly. "You steal the air from my lungs. I've missed you."

Alistair's fingers crept over the mound of her stomach; protective and tender at first, then taking on a far more intimate character as they dropped further. Once his hand was resting comfortably between her thighs, his calloused thumb began to move in practised circles.

"You're so sweet," he whispered, listening to the slick confirmation of her arousal. "And I've missed doing this for you, baby."

Flora let her forehead rest on his shoulder, feeling her heart throbbing with escalating vigour against her ribcage. Alistair's lips sought out her ear, gently teasing the lobe with his teeth as he stroked her into squirming ecstasy.

When he dropped his tongue to her nipple, Flora gasped; the sound echoing about the forest of tall pillars surrounding them. Alistair grinned into her breast, grinding his sword-roughened thumb against her most sensitive spot.

"Aaiee- "

"Don't hold back, love," he murmured, feeling her mouthing desperately against his shoulder. "Let it happen, let it hap- "

Flora let out a muffled wail, her body convulsing on his thighs; her head flung back with mouth wide and helpless. Alistair pressed his lips to her throat, lapping a line along her neck as he felt her quiver helplessly against him.

He held her tight as she recovered, eyes half-closed and bleary; one large hand stroking the length of her back as he murmured admiration into her ear. Once Flora had clawed back her composure, she leaned forward to whisper her counter-offer; asking only for some assistance in descending to her knees.

Alistair nearly spent himself in his breeches at the prospect, just about managing to restrain himself. For a moment, he was tempted to accept the offer – or simply to take her perched atop his thighs – but distant noises behind the closed rear doorway heralded a return of his senses.
With immense reluctance and an urgent, unsatisfied pulsating in his groin, Alistair reached out and tightened the laces of Flora's tunic, pulling the navy lambswool taut once more. She blinked at him, the corners of her mouth turning down comically. Her expression was one of such blatant outrage that Alistair had to stifle a laugh, knotting the laces in a swift bow before leaning forward to kiss her cheek.

"Darling, don't look at me like that!"

"Like what," Flora muttered slightly belligerently, slithering off his lap and reaching up to flatten down her hair.

"Like that," Alistair replied with a snort, rising to his feet and helping her to compose herself. "Your Templar chaperones will be back in a minute, and I'm pretty sure that they wouldn't look too kindly on us… having some out-of-hours prayertime in their Chantry."

"Hm," said Flora grumpily, shifting from foot to foot and running a hand absent-mindedly over her stomach. The baby turned over, pressing something firm and curved against the inside of her belly. Alistair's eye was drawn to the movement of her hand, and his expression shifted subtly from amusement to affection. He reached down to cup her stomach with his own fingers, never failing to be astonished at the peculiar sensation of something nudging against his palm.

Just then, there came a minor commotion from the back of the Chantry.

"I don't care if I'm interrupting," rang out a familiar, imperious voice. "I want to see my sister!"

Flora's face lit up and she turned towards the back entrance, all thoughts of intimacy vanished from her mind.

"Fergus!"

She scuttled, crablike, from the pew; a beam spreading over her face. A large group of people had just entered the Chantry from behind – men clad in Highever colours, Flora's own Templars, Alistair's Royal Guard, and Leliana herself. The bard's face was suffused with exasperation and relief – she had clearly been anticipating that they would find Alistair and Flora in some compromising position.

Yet Flora's eyes were fixed on her elder brother, recently returned from Highever and still clad in travel leathers. Dust from the road covered Fergus' boots, his auburn curls were rumpled and his beard was sorely in need of a trim.

He held out his arms to his little sister, letting out an unsteady exhalation as she flattened herself readily against him.

"Thank the Maker you're alright," he breathed, bowing his head to press a kiss against her hair. "Finian wrote to me about the assassin. I swear, I'll have the remaining Howes hunted down like rats."

Alistair, fervently grateful that he had not succumbed to his baser urges, came to join them; hoping that his face was not too flushed.

Fergus looked up from Flora, his eyebrows rising as he prepared to launch into a tirade of questions. His face was twisted into an ugly blend of wrath and fear.

"The amount of Royal Guard have been doubled," Alistair replied, predicting the teyrn's outraged
enquiry. "As have the number of patrols. Bann Teagan is spending his nights down here, sleeping in the same chamber. And Zevran is investigating the source."

The second most powerful man in the realm let out an unsteady exhalation, keeping Flora clamped to his chest. His eyes – which tended more towards blue than grey, having inherited more of Eleanor's colouring than his younger siblings – softened a fraction; mouth twisting with worry.

"My young sister can't defend herself anymore," he said, frankly. "She's as helpless as Oren was. I swear, if anything happens to her-"

"Fergus, everything in our power is being done to ensurer he safety," murmured Leliana, the bard's tone mellifluous and reassuring. "She is never alone."

Fergus let a grunt, lines of fatigue and worry creasing across his forehead. Stepping back, he gazed down at his sister, and his anger softened a fraction.

"Breath of the Maker, Floss. That belly has grown since I last saw you."

"They do say that Theirins make for large infants."

Flora peered over curiously at the man who had spoken. He was clad in Highever colours and appeared in his mid twenties, coppery hair rumpled from the long journey. There was a brutal scar across his cheek, curling down from beneath his eye to the corner of his mouth.

"Florence, this is Ser Gilmore," Fergus said, just about managing to retrieve some courtesy from the depths of his worry. "One of our father's most faithful servants."

Gilmore bowed, his smile distorted by the lurid mark over his jaw.

"And a fellow victim of Howe treachery," he said, returning upright with a rueful grimace. "My lady."

"You were at Highever when it was attacked?" Alistair asked, his own eyebrows rising to his hairline.

Fergus nodded, a shadow falling over his features.

"Gilmore was badly injured in an attempt to defend my father. This is the first he's been able to travel since… since the attack."

"Aye," confirmed Gilmore, his own tone darkening. "Blasted arrow got me in the face."

He gestured to his cheek and Flora flinched, hearing Alistair let out a low whistle.

"Anyway," continued the knight, his gaze swivelling towards Flora once again. "It's a Maker's blessing to see you alive, my lady. I remember you as a child, running amok about Highever and driving Nan to madness."

Flora gazed back at him, vague and polite. She had no idea what running amok meant, but it did not sound too endearing. The name Nan prompted a brief flicker of recognition, but she could not summon the memory of any matching face.

Fergus turned to the Knight-Commander, who had arrived from his quarters in a mild state of consternation. When the Templar general had agreed to temporarily house the Hero of Ferelden beneath Revanloch's leaking roof tiles, he had not envisioned the likes of kings and teyrns also
swarming about the monastery. With beads of sweat rising to his forehead, the man attempted to
assuage the fears of a growling Fergus.

Flora soon stopped listening to her brother berate the Templar, the image of the Orlesian Warden-
Commander's face manifesting on the forefront of her mind.

"Alistair," she whispered, elbowing the king to get his attention.

"Yes, my dear?"

"Young Caviar tried to speak to me today," she said in an undertone, watching a candle in a nearby
holster flicker as it neared its waxy base. "About the Fereldan Wardens."

Alistair looked nonplussed, eyebrows drawing together in confusion.

"Young Caviar?" he repeated, bemused. "Who?"

Flora shot Alistair a slightly anxious look, wondering if there was some problem with his memory.

"You know," she said, patiently. "The Orlesian Warden-Commander. Young Caviar."

"Yvon Cuvillier," corrected Alistair, just about managing to maintain a straight face. "What did he
say?"

Flora shifted her weight off her weak knee, attention caught by the reflection of Andraste's flame
flickering across Ser Gilmore's shield.

"He wanted to talk about reforming the Fereldan Wardens. I said that this was a discussion that you
needed to be present for, and Loghain Mac Tir, too."

Alistair's brow furrowed, taken aback by the Orlesian soldier's presumption.

"Damned right!" he replied, indignant. "I'm not about to let the Orlesians dictate how the Order will
be rebuilt. And... and you're right, Mac Tir ought to be here. He's the only true Fereldan Warden
left."

"I'll send a raven up to the castle," murmured Leliana, who had – naturally – been eavesdropping on
every word. "We can arrange the talks for tomorrow morning, if you wish. It's a Saturday; so you
won't have any royal commitments."

"Typical Lel, knowing my business better than I do myself," Alistair replied, immensely cheered by
the prospect of spending the night with Flora under Revanloch's draughty tiles – after all, it made no
sense to leave, only to return in a few scant hours.

Since Alistair's presence meant that Teagan was not required for the evening, the bann departed the
monastery alongside Fergus. It was a typical Fereldan summer evening, damp and prematurely dark;
Revanloch rising like a gloomy spectre from its shroud of sea-mist as it perched atop the cliffs.

Even now - with Justinian fast drawing to a close – it was necessary to light a fire within the
chambers of the old monastery. Only the guest quarters, and the private rooms of the Knight-
Commander, had the luxury of a hearth; the initiates had to suffice with threadbare woollen blankets.

Within the chamber reserved for Royal guests, Alistair, who could never resist an empty grate and a
pile of kindling, was busy demonstrating that he had not become too important to build a fire.

"You need to arrange the small twigs like this, then blow on them," he was busy explaining to
Chanter Devotia, who stared back at him with a vague, professional boredom. "Then once you’ve a flame the size of your palm, you can add the rest of the kindling."

There came a quiet murmuring in the corridor outside as the Royal Guard changed watch, their hushed whispers sliding in through the gap beneath the door. No fixture or fitting sat snug in its frame within decaying Revanloch – panes of glass let in draughts, roof tiles leaked and doors had to be shoved into off-set frames.

Leliana was murmuring to herself with prayer book in hand; an olive-green unguent smeared across her face. Somehow, she had managed to procure yet another piece of flimsy Orlesian lingerie – despite having arrived at Revanloch with only a single leather pack.

Flora, clad in a pair of striped Theirin pyjamas, was already in bed, chewing on the end of a long-handled wooden spoon. She did not understand why she felt compelled to do so – all she knew was that she suddenly wished to have something organic in her mouth.

Once the fire was blazing, a proud Alistair returned upright; chin aloft as he surveyed his creation. "I can still build a good fire," he said into the shadows, reaching to unbutton his tunic. "Haven’t lost the knack!"

Leliana closed her prayer-book, clambering into bed beside Flora and making herself comfortable amongst the cushions.

"Skills so ingrained are not easily lost," the bard murmured, shooting her bed-mate a perplexed look. "Ma petite, have you turned into a beaver? You have demolished that spoon."

Indeed, the length of the wooden utensil had been so thoroughly gnawed that it was no longer fit for purpose.

Flora let out a small, dissatisfied grunt – this was merely a poor substitute for what she really felt like doing; breaking off fragments of bark from one of the trees in Revanloch’s courtyard and devouring them like Orlesian sweetmeats.

"Think of your teeth- " Leliana continued, and then broke off abruptly.

Both Flora and Leliana had been immediately distracted by Alistair's divestiture of his under-shirt. The king reached down to pull off his boots, the taut musculature of his olive-toned stomach contracting as he bowed.

Due to her training the bard managed to recover her composure more quickly, hastily donning a lace-edged eye mask as she slithered down the pillows.

The spoon fell from Flora's mouth as she continued to gape shamelessly at her former brother-warden's well-hewn form; which had lost none of its definition from the lack of travelling. Conscious that they would no longer be fighting Darkspawn on a regular basis, Alistair had begun a drill routine to keep himself in prime fighting condition.

"The Orlesian Wardens have agreed to meet tomorrow morning," Alistair said, crossing the room and sliding into bed on Flora's other side. "Mac Tir should have got the message by now. I'm not sure if he can ride yet, but I'm sure he'll find some way to get down here- "

He broke off in mild surprise, looking down to see Flora pressing her face against the hard, protruding muscle of his upper arm.
"Wha-"

"Mmmm...."

Alistair continued to stare down at her, slightly perplexed. His confusion only mounted as he came across the mangled wooden spoon in the tangle of blankets.

"Are you alright, sweetheart?" he asked, and then flinched as Flora sat bolt upright in shock.

"Aah!"

Leliana put her hands pointedly over her head, rolling over to turn her back on them.

Flora, huge-eyed with alarm, cupped Alistair's ear with a hand and whispered something urgent and unintelligible. Alistair blinked, now entirely confused.

"Baby, I didn't catch that-

"I left my SMALLCLOTHES in the Chantry," bellowed Flora, the words echoing about the draughty quarters. "My knick-knacks, abandoned in public!"

Leliana hissed like a malevolent bat while the Chanter Devotia mouthed furiously, trying to find suitable words of condemnation from her limited supply. Alistair gaped for a moment, then let out a bark of laughter.

"Right," he replied, clambering back out of bed and reaching for his discarded boots. "As much as it would fulfil some young recruit's wildest dreams to stumble across the lovely lady Cousland's smalls; I have a civic duty to go and retrieve them. Back in a bit, my darling."

Chapter End Notes

OOC Author Note: Out-of-hours prayertime! I haven't used Alistair's old metaphor for sex in ages, what was Flora's version? Illicit hugging in the Potions cupboard! I definitely think Alistair is a tits man, based on... no real evidence, lol. Just a feeling!

So chewing on wood is the latest iteration of Flora's odd cravings, haha.
Rebuilding the Ferelden Wardens

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

A half-hour later, Alistair arrived back in the bedchamber with Flora's smallclothes bunched in his fist, trying his best to maintain a solemn expression. Leliana was snoring softly, curled up on the cushions like a cat; but Flora was still awake, chewing idly on the wooden spoon as she squinted into the darkness.

"Special delivery, darling," the king whispered, tossing the crumpled linen onto the blankets. "I was searching for them for ages, I couldn't remember what pew we were in. The Royal Guard must think me mad."

Alistair sat on the edge of the mattress to pull off his boots, while Flora navigated the nest of tangled furs to wrap her arms around his neck.

"Thank you," she whispered, plastering kisses over his bare shoulder. "I'm sorry to inconvenience you."

He reached up to cover her hand with his larger palm, rubbing his thumb wistfully over the knuckle of her bare ring finger.

"Anything for you, my sweet queen."

Flora paused for a moment, her lips hovering just above the lobe of Alistair's ear. Somehow, that particular term of endearment seemed a little more weighty than when he had used it previously. There was a purpose in the word that was almost a promise, and she did not quite understand what it meant.

Then Alistair twisted his head to smile at her, the mellow whiskey-toned eyes loaned especial richness from the hearth-light. Flora stared back at him, her lips slightly parted.

"What are you thinking, Lola?"

"That you're the most handsome man in Thedas," she replied, immediate and honest. "And also… that I want to go and chew on a tree."

"A tree?!"

"Mm. I don't know why."

The next morning, on the way to meet the Orlesian Wardens, Flora finally got her wish. Alistair stood at the side of the inner courtyard, watching in open mouthed perplexity as his mistress broke off a shard of bark from a nearby tree. Standing beneath the shade of its obliging branches, Flora chewed away happily; a blissful expression on her face.

"I don't understand," Alistair muttered to his elder uncle, who had just arrived from the palace to join the meeting. "Is there some sort of nutritional value to it? Does the baby like eating… eating wood?"

Eamon suppressed a laugh at the mixture of anxiety and sheer confusion on the king's face, infusing
reassurance into his reply.

"Don't worry, son. It's quite normal for women with child to have such… cravings. Isolde used to eat lumps of coal from the hearth when she was expecting Connor."

A brief flicker of sadness crossed Eamon's face, as it always did whenever his only child came up.

"Don't worry," the arl continued, forcing his mind from the Circle Tower where his son was currently confined. "It won't do the lass any harm, nor the babe."

Flora crossed the courtyard towards them, her face flushed with contentment.

"Thank you for waiting," she said, earnestly. "I feel a lot better now. And I took some snacks for later!"

She held out her pocket, showing several chunks of bark secreted away.

There were not many chambers within Revanloch that were suitable for meetings – after all, the ostensible purpose of the building was for reflection, not for politicking.

Therefore, the audience between the Fereldan nobility and the Orlesian Wardens had to take place within the same classroom where Yvon had confronted Flora the previous night. A vain attempt had been made to arrange the room for more solemn purpose: the desks had been manoeuvred into a circle, although the chalkboard at the front of the room rather spoilt the illusion.

Flora – who had never excelled within a classroom context – had nevertheless been cheered up by the sight of her lanky best friend trying to fit himself behind the initiate's desk.

"Maker's Breath," Alistair complained eventually, just about managing to fold his frame into the diminutive space. "Can you even fit, Flo?"

"Yes," replied Flora, indignantly. "I can – ouch."

Although she could fit well enough, the unforgiving hard line of the seat did not feel particularly good against her sore back. Alistair, whose head had spun at Flora's grunt of pain, immediately demanded that cushions be brought.

Loghain Mac Tir arrived during the delay, limping markedly and leaning on a wooden crutch. The false limb allowed for relatively free movement, but it would take some length of time to get used to. The former general inclined his head towards Alistair, his tone gruff.

"I'd bow in the proper manner," he muttered, drily. "Except I suspect I may fall."

"It's fine," Alistair replied, hastily. "You're a Grey Warden, there's no need to bow."

Loghain lifted his chin in wry acknowledgement, then turned his dark gaze on Flora; letting out the northerner's soft grunt of greeting.

"How are you feeling, lass?"

"Alright," replied Flora, stoically.

"The babe moving well?"

"Mm, all the time."
Once several hassocks from the Chantry had been brought and carefully wedged at the base of Flora's spine, the summit between Ferelden nobles and Orlesian Wardens could begin.

Eamon glanced sideways at Alistair, ready to step in if his nephew required direction.

Alistair, however, had spent the morning working himself up into a state of mild indignation. As Yvon Cuvillier opened his mouth to speak, the king of Ferelden cut straight across him; blunt and unforgiving as a negligent headsman's axe.

"Warden-Commander, I appreciate your coming here to offer assistance with rebuilding the Ferelden Order, but assistance is all we require. The lady Cousland and I may no longer have the taint, but we both still wish to supervise the rebuilding of the Wardens. Loghain Mac Tir lives, and must have some role to play."

Yvon Cuvillier raised an eyebrow, his tawny gaze swinging across to where the former teyrn was sitting, the wooden limb jutting awkwardly out to one side.

"The man known across Thedas as the Great Traitor of Ferelden?" he asked, deliberately neutral. The greying woman at his side, Clarel, let out a barely audible snort.

Loghain made no verbal response, merely lifted a shoulder in recognition. He was well aware that thirty years of loyal service to Ferelden had been erased by a single command; given in a rain-soaked valley in the shadow of Ostagar; retreat.

Flora had opened her mouth, ready to come to Loghain's defence; but to her surprise, Alistair was already there.

"Mac Tir has repented for his actions," he retorted, immediately and without hesitation. "He took the taint and was prepared to give his own life to save Ferelden."

"And he did end up giving his leg," Flora added solemnly.

And he saved me from Howe. And from the maleficar in the sewers.

"So, what do you propose?" Yvon Cuvillier replied, leaning forward on the desk and steepling his fingers beneath his chin.

Alistair glanced sideways at Eamon, who gave a small nod. Two servants clad in Theirin finery trooped in with a map held between them, angling it so that those gathered at the desks could see.

The Arl of Redcliffe stood, retrieving a pointer from the lecturer's stand, then dropped the wooden tip to a settlement in the north-east of the country.

"This is Vigil's Keep, the oldest fortress within Ferelden. It's large enough to house a decently-sized force, and comes with adequate training grounds. The Wardens could use it as a base from which to rebuild their numbers."

Yvon nodded slowly, standing to gain a better view of the marked location.

"That should suffice well enough," he murmured, his Val Royeaux inflection shaping the vowels as they slipped from his throat. "In whose territory does it lie?"

"The former seat of Howe," replied Alistair, barely masking his disgust. "The arling of Amaranthine. But the entire Howe family has been attainted, by demand of the Landsmeet."
"So who owns it now? Presumably it is their permission that must be sought," interjected Clarel, Yvon's shorn-headed lieutenant.

"The new arlessa of Amaranthine," said Eamon, after a long moment. "Florence, will you let the Wardens use Vigil's Keep as a base to rebuild and recruit the Order?"

Flora blinked for a moment, her brow furrowing.

"Eeeh?"

Alistair realised, in the face of assassins, post-Blight confusion and Riordan's funeral, he had entirely neglected to tell Flora that she was now the arlessa of the territory that bordered Denerim to the north.

"Sorry, sweetheart," he muttered in an undertone, leaning across to direct his words into her ear. "I forgot to tell you. The Landsmeet have granted you the arling of Amaranthine, as a reward for your services during the Fifth Blight."

Flora looked slightly nonplussed and a touch perturbed; the only arlessa she knew of was Isolde, whom she did not particularly like. Still, she was a child of Herring – and therefore a master of blank-faced stoicism – and did not want to embarrass her best friend before the Orlesian contingent. Without any concept of what being an arlessa entailed, she lifted her chin.

"That's fine," she said, kindly. "The Wardens can have Vigil's Keep."

Yvon nodded, as one of his juniors made a brief note on a sheet of parchment.

Alistair cleared his throat, grateful to his beloved for not causing a scene.

"And as for the new Warden-Commander," he continued, in measured tones. "Loghain Mac Tir has experience in military matters – including recruitment – and his loyalty to Ferelden is undoubted. However, the Landsmeet would not be happy at giving Mac Tir sole autonomy over an independent militia within Ferelden's borders, in light of recent events."

Loghain inclined his head in acknowledgement, his dark Mac Tir eyes watchful.

"So – if you have a suitable candidate in mind – I would propose a joint leadership," Alistair continued, steadily. "Loghain Mac Tir alongside an experienced Orlesian."

A rueful snort escaped from Loghain, as a reluctant smile curled the corner of his mouth.

"You've the slyness of your father, your majesty."

Yvon nodded slowly, his lazy, leonine gaze sliding sideways to Flora.

"And would the Warden-Commander be amenable to this?"

"Yes," replied Flora, immediately. "I think it's an excellent idea."

Alistair, delighted at such lofty praise from the person whose opinion he valued most, shot Flora a fleeting, proud smile; squeezing her knee affectionately beneath the table.

"And who would I have the pleasure of working with?" Loghain remarked drily, dark gaze moving from one Orlesian Warden to another.

Yvon made a gesture to a tall woman with braided, greying dark hair wound in a tight bun. Her
angular face was avian and memorable; her nose prominent and her eyes black as onyx stones.

"My captain, Leonie Caron, has led recruitment for the Orlesian Wardens for the past decade. Our membership numbers swelled after her appointment."

"Where in Orlais are you from, captain?" Eamon asked, having mentally run Caron through his index of Orlesian nobility and come up wanting. "I am unfamiliar with the name."

"Val Royeaux," replied Leonie Caron, in an accent that most definitely did not come from any noble house. "And not from the nice parts. I've no family to speak of, save for my brethren in the Wardens."

The briefest flicker of relief passed over Loghain's face: if he must work with an Orlesian, at least it wasn't one from some pompous branch of the peerage.

"And your experience?" Alistair asked bluntly, surveying the woman who would be responsibility for caretaking Duncan's legacy.

Yvon opened his mouth, but Caron herself replied in steady and measured tones.

"Fifteen years of service in the Wardens," she began, looking the king directly in the eye. "Responsible for recruiting nearly eight hundred Wardens over ten years. Oversaw the cleansing of a section of the Deep Roads nearly ten miles long. Led the purging of over thirty Darkspawn nests."

"An impressive résumé," Eamon murmured, thoughtfully turning the quill between his old warrior's fingers. "If the king is happy, I see no reason why this shouldn't be enacted immediately."

Alistair nodded, trying in vain to suppress a grin at the thought of Loghain having to work in close quarters with an Orlesian.

"There are still pockets of Darkspawn resistance within Ferelden that'll need to be dealt with," he stated, flatly. "It sounds as though you're well-qualified to deal with them."

There followed silence for a long moment, before Yvon Cuvillier lifted his lion-like head towards Flora.

"Then, if it is agreed, there is but one last thing to be done," he murmured, rising to his feet. "Warden-Commander Cousland, do you relinquish control of the Ferelden Order?"

Flora, with slightly more difficulty, pushed herself to her feet. Her heart gave a lurch, and for a moment she envisioned Duncan's spirit hovering near the chalkboard, looking at her with the faint smile that she could still just about recall. Leonie Caron rose to a stand; Loghain following with a soft grunt of stiffness.

"I… I relinquish control," Flora repeated, grateful that her voice sounded somewhat steady.

Yvon's voice expanded to fill the classroom, his rich, Orlesian tones reverberating about the plastered walls.

"Scribe, note for the records," he declared, smoothly. "That on the nineteenth day of Justinian – Ferventis in the old calendar – Warden-Commander Florence Cousland, Vanquisher of the Fifth Blight, willingly relieved her command to Wardens Mac Tir and Caron; who will henceforth lead the Ferelden Order."

Leonie Caron cleared her throat, piercing black eyes lifting to meet Loghain's.
"I suggest we ride to Vigil's Keep immediately," she stated, no longer requiring permission of her former senior officer to speak. "I want to see the condition of the buildings. Can you ride?"

"Aye," replied Loghain, grudgingly admiring the woman's forthrightness. "That's a… sound idea."

As the two conferred in reserved tones, Flora found herself in oddly wistful mood. She had not even wanted to be Warden-Commander – she still remembered her shock when Wynne had named her such in the courtyard of South Reach – but she had come to accept it, much as Alistair had accepted the mantle of king.

Then she felt fingers sliding into hers, a familiar calloused palm pressed against her own. Used to deciphering the minute changes in his former sister-warden's face, Alistair had reached out beneath the desks to fish-rope her, providing continuity in the midst of this great change. Flora clutched his hand tightly, inordinately grateful.

*My anchor,* she thought, feverishly. *I might no longer be mage or Warden, but I'm still your best friend.*

The Orlesian Warden-Commander lingered after Loghain and Leonie Caron's departure from the classroom; making a subtle gesture to the scribe.

"Your Majesty, a moment, if you will."

Alistair paused, having retrieved the hassock cushions from Flora's seat and deposited them into the arms of a servant.

"Yes?"

Yvon Cuvillier bowed his head towards Flora, eyes dropping reflexively to the swell of her stomach.

"I apologise if this seems forward," he murmured, in decorous tone. "But it ought to be recorded, both for posterity, and for the archives. When exactly was the child conceived?"

"Maker's Breath," muttered Alistair, wishing that Eamon had already left the chamber. The arl busied himself with a retainer, blatantly pretending that he was not eavesdropping. "Well, it would have been when we were at Ostagar, so – around the beginning of Drakonis?"

"Carp season," added Flora, helpfully.

Yvon, who had never handled a fishing rod in his life, shot her a slightly bemused look as the scribe made a note.

"And the conception occurred in the – *ahem* – usual way?"

Alistair's jaw dropped in disbelief and he let out a slightly incredulous snort.

"As opposed to what? By *osmosis*? For Andraste's sake! Yes, it happened the *usual* way. Happy? Or do you want even more *details*? It was a cloudy night, the bedroll was covered in mildew, I think it was snowing-"

"It *was* snowing," Flora clarified, helpfully. "You had snowflakes in your hair. They melted and dripped onto me."

Alistair's gaze softened, and he turned to face his lover; reaching out to slide a hand through her hair.

"I remember thinking afterwards, that there was no way back," he said, very quietly. "I could never
be just your friend anymore, not now I had seen you in the way I had."

Flora smiled vaguely at him, letting the memories rise to the surface of her mind like seaweed cast up by the tide. She remembered the way that he had looked immediately afterwards, gazing down at her with a mixture of adoration and astonishment.

"Anyway," Alistair said after a moment, turning back to Yvon Cuvillier with a wry, incredulous smile. "I don't know what else you want. Eyewitnesses? A reenactment?"

Flora beamed, her face brightening.

Yvon shook his head magnanimously, glancing to his shorn-headed lieutenant.

"That, ah, won't be necessary, your majesty. Thank you for your time, King Alistair, Lady Cousland."

Chapter End Notes

OOC Author Note: So this was my solution to the taking over of the Fereldan Wardens – since neither Flora nor Alistair has the taint any more, they can't do it! But I always thought it was a bit odd that everyone would be ok with some Orlesian coming in to run a militia within Ferelden borders! This is my way of resolving that issue – a joint responsibility between Loghain and an Orlesian. So they can keep an eye on each other!

Yvon doesn't recommend Clarel to take over, because he knows that he'll be experiencing the Calling soon, and she's going to take over the Orlesian Order.
After the Orlesian Wardens had departed, conversing softly in their melodic native tongue; Eamon, Flora and Alistair were left alone in the classroom. The lunch gong sounded in the distance, followed by the cacophonous thudding of several hundred feet heading into the dining hall.

Yet Flora, unusually, made no movement towards lunch. Instead, she reached out and put a hand on Alistair's arm, her expression entreat ing.

"Alistair?"

Alistair had an inclination as to what she was about to say, an apology already rising to his lips.

"Darling-"

"I'm an arlessa?"

"Sweetheart, I'm sorry that I didn't tell you about Amaranthine. I didn't – I didn't want to give you anything more to worry about, what with everything else going on. The Landsmeet approved it last week."

Flora gnawed on her lip for a moment, then turned grave and solemn eyes up to him.

"I'm very grateful," she began, measuredly. "I think it's very nice of you, but… I don't need a reward for helping during the Fifth Blight. I just asked for a feast, and that's happening soon, so…"

She gave a mild shrug, as Alistair and Eamon glanced at each other. They had suspected that Flora might react this way; and the arl of Redcliffe had already devised a solution.

"Then how about your brother – Finian – taking temporary ownership?" Eamon suggested, swiftly. "Despite the Orlesian frippery, there's a sound head on those gangly shoulders. The men respect him, after he led Highever into battle. Since he's unlikely to have heirs – unless something drastic changes with his, ah, predilections in partner – Amaranthine would revert back to your children in the future."

Flora gave a little nod, turning back to Alistair.

"That sounds good," she replied, placidly. "Do I have to say: I relinquish being arlessa, like I did Warden-Commander?"

Eamon snorted, shaking his head.

"That won't be necessary, lass."

Shortly afterwards, a reluctant Alistair returned to Denerim for yet other inimitable meeting – this time with the mercantile guild. They were determined to make a concerted effort to rebuild the Fereldan trade network, which would first require repairs to be made to the broken King's Highway, and other roads damaged by the Darkspawn.
He arrived back at Revanloch shortly after sunset, vaulting off his sweating horse and leaving it in the safe hands of the stable-boys. Trailing Royal Guardsmen, the king took the steps up to the guest chamber two at a time; causing much consternation as those he encountered dropped into bows hasty enough to make their heads spin.

He found Leliana in the upper hallway, conversing as best she could with a stern-faced Chanter Devotia. Leliana greeted him with a peck on the cheek, her own blue eyes sparkling with interest.

"What a calling to follow," the bard mused, enraptured. "To dedicate oneself so wholly to the Chant that one utters nothing else. How selfless, how pious!"

"How impossible for you, Lel," Alistair added, amiably. "You enjoy the sound of your own voice far too much."

Leliana let her slender fingers collide delicately with his elbow, feigning outrage.

"Honestly! Such cheek."

Alistair grinned at the Orlesian's slender shoulder-blades, following the lay sister as she ascended the final set of steps with the fleet footedness of an elven halla.

Templars and initiates dropped into further rapid bows as the King of Ferelden strode down the corridors; his gaze fixed purposefully in the direction of the guest quarters.

Leliana kept up a light patter of conversation as they wound their way through Revanloch's labyrinthine passageways.

"How are the preparations for the coronation going?"

Alistair shrugged a shoulder, just about restraining himself from letting out a soft and exasperated grunt.

"I don't even understand why I need to be officially coronated, anyway. I'm king already, aren't I? I'm wearing a fancy hat and people call me Your Majesty."

"It's tradition, Alistair. The people expect it. Besides, aren't you intending to wife our lovely Florence as part of the ceremony? That's what the Chantry Mother mentioned the other morning. Theirin and Cousland united in the Eyes of the Maker: hence, the realm stable for the foreseeable future."

Alistair contorted his face wordlessly; Leliana was a skilled interpreter of facial expression. The bard raised a plucked eyebrow with a small sigh, gesturing them onto the guest corridor.

"It seems as though the bride herself is going to be the last to know about her own upcoming nuptials. Assure me that you at least plan to propose before the morning of the ceremony!"

"I'm going to," retorted Alistair, indignantly. "I just want it to be perfect. Everything else about how Flo and I got together was all… well, it was all death, and despair, and Darkspawn. But this can be different."

Leliana flashed him a quick, wistful smile, pausing before a narrow window to admire the streaked apricot and mauve of sunset.

"It's a sweet notion, but don't leave it too long, hm?"

Alistair nodded dutifully, courtesy dictating that he wait for the bard as she gazed at the waning sun.
"How is Lo?" he asked, trying not to convey impatience through his tone.

"Tired," Leliana murmured in response, watching the ghostly outline of a constellation emerge from the twilight. "The babe has worn her out today, I fear. She's slept on and off for much of the afternoon."

As Alistair's mouth dropped open in dismay, Leliana stifled a smile and reached out to put a reassuring hand on the new father's elbow.

"It's wholly normal, Alistair. Don't fret."

Alistair grimaced, abandoning courtly manners and striding off down the corridor without a further word. To his gratification, the doorway to the guest chamber was guarded by no less than four Templars – the Knight-Commander was clearly taking no chances.

Knight-Captain Gannorn opened the door, greeting the king with a neutral inclination of the head. Alistair half-expected his former sister-warden to be asleep, but Flora was sitting up against the cushions, slightly paler than usual but appearing cheerful enough. Leonas Bryland was sitting at her bedside, *Sea Creatures of Tevinter Legend* clasped in his non-mangled hand. An expression of sheer incredulity contorted his grizzled features as he stared down at the contents of the pages.

"Lo!"

Lifting the crown from his head and setting it on the dresser, Alistair crossed the room in three lengthy strides and perched on the mattress. Flora smiled at him, reaching out her hands for him to clutch. His anxious hazel gaze searched her face, noting the shadows beneath his best friend's eyes and the slight waxiness of her skin.

"Love, how are you feeling?"

"Fine," Flora replied, blinking up at him. "But I've slept for hours, in the middle of the day! My dad would be horrified. Herring folk don't nap."

Alistair inhaled, kissing her fingertips with a slightly feverish intensity.

"Arl Leonas has been reading with me," Flora continued, her smile widening. "And he brought me a plant. I'm going to try and keep it alive without magic!"

She gestured across to the windowsill, where a pale green tendril sprouted tentatively from a pot.

"I'll be in the dining hall when you're ready to leave, lad," Leonas offered, rising to his feet with a soft grunt. "And I'll see you soon, pup."

As the general departed Alistair leaned forward, stroking his fingers over his mistress's forehead and flattening the rumpled hair with his palm. Dropping his hand to the back of Flora's neck, he touched his forehead to hers gently, pressing them together for a long moment.

"Sweetheart," he murmured, and she smiled at the endearment, her pale eyes anchoring themselves to his. "Is the baby misbehaving itself already? I heard it's been wearing you out."

"Yes," she replied, immediate and indignant. "It keeps poking me in the kidneys, even when I order it to stop. It must get this disobedience from you; I always did what I was told as a child."

*Or at least I did when I was in Herring,* she thought to herself, grimly. *It sounds like I was a brat in Highever.*
Alistair inhaled, pulling the blanket back to gaze at Flora’s swollen stomach. The folds of her striped Theirin pyjamas draped open, revealing the firm curve of peachy flesh that seemed so incongruous on her slight frame. He leaned forward to put his face close, assuming his best stern expression.

"Stop prodding your mother," he instructed, solemnly. "I'm the king of Ferelden, and you have to listen to me."

Alistair pressed a tender kiss to the ripe mound, feeling something shift beneath the thin band of muscle. Flora reached down to touch his tousled, tawny head as it bowed before her; Alistair caught her fingers and entangled them tightly within his own.

"Have you had any ideas about names yet?" he asked, tentatively. "I was thinking about some on the ride over."

Flora was momentarily startled, her eyes widening a fraction.

*I've called you 'little creature' for so long that I almost believed it was actually your name.*

"I don't know," she said, astonished. "I hadn't thought about it at all."

Alistair smiled at her wonderingly, still bemused at the odd circumstances of them becoming parents.

"Give me a name – your gut feeling!" he demanded, catching Flora off-guard. "Quick, Lo, what're your instincts saying to you?"

"Tuna," she replied, alarmed.

Alistair's jaw dropped and he stared at her with utter incredulity.

"Tuna?"

At the doorway, Chanter Devotia and Knight-Commander Gannorn shared a look of mutual disbelief.

"Yes," Flora retorted, defiantly. "What's wrong with it?"

"What's right with it?!" countered Alistair, his hazel irises round as copper coins. "Why on earth would you name an innocent baby after a fish?"

"Not just any fish," said Flora, stubbornly. She was prepared to defend her impulsive response, despite being wholly aware that it was also ridiculous. "The tuna is strong and powerful. It provides meat for many people. It swims majestically."

A muscle in the corner of Alistair's jaw flickered as he gazed at her, unsure whether or not she was joking. Flora's solemn expression gave no clue away, her grey eyes fixed earnestly on his.

"Let's have a look in here for some inspiration," he replied at last, kicking off his boots and reaching for the pile of books stacked on Leliana's cabinet.

The stars emerged like bright lanterns, hanging from a veil of twilight like some fantastical ornamentation in an Orlesian whorehouse. The initiates within Revanloch went to attend evening prayers; the piety of their hymns echoing down the monastery's draughty halls and cobwebbed hollows.

Within the chamber reserved for royal guests, Flora and Alistair rested side by side on the bed and poured through several of Leliana's heftier tomes. The far more literate Alistair would scan the pages,
pointing out the various names and letting his companion enunciate them with meticulous care.

Teagan arrived, travel cloak slung over his arm, just as they were puzzling over an entry from *The Legend Of Calenhad: Volume One*.

"Right," said Alistair, nodding a greeting to his uncle. "So, from this chapter, we have Myrddin and Simeon for boys, or Shayna and Mairyn for girls. What do you think?"

Flora, who was chewing the edge of a shard of bark, gave a little shrug.

"It has to be something I can spell," she said, eventually. "I don't think I could spell any of those."

Alistair closed the book, sneezing as a plume of dust billowed straight up his nose.

"Uncle, what names do you think sound authoritative and powerful?"

"Teagan," said Teagan, flashing them a wry grin as he hung his cloak on a nearby stand. "Can you spell that, poppet?"

"T-e-e-g-i-n," recited Flora, vaguely. "Is that right?"

"Not far off," replied the bann kindly, going to retrieve his bedroll and blankets from where they were kept beside the window. "Can you spell Alistair's name yet?"

Flora scowled - not appreciating the impromptu literacy test - but she liked Teagan and made a valiant attempt to rise to the challenge.

"A-l-i-s-t-a-r-e," she offered, then caught sight of Knight-Captain Gannorn's incredulous expression and grimaced. "Oh, is that wrong? It's wrong, isn't it?"

Knowing that his best friend was still self-conscious about her poor literacy, Alistair drew Flora's head towards his and pressed his lips to her cheek.

"I adore you more than a nug loves elfroot," he said, kindly. "My lovely Lo."

"I adore you too," replied Flora without hesitation, pulling a small face. "And I hope that the baby gets your brains, rather than mine."

Chapter End Notes

OOC Author Note: Literally everyone knows now that the upcoming coronation is actually a coronation/wedding, lol – apart from Flora herself!

I've read several fanfictions where a pregnant Warden names the baby Duncan, and I did think about it for a while – but Flora and Alistair, by mutual silent agreement, have agreed not to do so. They've got other ways in mind to remember Duncan, rather than saddling a baby with such a weighty, solemn and sad memory. So, no consensus on names yet! But it's definitely not any names mentioned in this chapter, haha. Those names were actually taken from the codex entry for Legend of Calenhad!
On a damp and drizzly afternoon several days later, Flora met with the head cook from Denerim's Royal Palace. Their purpose was to discuss the feast which would shortly take place to celebrate Flora's role in ending the Fifth Blight. Her flippant, offhand comment from months prior had been taken seriously – to her slight awe and embarrassment.

In truth, Flora did not want any reward. She did not want to become an arlessa, and she certainly did not expect any monetary compensation. Flora had requested that her Herring-dad be purchased a new fishing boat – and as far as she was concerned, that was sufficient. However, everybody seemed determined to impose some sort of remuneration upon her; and so she had agreed to a feast in the hope that the nagging would end.

It was a typical Fereldan summer day – despite it nearing the end of Justinian, a vast swathe of raincloud hung overhead, blurring the line between sea and sky. Rain pattered against Revanloch's leaded roof, water running in rivulets down the walls where it had managed to find some gap in the roof. Puddles formed across the uneven flagstones of the inner courtyards, and the younger, rowdier initiates delighted in crashing their boots into the pooling water.

Flora met with the head cook in the Knight-Commander's office; with the classrooms all in use, the chief Templar had volunteered his own quarters. The man – a balding human in his middle years with a belly that suggested he frequently partook of his own dishes – was so intimidated by Flora at first that he was barely able to speak.

Flora gazed in perplexion at the man as he blushed and fumbled with his recipe cards, bemused as to the cause of his discomfort. She knew that the solemn, haughty beauty of her face sometimes made her seem cold and unapproachable, but the cook had seen her many times before, during her residence in the Royal Palace.

"I'm sorry," she said at last, hating to see anyone in such squirming discomfort as the portly man accidentally dropped his sheath of recipe cards on the tiles. "Am I doing something to... disturb you?"

"No!" squawked the cook, crimson flooding to his cheeks. "No, no, no, my lady – your great dragon-slayeriness- Madame Hero of Ferelden- "

Flora realised then that it was not so much her face, but her accomplishments that served to intimidate. As the blushing cook spread the recipe cards across the table, she pulled an apologetic face at him.

"Please," she asked, wide-eyed and earnest. "Would you be able to speak them to me? I can't read very well."

As Flora had hoped, her humble request made the man a little more comfortable in her presence. In a far steadier voice, he read out the list of dishes that would be served in a few days time.

"A pottage of ham and leek; capon with blackberry sauce; ragout of wild deer; fried oranges from Antiva; eel and trench pie; honey-mustard spiced eggs…"

Flora had no idea what half of these dishes were, but nodded solemnly at each one regardless.
"Who is coming to the feast?" she asked curiously as the man paused for breath. "Will the army leaders be coming? The nobles?"

"The armies have already feasted and departed, my lady," the cook replied. "The nobles have also already hosted their own private banquets for their retainers. This feast is for you, and you can invite whomsoever you wish."

"Huh," said Flora, shifting in her seat as the little creature nudged against her spine. "Is it taking place in the Royal Palace?"

"Wherever you desire, my lady. If you wish to eat in the gardens – although perhaps not, if the weather is like this – it can easily be arranged."

Flora thought for a long moment and then smiled at him; her eyes thoughtful.

"Thank you."

The sun emerged after lunch, pale and insipid at first but then increasing in intensity as the hours drew on. To Flora's relief, the babe had deigned not to leech the entirety of her energy that day; she was able to accompany Leliana down to the rocky beach at the base of Revanloch's high promontory. Knight-Captain Gannorn, envisioning the king's limitless wrath if she fell, barely dared to breathe as Flora clambered across the seaweed-covered stones.

But Flora had spent more of her life traversing mossy rocks than she had tiled floors, and she was wholly comfortable with navigating the treacherous slippery surface. While Leliana covered herself in sunlight atop the flat edge of a boulder; Flora perused the various rock pools, dropping an expert hand into their navy crevasses. Sure enough, she had soon collected nearly half a bucket's worth of oysters.

However, to Flora's dismay, the moment that she cracked open a shell, she felt a violent curling of nausea in her stomach; strong enough that bile rose to the back of her throat.

In horror, she let the oyster drop onto the sand and went to wake Leliana, who was dozing in the late-afternoon heat.

"The baby doesn't like oysters!" Flora bemoaned loudly, as the bard grimaced and shielded her eyes from the sun. "I don't think it's related to me. How can it not like oysters? I just spent an hour collecting my midnight snack."

She scowled, giving the bucket a little discontented rattle.

Leliana ended up taking the collection of unfortunate oysters to the smoky labyrinth of Revanloch's kitchens; where the cooks took them with mild suspicion. Seafood was not a frequent occurrence in the diet of a Templar – the recruits existed on vegetable pottage, while the officers were afforded meat.

The bard ducked out of the kitchens, hearing a rattle behind her that sounded suspiciously like a large quantity of oysters being dumped out of a window. She met Flora at the foot of the stairs, and the two made their way back towards the guest quarters. Flora made little conversation; she was still sulking over the oysters, hands and feet covered in sand, and her hair teased into untidy whorls by the salt-laced breeze.

The presence of crimson and gold clad Royal Guard in the upper passageway indicated that Alistair had already arrived. Flora perked up a fraction, tilting her cheek for Leliana to kiss as the bard prepared to take her leave.
"I'll leave you in Alistair's capable hands," the lay sister murmured distractedly, already planning what she intended to do with her two hours of relative freedom. The Grand Cleric had been so impressed with Leliana's exquisite singing voice that she had requested the bard perform a solo at the next day's Evensong.

The Royal Guard flanking the entrance to the guest chamber shifted their pikes to acknowledge Flora's arrival. One opened the door for her; with a smile of gratitude, she stepped inside the chamber, blinking at the dimness within.

Alistair – worried that the chamber might be too cold for his pregnant mistress – was just drawing the heavy curtains closed, shutting out the chilly evening air. A fire had already been lit in the hearth, though its flickering reach only extended partway across the dusty floorboards.

Although the connection of shared blood between them had been severed, Alistair still recognised the sound of his former sister-warden's step. He turned around, unable to stop a reflexive grin from spreading across his face as he set eyes on Flora.

"Sweetheart!"

Flora beamed back at him, barely registering the golden band atop his head or the facial hair of authority sprouting from his jaw. Instead, she saw only her best friend and long-time companion, and went scuttling eagerly into his open arms.

Alistair embraced her, delighted in no less degree. After clutching her tightly to his chest for several long moments, he drew back a fraction and dropped his hand to her stomach, sliding an affectionate palm over the swollen mound of flesh.

"How are you feeling, darling?" he asked, gratified to see her looking fresh-faced and beaming.

"Good," she replied immediately, peering up at him through her eyelashes. "I slept well last night."

Alistair smiled down at her, lifting his palm to cup her cheek; brushing a thumb along her angular cheekbone.

"But," a solemn Flora added, watching her best friend's expression change almost comically at the conjunction. "I don't think the baby can be related to me."

Alistair looked somewhat perplexed, looking at her, then down at her stomach, then back at her face. His eyebrows shot into his hairline.

"Wha- ?!"

"It doesn't like oysters," Flora complained, indignant. "How can it not like oysters? They're the best. They're so flavourful, and salty; and you don't need to waste time cooking them, you can just eat eighteen at once without stopping. They look so beautiful, with their shiny black shells, like… like mysterious snails of the sea."

Alistair studied his best friend's earnest face as she soliloquised about the qualities of oysters; trying his hardest not to laugh out loud. A legacy of her Herring upbringing, Flora rarely spoke in such volume outside exceptional circumstance.

"Maker's Breath," he said, as she paused to inhale. "You make me so happy, Flo."

Flora interrupted herself mid-sentence and smiled shyly up at him; he gazed back down at her, with the green filaments standing out stark in his hazel irises.
Without another word, Alistair drew her down onto the window bench, letting their mouths collide in lazy trajectory. As he kissed her tenderly and without reservation, Flora curled her fingers in the hair at the nape of his neck; vaguely remembering a time when he had been too self-conscious to kiss her in public. As Alistair had grown more comfortable with the notion of being king, he had also become accustomed to the lack of true privacy that accomplished such a status.

Still, if they had been in the Royal Palace, the king would have eventually ordered any other occupants of the room to leave. As it stood, Alistair was not entirely sure that his jurisdiction held within Revanloch, and so did not order the Templars to depart.

Chanter Devotia was snoring on a pallet near the door, in preparation to take the second half of the night shift. Knight-Captain Gannorn gritted his teeth, raised his eyes to the ceiling, and hoped very much that the king was not planning to actually *bed* his mistress. Based on tavern songs he had heard on the occasional patrol around the city, the new Theirin and his crimson-headed Cousland were known for their brazenness. Fortunately for the uncomfortable Templar, the occupants of the window seat managed to exercise some degree of restraint.

Flora inhaled unsteadily, able to breathe only when Alistair's mouth wandered down her throat, his hand pulling her hair loose from its restraining band. Moments later, his lips were parting hers once more, his tongue insistent on laying claim to her mouth as though it were territory to be won.

With Flora's back angled towards the Templar, Alistair was able to work his hand through the opening of her tunic, seeking the curve of her bare breast. He kissed her ear as his fingers meandered gently over the firm mounds of flesh; considerate of their new sensitivity.

In contrast to the tenderness of his touch, Alistair's gaze caught Flora's like a barbed hook. His pupils were blown wide and black with desire, all traces of her compassionate brother-warden vanished in a swell of raw-edged lust.

"By the Maker, Lo," he whispered in her ear, voice throaty and desirous. "I want you so badly, I can't think straight. All I can think of in meetings is you, naked on the furs in the Royal bedchamber."

He ducked his mouth to her neck, tugging the soft skin gently with his teeth as his fingers sought out her nipple.

Flora tilted her head to the side with an appreciative little grunt, trying to envision herself posing seductively amidst the velvet cushions. The thought amused her slightly – sexual allure had always been more Leliana's area of expertise. Additionally, with her swollen stomach, sore feet and aching back; she did not feel at her most *beguiling*.

Suddenly, there came a confident rap on the window, several inches from Flora's head. A figure cloaked in shadow crouched on the sill, features obscured and the glint of weapons at their hip.

Alistair reflexively drew his mistress into his arms, twisting to position his own torso between Flora and the glass. From the doorway, the Knight-Captain drew his sword with a singing metallic chord, and made to stride across the room.

Flora peered over Alistair's shoulder, then beamed and reached out to tap her fingers against the glass in response.

"It's Zevran," she said, as the king let out a muted sigh of relief. "He's back! What does he have against *doors*?"
Chapter End Notes

OOC Author Note: So of course seafood is a big no-no for women who are up the duff! To Flora's horror, her body has developed a gag reflex for oysters, lol. She's actually genuinely enraged by this, since oysters were a Herring staple!
Alistair leaned forward to unfasten the rusting window catch, standing back as the frame swung inwards with a creak. The elf, lithe as a cat, slithered his way onto the bench, his face hidden by a low hood. The formfitting leathers he wore gleamed oddly in the candlelight, leaving dark smears wherever they touched the wood.

"Greetings, mis amores," he purred, weariness running through the words. "I am very glad to see you both. And I am seeing quite a lot of you, mi florita."

The elf drew back his hood, winking leisurely at Flora in a way that did not quite hide the deep lines of tiredness scored beneath his eyes.

Flora absent-mindedly tightened the laces of her tunic, brow creasing as she stared at her Crow companion more closely. Reaching out, she pressed a finger to the oily patch on the elf's leathers; when she withdrew it, the tip came away a brownish-red.

Alistair came to the same realisation moments later, inhaling sharply in dismay.

"Zev," he breathed, alarmed. "Are you injured?"

The elf shook his head, fatigue ingrained deep in the angular crevasses of his face. His olive skin appeared a shade paler than usual, the tattooed marks standing out as though freshly inked.

"No, mi rey. It is not my blood."

Alistair barked for a servant; one came scuttling into the room with head bowed. The king proceeded to deliver a set of terse instructions: for a bath to be brought up and the lay sister Leliana to be located.

Meanwhile Flora was gazing anxiously at the elf, her eyes dropping to the blades at his hips. They were still caked in dried blood, and it was this that alarmed her more than anything, since the Crow took meticulous pride in the care of his weapons.

"Zev," she whispered, alarmed. "Wha-"

"You are looking radiant, mi sirenta," he interjected, skilfully avoiding her concern. "Fecundity suits you, my ripening little peach."

Flora frowned at him, unswayed by his diversionary tactics. The elf continued, determinedly.

"Anyway, I have news of your assassin. I shall update you both on the situation; appraise you of what I have learnt-"

"Not before you bathe, and sit down properly," Flora interrupted, with Herring bluntness. "And have something to eat."

A muscle in Alistair's jaw flickered – he was keen for any news on the one who had attempted to kill his beloved and best friend – but acquiesced to Flora's solemn declaration.

Zevran eyed her for a moment, and then sighed, leaning his white-blond head back against the glass.
Flora surreptitiously looked him up and down, noting a bloodied smear of crimson on the pointed length of his ear. Licking her thumb, she reached out, and wiped it away.

It was a kind and oddly maternal gesture; the elf exhaled slightly unsteadily, anchoring his fingers in the folds of his leathers to stop himself from touching her.

"You must be hungry if you've been travelling," Flora said, glancing around. "Hm, what would you like?"

Unfortunately, the only food present was that which satisfied her own strange cravings – bundles of tree bark, a basket of earth-covered turnips and a pot of mint sauce.

"I'll have some fare brought up," Alistair called from across the room, shoving the poker into the hearth to perk up the flames. "I can hear your stomach rumbling from over here."

Flora knelt up and refastened the window, pulling the curtains closed once again. When she turned around, the elf had his eyes closed; in his stillness, the violet shadows etched around the sockets stood out all the more starkly.

Unsure whether or not he was dozing, Flora reached out and touched her finger to his cheek, tracing the faded pattern tattooed against the rich, stewed-tea skin.

Zevran opened a dark, inscrutable eye and watched her, a myriad of indescribable emotions swirling in the depths of his pupil.

"You look tired, carina," he murmured, seeing the remnants of similar shadows beneath Flora's own eyes. "Is it the babe keeping you awake, or has our king been exercising his royal prerogative at every available opportunity? Have the Templars been amenable to granting you some privacy, hm?"

Flora had no idea what a prerogative was, and so merely smiled enigmatically in response.

The elf realised that she had no idea what he was asking, and let out a weary chuckle. Reaching out, he mirrored her gesture; letting his thumb trace the high angle of her cheekbone.

"Congratulations on your retirement, Warden-Commander. I heard about the visit from the Orlesians. Did they smell of sugared violets and political intrigue?"

Flora pulled a little face at him, slumping down against the wall and resting an absent-minded hand on her belly.

"I think they tried to take over the Ferelden Wardens," she replied, somewhat uncertainly. "But Loghain Mac Tir is in charge now, along with one of their lieutenants."

"They'll watch each other like hawks," called Alistair from across the room, batting out a spark that had landed on his knee. "Loghain won't have time to get up to anything devious; he'll be too busy making sure there's no foul play from the Orlesian woman."

Despite his weariness, Zevran managed to summon a wry chuckle, dark eyes flashing.

"You're making Loghain work with an Orlesian? How deliciously twisted of you, Alistair. Perhaps they'll hate each other so much that they'll fall into bed."

"Maker's Breath!"

"Aaah!"
Neither Flora nor Alistair were much grateful for this mental image being inserted into their heads.

Soon afterwards the bath arrived, alongside a fleet-footed Leliana. The bard elbowed her way impatiently past the servants, going to greet Zevran with a smile.

"Mon chèr," she murmured, kissing the elf's tattooed cheek as he winked at her. "You must tell me the results of your investigations later."

He inclined his head, tucking away a strand of platinum hair that had escaped its tight braid.

Alistair directed the bath to be placed beside the hearth, as Flora went to intercept a servant carrying a tray.

"Thank you," she said, casting an appraising eye over the contents. There was a pot of freshly brewed tea, and an odourless vegetable stew accompanied by several slices of thick, grainy bread.

Zevran lifted a spoonful of stew to his mouth, just about managing to disguise the faint curl of his lip that accompanied any Fereldan cuisine.

"Tell me, nena. Has this country ever heard of using spices to flavour its food?" he begged after a moment, wide eyed. "If not, I know several Antivan merchant princes who are always looking to expand their trade networks."

Flora smiled at him, patting her stomach as the little creature nudged against her kidneys.

The servants soon departed, leaving the bath steaming before the fire. Zevran – like Flora – had never been self-conscious about disrobing before others. Discarding his bloodied leathers and similarly-coated blades, he strode across the room, tan and feline.

Alistair coughed, hastily directing his attention to the hearth. Leliana, who appreciated both aesthetically-pleasing male and female forms in equal measure, eyed the elf surreptitiously. Flora, who had a healer's ambivalence to the naked body, dutifully followed in the elf's wake with the congealing, tasteless stew.

"Ayuadame, its following me," breathed the elf, glimpsing the hated bowl from the corner of his eye. "The stuff of nightmares. I will stick to the marginally less offensive bread, I think, mi florita."

Flora nodded, perching carefully on the stool beside the bath as the elf lowered himself into the water.

"Alistair," murmured Leliana, drifting across the room like some ethereal spirit in her flimsy Chantry robes. "I have also been making some enquiries about our three remaining Howes."

Alistair's head snapped up from the hearth, his stare tautening as it met the duck-egg blue gaze of the bard. Reaching out, he took Leliana's arm and drew her to one side; lowering his voice as he glanced back at his seated mistress.

"Tell me, Lel."

Meanwhile, Flora rested her arm on the side of the bathtub and prodded at the floating foam with wary suspicion. Fortunately, there was no offensive flowery aroma rising from the water – Revanloch soap was made from plain, unscented animal fat.

Zevran exhaled unsteadily, closing his eyes and gripping the edge of the bathtub. Flora eyed his slender fingers, the nails of which were caked with something dark and sticky. Her gaze travelled...
over his faintly discoloured knuckles, which appeared to have recently made contact with something organic and yielding.

The elf watched her from beneath pale, half-lowered eyelashes, hair plastered to his shoulders.

"Do not judge them too harshly, mi sirena," he murmured wryly, watching the soapy residue congeal atop the tepid water. "They are not the large, honest hands of your former brother-warden, strong and sword-calloused. They are the hands of a killer."

"I like your hands," Flora retorted, gazing enviously at the elf's graceful fingers. "They're very elegant."

"And they have done many gruesome things, carina," the elf said, watching the water roll down his forearm. "Things which would give you nightmares, if you were still capable of having them."

Flora held up her own smaller, far less elegant hand, with the fingernails bitten and the strange, moon-colour marking seared across the palm.

"Well, I once broke a man's head into pieces with this hand," she replied, recalling a rain-soaked balcony and the flash of sheer terror in Rendon Howe's eyes as he realised that Flora was not Tranquil after all. "And I still like it well enough."

Zevran smiled back at Flora, the bone-white of his teeth in gleaming contrast to the rich lustre of his tattooed skin. He reached out with wet fingers and gripped her wrist, bringing her hand close to his face and eyeing it, solemnly.

"This is the hand of the Hero of Ferelden. The hand which slew the Archdemon and ended the Blight. I'm surprised the Landsmeet haven't wanted to preserve it."

Flora looked alarmed. "Cut it off?!"

"Cara, no! I mean immortalising your fingerprints in plaster."

"Oh."

Later, after the elf had deliberately lingered over dressing to make Knight-Captain Gannorn distinctly uncomfortable; king, Cousland, bard and assassin sat down together as Zevran prepared to share his findings.

Flora leaned back against the cushions, incongruously hoping that she could push right through them and disappear into the depths of the bed. She had quite happily been in denial for the past fortnight – Howes, assassins and poisoned blades had been lodged firmly in the back of her mind – and was not looking forward to Zevran's revelations.

Alistair, conversely, was sitting bolt upright. One hand was resting protectively on Flora's bare calf, palm sliding up and down the skin. The fingers of his other hand lingered near the hilt of his nearby sword; as though ready to take it up immediately against any offending parties.

"So I have questioned Delilah Howe," Zevran began, wet hair hanging dark and wet around his bare shoulders as he paced about the bed. "She has married a commoner, and no longer considers herself a Howe. I have it confirmed by three sources that Rendon Howe disowned her six months ago, due to her lowly choice in partners. She is with child – much further along than you, carina-"
"Hence the marriage," whispered Leliana, surreptitiously.

"– and when I questioned her, there was no lie in her face. She is fully cognisant of what an animal her father was; of his betrayal at Highever, the kidnap of Florence Cousland and subsequent plan to illegally Tranquilise her."

Flora cringed, as she always did whenever the hated man was mentioned. Alistair felt her flinch as though struck, and a quick flash of Theirin anger passed across his face like an ill wind. Muttering a curse under his breath, he reached out and drew her beneath his arm.

"The elder brother is still in the Marches," continued the elf, quietly. "And although it would not be impossible for him to orchestrate some scheme from there, my little birds suggest otherwise. No, it is the younger brother, Thomas, whom I believe is behind this plot."

"Thomas," Flora said in disbelief, remembering the sallow-faced youth who had sat opposite her at Howe's dinner table. "I said sorry to him for killing his father. He said that he didn't even like him!"

"Where is he?" the king demanded in sudden rage, releasing his mistress and reaching for his sword. "I swear to the Maker, I'll go there tonight, I'll get some men- "

"Hold, Alistair," Zevran replied, reaching to place slender fingers on the fuming man's elbow. "I have not finished. I have made enquiries amongst the various assassin guilds – the Denerim Avengers, the Beards, the Loyalists, amongst others – and nobody knows of a contract on mi florita's life. Indeed, they were near-incredulous at the prospect. Unsurprisingly, nobody wants to go after the Hero of Ferelden."

Alistair, whose eyebrows had risen into his coppery hairline at the sheer number of assassin guilds apparently operating within Ferelden, ground his teeth.

"So, what are you saying?" he asked, bluntly.

Zevran turned to Flora, who was anxiously rubbing the heel of her hand across her stomach.

"Nena, I believe that it was not an assassin who made the clumsy attempt on your life in the Chantry," he said, quietly. "I believe it was Thomas Howe himself. Furthermore, I believe that he has located himself nearby."

"How do you know that?" demanded Leliana, her eyes at once both shrewd and surprised.

Zevran slipped a hand into the pocket of his trousers, withdrawing a small vial filled with a blackish-green ichor.

"I distilled the poison used onto the assassin's blade into its various essences," he murmured. "The core component was the crimson lily-wort, a flower only found along this particular stretch of coastline. I believe that Thomas Howe is nearby, possibly very nearby."

"Within Denerim?" Leliana asked, softly. "Hidden in one of the caves along the coastline?"

"Or even closer still," replied Zevran in low tones, the surface humour that usually danced across his words entirely absent. "Perhaps within the monastery itself."

There was a silence, during which Alistair gaped in horror; loosing his grip on the sword hilt and tucking his lover beneath his arm once more. Flora swallowed, feeling the little creature nudge against the base of her spine.
"There are three hundred initiates here," murmured Leliana, glancing around as though her pale blue gaze could penetrate Revanloch's stone walls. "How old is Thomas Howe, two decades? He could easily blend in amongst them."

"I'll have the recruits numbered and interviewed tomorrow," Knight-Captain Gannorn interrupted from beside the door. "If this Howe is hiding within Revanloch, we will find him."

Alistair was already on his feet, sword at his side, looking ready to lead an immediate charge into the initiate dormitories. Leliana reached up to put placating fingers on his elbow, shaking her head.

"Alistair, brute force is not the way to bring this vile creature to the light," she breathed, as the king put a despairing hand to his head. "We must proceed carefully, or else we will drive the Howe back underground. We know that he can be stealthy – after all, he slipped from Eamon's estate without notice."

Alistair groaned, turning to Zevran with a raw plea in his eyes.

"Zev-"

"Give me a day," replied the elf, quietly. "One more. I believe I am close."

Alistair stared down at the former Crow, who raised cunning dark eyes to meet his own.

"But, if he is here, Lo is in danger," he said, a clear note of despair ringing through his words. "If anything happens to her-"

"I will not allow it," said Zevran throatily, a harsh, ragged edge to his reply. "You know I would not permit a hair on her head to be harmed. Or for any misfortune to come to your little babe. The thought is… anatema."

Alistair glanced once towards the door, paused, then nodded wordlessly. Letting the sword drop to the floorboards with a clatter, he strode to the sideboard and poured himself a flagon of ale with a trembling hand.

Flora, her own alarm sufficiently assuaged by Zevran's reassurance, shifted position amidst the furs until she could put her arm about his neck. The elf reached up to touch her fingers as she pressed her lips affectionately against his cheek; his eyes half-closing.

"Right," he said, low and determined as he turned back towards them. "What do you need me to do?"

"Return to the city tonight, as normal," replied Zevran, steadily. "Host tomorrow's meeting with the Fereldan merchants, as planned. Basically, do not act as though you are suspicious. If our treacherous halla catches the scent of a wolf, then it will flee."

"Does that make you the wolf?" Flora asked, resting her chin on his shoulder.

"Sí," breathed the elf, and there was a dark menace in his smile. "My claws have been sharpened, and my belly hungers for foul traitor-meat."

"Oh! Are you going to eat him?"

"Qué?!"
OOC Author Note: Ooohhh, so the treacherous Howe is within Revanloch! Now we'll just have to draw him out of hiding..... Nathaniel Howe is going to make an appearance later on; I can just do more headcanon stuff with Thomas, since there's no lore on him. At least, not that I can find, anyway!

Hurray, Zevran is back! He's one of my favourite characters, and I really adore the closeness between him and Flo. I do feel sorry for him – I bet Ferelden cuisine is super bland, if it is meant to be based off Medieval England, lol.
Once Alistair had departed, with even greater reluctance than usual, the other occupants of Revanloch settled down for the night. A lone priestess tended the eternal flame in the Chantry, while the guards made silent patrol along the monastery's crumbling ramparts. A watchful moon filtered through the clouds, penetrating the broken roof tiles with rays of searching light; as though attempting to illuminate any possible Howe intruder lurking within.

Up in the guest chambers, Bann Teagan, who had had a long day arguing with the stonemasons about the cost of rebuilding Denerim's broken defences, was snoring away on the bedroll. Leliana had just finished applying her facial unguents, and was leaning forward; eyes closed in pleasure as Flora knelt at her back, kneading her fingertips into the bard's skull.

"Ma petite," Leliana murmured, exhaling as the tension across her temples began to dissipate. "Just so you are aware. There may be some time tomorrow when I, and your usual Templar guards, will not be with you."

Flora blinked, sliding her fingers in slow circles behind Leliana's ears. The bard's strawberry blonde locks felt conditioned and silken, much – Flora reflected – like the bard herself.

"Oh!"

"If that is the case, Bann Teagan will be with you, as will Lieutenant Rutherford."

"Alright," said Flora, bemused. "Why?"

The bard made no reply, merely let out a little sigh and rolled her shoulders. Flora stuck an immature tongue out at the back of Leliana's skull. The next moment, she felt bad and pressed her cheek affectionately against her companion's hair.

"Well, I'm sure you have a good reason for it," Flora conceded amiably, leaning back into the cushions and yawning. "Watch out for Thomas Howe. He might jump out at you from behind the Grand Cleric's giant hat!"

Zevran, who had just been admiring his own taut, biscuit-brown torso in the mirror, turned around and flashed them a brilliant smile.

"Bedtime, with my two beautiful pelirrojas!"

Skipping across the floorboards, the elf made to gleefully clamber into bed beside Flora; Leliana let out a warning snarl.

"On my other side, dépraver!"

Zevran pouted, but obediently rolled across to relocate himself on the far side of the bed. Leliana lowered her lacy eye mask just enough to shoot him a warning glower.

"Envision me as the impenetrable wall of Minrathous," she said sternly into the darkness. "None shall pass."
Zevran blew a plaintive kiss in Flora's direction, over Leliana's muscled, silk-clad stomach.

"Alas, we must postpone our passion once again, carina."

"Oh, well. Have some interesting dreams," Flora replied, smiling sleepily back at him. "Tell me about them in the morning."

An owl hooted from the depths of some vaulted crevasse, a light night-time drizzle pattered against Revanloch's roof tiles. The city of Denerim, sprawled on the estuary two miles to the north, was lost in a caldera of smoke and shadow; its braziers smouldering in vain defiance of the sodden darkness.

Alistair, tossing and turning within the Royal bedchamber, stretched out an unconscious hand into the hollow of the mattress. Flora's old fishing jersey, its fraying navy wool unravelling in a half-dozen places, lay on the pillow beside him.

His sleeping mind was crowded with images of faceless Howe descendants, each one brandishing a fragment of their father's broken skull. He saw his best friend, vulnerable and defenceless, startled fingers flying to her throat as a dozen crimson birds flew from her mouth.

The king awoke in a cold sweat, shouting out in alarm. Moments later, several guardsmen burst through the doors with pikes raised, torchlight sweeping the chamber.

After reassuring the guards that all was well, Alistair leaned back against the cushions, trying to calm his racing heart. He reached for Flora's fishing jumper and held it against his chest, finding some small measure of comfort in the salt-roughened wool.

Meanwhile, within the decrepit towers of Revanloch monastery, Flora herself was having a restless night. The little creature was testing the boundaries of its confined quarters, nudging irritably against her kidneys and spine. She had tried sleeping propped up against the cushions, curled on her side, and eventually tried rubbing her hand over her belly in an attempt to soothe it.

I shouldn't call you little creature, Flora thought to herself, pressing the heel of her palm against her swollen stomach. Everyone keeps saying how big you are. Please don't get too big. I'm already not sure how you're going to... fit.

I mean, I know how it happens. I'm a healer. I just can't see it happening in this instance. Especially if you've got three more months of growing to do.

The rubbing motion seemed to settle the not-so-little creature, and Flora managed to glean an hour or so more sleep. When she woke next, it was to the sound of the guard changing shift on the midnight bell.

Yawning, she was about to roll over and attempt to reclaim sleep, when the balance of light inside the room shifted; shadow and moonbeam briefly merging as a figure moved before the window.

In mild alarm, Flora sat up and rubbed her eyes, squinting towards the opened curtains. A moment later, she recognised Zevran's form silhouetted before the leaded glass. The elf was leaning back against the stone frame, naked from the waist up, his hair braided neatly behind his head.

Yet it was his expression that caught Flora's attention; the tan features uncharacteristically austere, the gaze clouded and distant. There was none of the usual humour in the laughing mouth, which was
Flora shoved the blankets back with a foot, taking care not to tread on Bann Teagan as she clambered inelegantly upright.

Immediately, Chanter Devotia let out a little cough of warning from where she was stationed beside the door, her violet eyes narrowing through the shadows. The Chanter clearly believed that Flora was ready to embark on another of her nocturnal wanderings, and relaxed a fraction when the Cousland padded towards the window instead.

Zevran heard Flora's approach, and turned to face her, his angular features immediately assembling themselves into a charismatic smile of greeting.

"Carina," he murmured, teeth very white against the gloom. "Why are we up at this hour?"

Flora looked at him dubiously, the gold mote embedded within her iris gleaming with reflected moonlight. The elf continued in a similar charming vein, his smile fixed and brilliant.

"Doesn't this lighting suit me, hm? I look almost Dalish. I heard the forest elves caper and cavort about beneath the full moon – or perhaps that is the Witches of the Wild, I know not."

He held out a sinewy arm, the lean muscle harbouring the coiled strength of a wildcat. The tattooed markings extended down his shoulder-blades and wound to his elbows, the ink faded from longevity.

"Zevran, I thought you were Antivan," Flora whispered back, solemnly. "Not Orlesian."

Zevran managed to maintain his charming grin while simultaneously twitching his brows together in confusion. Flora propped herself up against the opposite window frame and continued to stare at him, unblinking.

"I am bemused, nena," the elf said at last, quizzical and smiling. "What do you mean, Orlesian? Surely my fashion sense is not that bad?"

Flora made a little gesture, passing her fingers in front of her face with a smile and a frown in quick succession.

"The mask," she explained, pale eyes unfathomable as the Waking Sea. "You're wearing it now. You don't need to, not in front of me."

Zevran stared at her for a long moment, the smile gradually turning rictus.

Subtle as a sea change before a storm, the veil of outer charm slipped away. The elf seemed to age several years before her, his mouth pulling grim and humourless; old regrets shadowing the rich depths of his irises.

Flora did not say anything, but looked at him silently; for once, she was not distracted by the sight of the nearby ocean. The elf was never shy about shedding clothes in daylight – he revelled in his own fine-hewn physicality – but the daylight warmed the rich skin sufficient to hide what lay beneath its surface.

Conversely, the silvered hue of moonlight illuminated a dozen old wounds, the scar tissue pale and discoloured. Some appeared to be the careless remnants of battle – from the rare occasion an opponent had managed to land a lucky blow – but others were of far more insidious more nature. These earliest ones spoke of systematic and deliberate infliction; of chains, and manacles, and a punishing lash.
Flora looked at them, recalling the brief fragments that the elf had shared with them about his childhood with the Crows.

_They were... not kind to my fellow bond-slaves and I. Most of us did not survive training._

_But, enough of that! Where to now, hm? My, the colouring of sunset suits you, mi sirenita._

"I think you are lucky, _mi florita_, not to dream any longer," murmured the elf at last, pensively. "I wish I was afforded the same luxury."

Flora leaned her head against the window frame, wistful and contemplative.

"I think I would have had a lot of nightmares," she agreed, her pale eyes seeking out his. "Is that why you're awake? A nightmare?"

Zevran almost smiled and spun her a pretty lie, then remembered that Flora had politely and insistently requested the removal of his mask.

"_Sí_," he replied instead, soft and without pretence.

"_Si_," repeated Flora, in her flat, northern augmentation. "_SI._"

"No: _sí_, like this. _Sí._ _Sííí._"

"_Si_," she said obediently, then smiled at him. "Is that better?"

Zevran flashed her a quick, ambiguous grin; his gaze sliding sideways towards where the moon left dappled patches on the vast, dark swathe of ocean.

"What was your nightmare about?" Flora asked after a moment, fiddling with the fraying sleeve of her Theirin-crested pyjamas.

For a moment, Zevran stared at the window as though the reflections of his reproachful dead were gazing back at him through the leaded glass. The elf flinched fractionally, the movement so infinitesimal that Flora almost missed it.

"Tell me, _bella_," he said, quietly. "Do you think that your Herring past will ever leave you? Or does the saltwater run so deep in your veins that it is impossible to drain?"

Flora made a vain attempt to decipher the elf's euphemism, her brow furrowing. Eventually, she gave up and asked him to clarify.

"What do you mean?"

The elf gave no reply for a moment, turning his eyes away from the sad imagined faces of betrayed friends. When he spoke, the words emerged low and rueful.

"I do not think that I will ever leave my mistakes behind, _mi florita_. The shadow of the crow's wing will fall across my path for the rest of my life."

Flora pressed her finger against a warped mark in the glass, thoughtfully. The elf continued in a quiet, dry voice; grateful that she had not attempted to interrupt him with platitudes.

"You said in the Brecilian Forest: Zevran, you are free. But I am a prisoner of my own past, _carina_. I do not wish to be a Crow, but if I am not a Crow, I... I do not know what I am."
Flora held her breath as her friend continued, wondering what arcane alignment of stars had occurred to prompt this uncharacteristic confession. Zevran had rarely mentioned his youth with the Crows on their travels; clearly, it was a rite of passage he chose not to dwell on.

The elf licked his dry lips, closing his eyes and resting his forehead against the cool, uneven glass.

"During the Blight, I had a purpose – to assist you and Alistair in defeating the Darkspawn. What now is the purpose of Zevran? I am masterless, guildless, aimless."

He opened his eyes, to see Flora proffering a tankard of weak ale, having spotted it abandoned half-drunk on the sideboard.

In defiance of his usual caution when ingesting strange fluids, Zevran drank the liquor in three long gulps, grateful for its tepid refreshment. Flora watched the muscles in the elf's tan throat contract as he swallowed, thinking on how to best phrase her thoughts.

"When my spirits left me, I didn't know what to do," she said at last, careful and solemn. "They had been with me for as long as I could remember, longer than any real person. I thought they were my parents when I was younger, because the other children in Herring teased me about not looking like my dad."

Flora swallowed, feeling the perennial sadness rise once more to the forefront of her mind.

"When they left – were destroyed? – I felt useless. I felt like a crab in a rock pool; trapped in my own body, weak and... and pointless."

"Nena," said Zevran, and then cut himself off as she continued; her voice small.

"And I still feel a bit useless, even now. But..."

"But?"

"But," Flora whispered, determinedly. "I'm sure I'll find some new purpose, now that there's no Blight. Even though I can't heal anymore, and my spirits are gone... I can do something else. I can move on from them, from my old life. I'm sure I can. I have to, or I'll never... I'll never grow up."

Zevran looked at her, his dark pupils thoughtful and unreadable. She was looking out at the ocean, fingertips pressed against the glass, more dark red hair hanging free from her braid than was contained within it. The pyjama shirt – clearly one of Alistair's, from its size – drooped just enough at the neck to show the highest arc of the white scar between her shoulder-blades; the Chantry-like sunburst that had resulted from the Archdemon's soul attempting to take root.

"Mi florita," he murmured eventually, and then trailed off; unsure what to say.

Flora smiled sideways at him, quick and fleeting as a fish darting through a patch of sunlight-dappled water.

"And if I can move forward, you can, too. We'll be currents together," she said, determinedly. "Currents, not crabs stuck in rock-pools."

Zevran opened his mouth to speak his heart plainly, and then arrested himself at the last minute; reaching out to finger a thick rope of loose hair.

"Currents, not rock pools," he repeated instead, feeling his gut constrict. "Constantly moving, not stagnating."
"I know it's going to take a while," Flora added, pulling a rueful face. "I saw a skull on a tapestry the other day – you know, the battlefield scene in the Chantry corridor? - and it reminded me of my Golden Lady. I spent the whole afternoon as an… an *emotional shipwreck*.

She grimaced, nudging her fingertip into a pockmarked section of the window pane. There was silence for a few heartbeats; an owl called out for its mate from somewhere beyond the glass.

"Why are you so kind, *carina*?" the elf asked eventually, watching Flora trace her mispelled name in the condensation.

"Because," she replied, soft and without hesitation. "People have been unkind to me."

Zevran inhaled suddenly, turning away from her and staring very hard up at the beams that ran horizontally across the ceiling.

"Go back to bed, *amor*," he said, an odd throatiness blurring the words.

"Eh?" said Flora, blinking. "Why?"

"Because I like Alistair very much," the elf continued, measuredly. "And I do not wish to disrespect him by kissing you, *advertencia justa*."

Flora's brows drew together as she thought on this. After a moment, she leaned forward and pressed her lips against his cheek, firm and affectionate.

"Try and get some sleep," she told him kindly, clambering off the window bench. "You and Leliana have some big plans tomorrow, apparently, which neither of you will tell me about!"

The elf inclined his head, feline gaze tracing her steps across the room.

"Remember what our bard said," he murmured, the words carrying easily through the still, damp air. "If we are not with you tomorrow, stay with the bann."

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**Chapter End Notes**

OOC Author Note: I actually love this one – I think it's really important for Flo's character development. And of course, I love Zev as a character and I think he's so much more complex than just a flirtatious rogue! I've only touched on the complexity in my account, but I wanted to at least allude to it.
When Flora awoke the next morning, she was alone amidst the rumpled blankets of the bed. Bann Teagan was dictating quietly to a clerk clad in Redcliffe colours at the door; while a familiar Templar with curly blond hair stood stiffly beside the hearth. Knight-Captain Gannorn and Chanter Devotia were nowhere to be seen.

Flora rubbed her eyes with her thumbs, yawning. The sun was spilling through the leaded window, illuminating the dusty floorboards with a languid, buttery light. The Herring part of her soul was immediately ashamed at sleeping in so late; it must have been at least mid-morning.

"Sorry, poppet." Teagan turned away from the clerk, apologetic and freshly-shaven. "Did I wake you?"

"No," Flora replied, her curious gaze sliding sideways. "Morning, Lieutenant Rutherford."

The lieutenant swallowed and began a reply that was an octave higher than normal; before clearing his throat and making a second attempt.

"Good morning, my lady."

But Flora was so distracted by the terrible realisation that she had missed breakfast, that she did not reprimand Cullen for his use of her honorific title. Immediately anxious, she put a hand to her stomach, feeling the little creature nudge against her palm.

"Has everyone broken their fast already?" she breathed, dismayed. "I need to go to the kitchens."

The bann stepped to one side, revealing a tray of freshly cut fruit and seeded rolls resting on a low stool.

"Here," he said, hastily. "Anything else you want, just let one of the servants know. Lay-Sister Leliana has requested that you… not leave the guest quarters today."

Flora, already halfway across the room, paused with one hand stretched towards the tray. She blinked, pale eyes moving from Teagan, to Cullen, then back to the bann.

"I can't leave the rooms?" she asked, nonplussed. "Why? What's going on?"

The younger Guerrin shot a quick side-look at the lieutenant; Flora spotted the fleeting exchange of glances, and narrowed her own stare.

"Why can't I leave?" she repeated, an unconscious note of Cousland imperiousness creeping into the query.

Teagan let out a sigh, taking a step towards her.

"Leliana and your Crow are now convinced that Thomas Howe may be hiding within Revanloch," he said, watching Flora's eyes widen in alarm. "It's almost a certainty, in fact."

"So he is here?" she breathed, disbelieving. "In the same building?"
Indeed, it appeared that Revanloch's crumbling chambers and labyrinthine passages had harboured a more insidious presence than mildew or mice.

"I… I-"

Seeing Flora mouth wordlessly as she paled, the freckles standing out like flecks of tan ink against her nose, Teagan hastened to reassure her.

"Child, no harm will come to you," he hastened to reassure her. "I swear by the Maker. Don't be frightened-"

"I'm going to knock his teeth out!" finished Flora, the words emerging as an enraged hiss.
"He's here?! Let me out, I'm going to find him, I'm going to find him and impale his manhood on a fishhook; which I will then use as bait! If it's anything like his father's, it'll be miniscule-"

Cullen, who had witnessed Flora's similarly violent outburst in the Chantry after the initial assassination attempt, was not taken aback. He stepped across to bodily block the doorway as Teagan gaped, momentarily too surprised to intercept Flora as she lunged forwards.

"I wish I'd never said sorry for killing his dad now," Flora fumed, sidestepping like a crab in an attempt to dodge the stoic-faced young Templar. "I should've butted out his teeth with my head. I'm going to do it now, once you move out of my way!"

"Flora, no."

The combination of her name, and the authority in the officer's voice, caused Flora to come to an abrupt halt. For a moment, she was no longer lady Cousland or king's mistress; but merely an apprentice being reprimanded by a Templar. Despite no longer possessing magic, deference to the Chantry's soldiers was still ingrained within Flora's psyche.

"It's important that you stay here," Cullen repeated, a fraction less sternly. "The bard Leliana requested it."

Inwardly, the young officer was quailing at his own audacity – after all, this was the Hero of Ferelden whom he had just told off. But Flora had visibly given up; her head hanging in defeat. She had remembered her promise to be cautious, and knew that that charging down Revanloch's damp corridors (like an enraged bull) in pursuit of assassins was perhaps not the most sensible course of action.

You're alone now. There's no one to protect you any more. No shield but your own skin.

Frustrated at her own vulnerability, the sulking Flora went to sit on the bed with shoulders slumped.

The next few hours passed with excruciating slowness. The quiet noises of Revanloch at day – muffled footsteps, hushed conversations, the distant clash of training swords from the inner courtyard – seemed to taunt Flora; now that she was confined to within four walls. The thought that Zevran and Leliana might be engaged in some potentially dangerous activity – involving a Howe, no less – while she was trapped useless inside the room, proved a source of great frustration.

Teagan dragged the writing desk over to the window, where there was the best light, and busied himself with correspondence. The young Templar lieutenant stood beside the door, one hand on his blade in readiness, chin raised.
Flora had taken her cards of Theodesian leaders to the bed, but she had memorised every angle of their inked faces already. Gazing across the room, her pale irises settled on the young Templar, whom she had first come into contact with during her earliest years at the Circle.

"Lieutenant Rutherford," Flora said eventually, her words breaking the silence.

The officer, who had been making a conscious effort not to look at Flora as she sprawled back against the cushions, now had little excuse. Hoping that his cheeks were not deepening their colour, Cullen returned her stare.

"Yes, my lady?"

Flora let the card featuring Empress Celene slip from her lap, pressing her fingertips together thoughtfully.

"We've known each other for a long time," she said, thoughtfully. "And you probably know a lot about me, after... after everything."

"Well, all of Ferelden knows about you now, I would assume," Cullen replied, with a wry half-nod of acknowledgement. "If not Thedas."

"I imagine that Herring is going to become a rather popular destination for travellers in the future," Teagan added from beside the window. "People will be curious to see where the Hero of Ferelden grew up."

Flora was silent for a moment, knowing that such an influx of strangers into the insular community of Herring would cause no small amount of consternation. Deciding that she could do nothing about this grim prospect, she pressed onwards.

"But I don't know a thing about you."

"What would you wish to know, my lady?"

Flora thought hard for a moment, frowning. She had incorrectly predicted that the shy young man would politely deflect any personal enquiries, and thus had not prepared any questions.

"I feel as though you're from a small village, like me," she said at last, carefully. "Is that right?"

"I was raised in a village by the name of Honnleath," the Templar said, with a slight inclination of the head. "There weren't many of us there. Our Chantry was only a little larger than these chambers."

"Where is Honnleath?" Flora asked, unfamiliar with the name.

The junior officer paused, before continuing in a carefully measured voice.

"It... it was in southern Ferelden."

The use of the past tense did not escape Flora, who understood immediately that Cullen's hometown had met the same fate as poor, lost Lothering.

"Oh," she breathed, immediately regretting having asked. "I'm sorry."

"My family fled when the Darkspawn came," Cullen continued, steadily. "To South Reach."

Flora grimaced once more at the mention of Arl Bryland's doomed seat. She dared not ask if his relatives had survived the horde's assault; yet the young captain continued to speak without
prompting.

"My sisters and brother made it to Denerim, thank Andraste. Our parents were delivered to the Maker's side."

Cullen spoke with the resigned tone of a man who had prematurely forced himself to come to terms with such a tragedy. Flora, who had been devastated by the departure of her spirits, was humbled by the man's Herring-like stoicism in the face of an even greater loss.

Letting the rest of the cards fall from her lap, she clambered out of bed and crossed the chamber, coming to a halt before the Templar. Not wanting to make Cullen uncomfortable, she made no attempt to embrace him; but reached out and took his gloved hand, clasping it between both of her palms.

"I'm sorry," she said solemnly, meaning it. "I'll never forget the villages and towns that the Darkspawn stole from us. Their names have been engraved on my bones."

It was an odd expression of sympathy – a typically fatalistic northerner's saying - but the sincerity of the words was clear. Cullen glanced down at her, his bruised, bronze gaze meeting her steady silvered one.

"Thank you."

Flora nodded, letting his hand go after a final tight squeeze.

"I should have known you were a man who had sisters," she said, angling the conversation gently away from death. "You were always kind to me in the Circle. Are they younger or older?"

"Mia is the oldest," Cullen replied, some of the rigidity loosing in his face as he uttered his sister's name. "Rosie is only sixteen summers old."

"Sixteen," repeated Flora, trying not to grimace as she envisioned the horrors that the girl must have experienced over the past year. "Are they still in Denerim?"

"Yes, I-I believe so."

"You don't know?"

The Templar coughed, eyes darting over her shoulder towards the window.

"The Chantry discourages contact with our families," he muttered, stiffly. "They suggest we do not even think on them. They're seen as a distraction."

"Oh."

Flora, who could not envision her family being anything other than an integral part of her life, glanced down. Then the Templar coughed, a slight awkwardness creeping into his tone.

"I was never very good at that part," Cullen said, frankly. "The forgetting of the family. It's my second greatest failing as a Templar."

"What's the first?" Flora asked, curious.

There was a brief pause, while the officer considered how best to phrase his answer. When they emerged, the words were carefully selected.
"Not following protocol when I found out that you were violating curfew. You should have been
disciplined for climbing up onto the roof."

Flora peered up at him through her eyelashes, the corners of her mouth tightening in disapproval.

"It's not a failing to be kind," she told him, sternly. Cullen's eyes slid evasively from her own, darting
once more towards the window.

With that said, Flora went to retrieve *Sea Creatures of Tevinter Legend*, taking the book over to the
window bench to glean some light from the watery sun. The Templar watched her as she went; the
latent meaning of his words writ plain across his clean-shaven face.

*My greatest failing as a Templar was how I felt about you. I harboured inappropriate desires, in
violation of my sacred oath to the Chantry. I almost acted on them.*

Teagan, who recognised that particular brand of longing only too well, rose from the writing desk in
a pretence to fetch some ale. As he passed the young officer, he lowered his voice and directed his
words like a spear-thrust into the man's ear.

"Mind yourself, Templar. The girl is meant for the king."

*And if I can keep my feelings submerged, so can you.*

"I know, my lord. I am... I've requested a transfer to Kirkwall, in the Marches," Cullen replied, not
quite able to look the bann in the eye. "They're telling me it'll be a promotion."

"Hm," said Teagan shrewdly, watching the young man's gaze edge back over the room in small
increments, until it was settled once more on Flora. She was puzzling over some inscrutable word
from *Sea Creatures of Tevinter Legend*, holding the book an inch before her face and squinting at it
in bemusement.

"Well, I think that would be a good idea, lieutenant. Need some help, petal?"

This last part was directed to Flora, who was now holding the book upside-down in an effort to
extract some sense from the text.

"Yes! Please!"

Flora made no further attempt to leave the room that day; after all, she was more than used to being
confined in cramped quarters. She puzzled over several more entries from *Sea Creatures* with
Teagan, then spent an hour writing out a series of improvised sentences that the bann dictated.

Many of them were related to the great horse fairs of the Marches that Teagan had attended in his
youth. Flora painstakingly scribed statements such as *the dappled grey mare was sold for fourteen
guineas*, and *the final steeplechase was won by a brave Ferelden Forder*.

The bann, with a patience that he had not known he possessed, corrected each misspelled word,
adding in capitalisations and commas where necessary.

Grateful for Teagan's assistance, Flora opened her mouth both to thank him and suggest a tactical
break; anxious not to dissuade the bann from helping her in the future.

Teagan appeared about to follow her suggestion, half-rising to his feet as he set down the quill.
struck by an idea, he sat back down and cleared his throat.

"Do you know how to spell Theirin, pet?"

Flora thought for a moment, her expression dubious. She had a vague idea, but the name was full of confusing vowels and she was not entirely sure where they all belonged.

"T-h-," she began, then trailed off. "Um: T-h-e-r-r-a-n?"

"I'm going to teach you how to write it," the bann said, not quite looking her direct in the eye. "So that you're confident in the future."

*When you're using it as your new name,* he thought with a faint pang of regret. *Surely, you must have some inkling as to what Alistair intends by now?*

Flora smiled at him, reaching to pull a fresh sheet of parchment onto her knee.

"Alright," she said, and there was no hint of realisation in either expression or reply. "Teach me."

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OOC Author Note: So I wanted to show how conflicted Cullen is in this chapter – he's def still got some issues from the whole desire demon torture episode! He still carries a torch for Flora, but feels incredibly guilty over it – hence him being like YES YOU SHOULD HAVE BEEN DISCIPLINED FOR GOING ON THE ROOF to Flora, lol. So he's going off to Kirkwall to try and get this rid of this inappropriate desire!

Slipped in a nasty little memory of Flora's imprisonment in Fort Drakon by Rendon Howe – when he forced her to bathe him, believing it to be the ultimate test of whether she was really Tranquil or not. Surely a Cousland who retained pride and dignity in their heritage would never stoop to such lows, with the man who had ordered the slaughter of Highever! Luckily, Flora had a healthy dose of Herring stoicism, and a healer's indifference to the naked body – hence she could maintain her poker face.
The hours passed by slow and steady, beams of light moving gradually across the floorboards as the sun began its long western arc. Teagan finished his correspondence and positioned himself at the window, watching various Templars come and go beneath Revanloch's crumbling entrance arch. The city of Denerim was visible in the distance, the Royal Palace perched on its supervisory edifice high above the estuary.

Cullen Rutherford was still berating himself inwardly for informing Flora that he ought to have had her disciplined for breaking curfew in the Circle. He stood, stiff and unhappy, before the doorway, tawny eyes fixed on the plastered wall opposite, mouth folded into a tight line.

Flora watered the plant that Leonas had given her, then became unduly anxious that she had over-saturated it. Not wanting it to die – after all, she could no longer prod life back into it with a finger – she spent several minutes scooping out the excess water with a spoon. Deciding grimly that horticulture wasn't for her, she sat back down on the window bench, taking the seat recently vacated by Teagan. Turning over the parchment so that *the Ferelden Forder won the steeplechase* was on the back, she began to painstakingly scribe her own sentences.

This was an arduous and time-consuming process, and soon a sweat had risen to Flora's forehead. She bit the end of the ink-pen, unable to stop herself from gnawing the end of the wooden shaft. Before she could stop herself, she had demolished near a quarter of it with her teeth.

"Bann Teagan, I've eaten your pen," she called across the room, sweating and unhappy. "I'm really sorry, the baby made me do it."

The bann came over and inspected his gnawed ink-pen, snorting. Curious, he glanced over Flora's shoulder at the scribbled sentences, one eyebrow rising.

"What's this, poppet?"


Teagan paused, the chewed ink-pen motionless between his fingers; something odd flickering in the depths of his pale green Guerrin gaze.

"You're writing to my nephew?"

"Mm, at the Jainen Circle. I wrote to him when we first came to Denerim, I told him I would. He wrote back. He's seen lots of ships, and he's made a friend called Hen-

When she wasn't delivering a speech for a specific purpose, the rhythm and flux of Flora's diction was classic Herring – short, rather abrupt sentences, strung together like fish on a line. Yet, Teagan was not listening to her peculiar northern delivery. The bann was still speechless at the revelation that – in the middle of the assembling of the army, in those frantic, dark days before the horde arrived at the city walls – the young Cousland had remembered a promise she had made months ago to a frightened ten year old boy.
"Anyway, how do you write Gregoir?" Flora repeated patiently, plucking the ink-pen neatly from the bann's fingers. "Grongor? Gree-gwaaar?"

Teagan took a deep, steadying breath; forcing the storm-surge of inappropriate emotion back into his gut.

"Shift over on the bench, lamb, I'll check your spellings. I'm not sure about Gregoir, but I'd wager it's not spelt Gree-gwar."

Worn out from such mental exertions, Flora decided to have a short rest. The baby, after shifting restlessly in her belly for an hour, had also deigned to settle down; mother and child taking concurrent naps. Entirely nonchalant about preparing for bed with others present – after all, she was a veteran of communal sleeping quarters – Flora changed back into her striped Theirin-crested pyjamas. Teagan gritted his teeth and directed his eyes to the ceiling; while the Templar kept a carefully neutral expression.

Seagulls made lazy circles around the crumbling towers of Revanloch as the sun eased itself beneath the horizon. Instead of the usual dinner gong, there came a strange succession of noises from somewhere within the monastery's labyrinthine heart. There was a distant echoing crash, followed by a quickly muffled shout. The acoustics of the cloisters meant that the sounds were projected even as far as the guest quarters, rousing Teagan from his musings.

The Mabari at the door – one of the guard-dogs brought down from the palace – let out a low growl of warning as the bann's hand went to his sword-hilt, immediately alert. He crossed the room in six steps, positioning himself at Flora's bedside.

Cullen, who had also heard the noise, drew his sword with a singing of metal as he met the bann's quick glance: yes, I heard it too.

Flora, whose quick nap had accidentally turned into a four hour snooze, woke disorientated, having been disturbed by the bann's footsteps rather than the strange noise. In an instant she took in Teagan's vigilant expression and the Templar's drawn sword, and sat up in alarm.

"Wha-"

In the distance, there came the sound of running footsteps, metal boots against time-worn flagstones. Another shout followed it, ragged and muffled. Flora heard this new set of noises, and frowned in confusion, swinging feet legs out from beneath the furs.

"What's going on?"

"I don't know," replied Teagan tersely, keeping close at her side. "Stay with me."

Flora shot him a slightly bemused look, wandering over to the window and peering down into the courtyard. Her face immediately brightened, spotting a familiar crimson and gold banner leaning against a wall.

"Ooh! Alistair is here," she said, pleased. "I wonder why he hasn't come up? Maybe he's on his way."

Another distant shout echoed through the corridors of the monastery. Teagan glanced at Cullen, and the Templar gave a brief nod; positioning himself before the door.

"I'm hungry," continued Flora obviously, giving her swollen belly an absent-minded rub. "Did I miss dinner? Do you think there'll be anything left? That's two meals I've missed today."
Nobody made any reply, and she scowled over her shoulder, one palm spread over the window pane.

There suddenly came a loud, staccato rap on the door, so loud and unexpected that it startled each occupant of the room. The bann let out a muffled blasphemy under his breath, drawing his own sword as he shot a quick glance at Cullen. The Mabari snarled, low and threatening.

"Call off the dog," came a terse, familiar snap from the other side of the wood. "The danger is over."

It was the Templar Knight-Commander, and Cullen hastened to open the door. The man strode in, seemingly aged a decade, shock and rage engraved into the lines of his greying face.

"What's happened, man?" Teagan demanded, not quite ready to sheathe his blade.

The Knight-Commander glanced at Flora, who now looked thoroughly confused.

"My lady," he said, heavily. "The king is asking for you."

From the tone of the man's voice, it was clear that Alistair was not asking for, but demanding that his mistress be brought to him.

Unable to locate her boots, Flora ended up sliding her feet into a pair of Leliana's silk slippers; which were too large and required the curling of toes to keep in place.

They followed the Knight-Commander down a series of passageways, past whispering initiates and restless guards. All of Revanloch seemed to be aware that something strange had transpired, that something was not quite right. Teagan, sweat beading on his brow, kept so close to Flora's side that he was almost treading on her heels.

Soon, it became clear that they were heading towards Revanloch's main Chantry. Clumps of grim-faced Royal Guard shifted their pikes from hand to hand as Flora approached; a tacit acknowledgement of their future queen.

There was a crowd gathered before the great doors that led into the Chantry. It was made up mainly of Templars and Royal Guardsmen, yet there were a not-insignificant number of soldiers clad in Highever livery also present. It was a Cousland retainer who first spotted Flora's approach, and gave a sharp bark of instruction.

"Make way for the lady Florence!"

The crowd parted before them, quiet and sombre.

Beyond the great doors, Revanloch's Chantry appeared the same as it had always done; a vast, cavernous space lined with a forest of ancient pillars. The stained glass windows and plethora of candles made little headway against the incense-scented shadow, yet there was a distant side-chapel that blazed with the brightness of torchlight.

It was towards this illuminated enclave that the Knight-Commander headed, his expression becoming more strained by the minute. A cluster of senior officers were gathered within the small chapel, huddled around a statue of Maferath.

The tallest man in the group turned around, hair gleaming burnished gold in the reflected light. Yet Alistair's face was pale and sickly beneath the summer tan, twin wolves of fear and anger fighting in his expression. A fine line worked its way across his forehead, and he appeared to have aged several years since Flora had last seen him.
The moment the king set eyes on her, a vast and indescribable relief passed over his face. Abandoning his terse conversation with a senior officer, Alistair strode forward with arms outstretched.

"Darling."

Flora, who still had no idea what was going on, went dutifully into her best friend's embrace, letting Alistair fold her tightly against his chest. She could feel the reverberation of his racing heart, thunderous within his ribcage.

"Alistair-"

"Thank the Maker."

"What's going on?"

"Just let me hold you for a second, Flo, I can't think straight-"

Flora gave up on extracting any sense from Alistair, clutching a fold of his tunic and letting him calm himself against her body. One of Alistair's hands had slid down to cradle the swell of their child, cupping it with a protective palm.

Out of the corner of her eye, Flora saw Teagan make his way through the crowd, then seemingly disappear into the ground. After a moment, she realised that a bronze grill set into the tiles had been moved to one side, revealing a flight of mildewed stone steps. They appeared to descend into a shadowed recess beneath the chapel, from which more angry and incredulous voices were rising.

Flora thought that she recognised one particular murmur; and indeed moments later Fergus Cousland emerged from the hidden stairway, his expression very grim.

"Fergus," she breathed, then repeated his name a little louder, squirming away from Alistair's arms. "Fergus! What's happened?"

Fergus let out a low hiss of warning directed towards the Cousland retainers gathered about them, shaking his head quickly from side to side.

"Don't let my sister go down there and see it," he instructed, voice taut. "It won't be good for the babe."

Flora, who was now beginning to grow a little irate, thrust Alistair's arms away and strode towards her brother; trusting in the haughty arrogance of her face to convey an authority that her striped pyjamas lacked. The Cousland soldiers, caught between loyalty to the teyrn and reluctance to stand in the Hero of Ferelden's path, looked mildly terrified. Ultimately they gave way, letting Flora confront her brother.

"Who's down there?" she asked, bluntly. "What's down there?"

Fergus' eyes slid over her shoulder to Alistair, knowing that the king was the only one who Flora would ultimately listen to; not because of the crown, but because he was her best friend and former brother-warden.

"Alistair, the shock won't be good for the child," the teyrn repeated, hearing muffled conversation from below. "You ought not let her-"

"Flo will be fine," Alistair said heavily, knowing his lover better than any other man present. "She
can handle it, she's seen far worse. Sweetheart, let me help you on the steps."

This was in response to Flora, who had dodged Fergus' restraining arm and was striding determinedly towards the stairs. Alistair shot forward with remarkable speed for a man his size, reaching out to grip Flora's elbow as she peered down the treacherous flight.

"Lo, let me go first."

The steps were basalt and crumbling from age; there were at least a dozen of them, descending to a candlelit hollow beneath the Chantry tiles. Alistair led the way, keeping a tight grip on his best friend's arm as she navigated the treacherous stairwell. Flora slid one hand along the wall, the stone slick with mildew beneath her palm.

At the bottom lay a subterranean crypt that was both ancient and decrepit. The curved stone ceiling was cracked, the altar long since crumbled away into fragments. Spiders had decorated the low vaulted stonework with veils of webbing; these too were coated in a thin, dusty film. Candles – Flora recognised them as ones stolen from the Chantry above – littered the floor, their wax melting into soft pools on the broken tiles.

Yet it was not towards the scattered bones or ancient altar that Flora's eye was drawn, but to the figure hanging from a rusting iron hook bolted at the highest point in the curved stone ceiling. Thomas Howe, slack and grey, rotated slowly as he dangled by the neck; his expression contorted. Mottled black and blue bruising was visible on the skin beneath the taut ligature.

Flora had seen a hanged apprentice in the first month of arriving at the Circle (and her first drowning at the age of seven); dead men held no fear for her, especially after the events of the past year. Still, she felt a pang of sadness as she gazed upon the young man's bulging-eyed face, since Thomas Howe had only been her age.

Zevran and Leliana framed the scene, he leaning against the wall and cleaning a blade, and she in the process of removing something from her hooded cloak. It appeared to be some sort of padding, and to Flora's surprise, she spotted her own missing boots on the bard's feet.

"Thomas Howe was here," Flora breathed, astounded. "All along. Are you alright?"

Casting a wary glance at the hanging man, she sidled past and went to her companions; her eyes sweeping over them to ensure that they were not hurt.

"We're fine, ma crevette," Leliana replied, her face flushed with pleasure at a job well done. "Zevran, perhaps you would like to recant the story? This is the fruition of your scheming, after all."

The elf nodded, unable to stop his lip curling in contempt as he eyed the rotating corpse.

"I wanted to ascertain whether my suspicions – and the rumours from my contacts - were correct, about the Howe being present within Revanloch. When he first attacked you, carina, it was from within this Chantry; so it was here that Leliana and I put our plan into motion. With the aid of your Templars, of course."

Zevran made a gesture, and Flora turned to see Chanter Devotia and Knight-Captain Gannorn flanking the stairwell, their expressions equally neutral.

"Our lovely bard took your boots, borrowed your mourning garb and your voice, and made a loud display of grief outside the Chantry; sending the Templars away so that she could pray for her departed spirits alone. Providing the perfect bait for our would-be assassin."
Flora turned to Leliana, noticing the discarded cushion that the bard had used to emulate a swollen stomach.

"You pretended to be me?!” she breathed, astounded. They both had red hair, but in all other aspects, the tall and graceful bard was Flora’s physical opposite.

Leliana pulled the dark veil of mourning back over her face and somehow appeared to *shrink*, carrying herself in such a way that she seemed several inches shorter.

"*Leave me in peace!*“ she demanded throatily, in a near-perfect emulation of Flora’s flat northern tones. "*I want to say a prayer for my spirits without you both glaring at me!*"

The inflection, speech pattern and mannerisms were flawless; Flora’s jaw dropped in shock.

"Leliana, you sound just like a Herring girl," she said after a moment, her eyes wide and round. "You're so clever."

The bard smiled demurely, pushing back the veil and reclaiming her full height.

"Well, the Howe was fooled well enough," she murmured, eyes lifting towards the shadowed ceiling. "He made his move in the Chantry, 'forcing' me down here at knife-point. Very quickly, it became clear that I was not his intended prey."

Flora’s mouth twisted in dismay and she went over to her companion, reaching out to clutch Leliana’s slender, lace-gloved fingers.

"That was so dangerous for you," she bemoaned, clasping Leliana’s hand tightly and bringing it to her chest. "You could’ve been hurt."

Meanwhile, Alistair had crossed to stand beside Zevran; his face still contorted with rage and relief. The elf glanced sideways to confirm that Flora was still preoccupied with Leliana, then lowered his voice.

"I offered him a choice of farewell: the noose or the knife," Zevran murmured, dark irises settling once more on Howe’s dangling figure. "Just as you requested, mi rey. No possibility of carina feeling sorry for him and begging for his life."

Alistair gave a taut nod, his green-flecked hazel eyes lacking even the slightest shred of remorse.

"I know he was young – well, my age – but he threw a blade at Lo. No mercy for anybody who tries to harm her, ever."

"I agree, Alistair. And, see- "

The elf made a gesture towards the back of the crypt, just as Flora withdrew anxiously from Leliana.

They turned as one to see a strange tangle of metal and leather near the crumbling wall; the torchlight reflecting off stained chains and blunt-edged blades.

Fergus, avoiding a half-broken skull lying on the dusty floor, approached the pile as though in a dream. Reaching down, he lifted a pair of rusting manacles, a metal gag attached by a corroded chain. Other various instruments lay haphazardly amidst the crumbling fragments of brick; a pair of pliers, a blade with jagged teeth, a spiked cuff for the neck.

"Maker’s Breath," the teyrn muttered, contempt infusing the words. "The sick little bastard. These
are torture devices."

Flora flinched as Alistair inhaled unsteadily beside her, the king's pupils shrinking to small dots of unadulterated hatred. A heartbeat later, he had wrenched a pike from a nearby guardsman, striding across the dusty tiles towards the manifestation of Howe's sadistic urges. Spurred by a volatile, barely controlled rage he used the blunt wooden end of the pike to systematically break manacles and torture devices alike into fragments of jagged metal. This was no small feat; but Alistair's strength was fuelled by unadulterated fury. He laid into the twisted iron as though he were beating in the skull of a Howe – father or son – fragments of stone skidding outwards as the tiles splintered under the brutal battering.

Meanwhile, Flora looked down at her stomach, feeling a lump of sadness rise painfully through her throat.

*Little creature: can you feel pain in there? I don't think you would have survived what Thomas Howe had planned for me.*

The thought of the unborn child experiencing even the slightest discomfort was so distressing that tears threatened to spill over her cheeks. Flora took a deep breath, willing herself to calm down. She envisioned her Herring-dad's familiar scowl; his furrowed grimace of disapproval at such a rampart display of emotion.

*Calm down. Alistair needs you to be calm; or he'll get even angrier.*

*You're a northerner. You're the rock against which the ocean breaks itself.*

She took another steadying breath, envisioning the soft, grey whisper of waves creeping over shingle-ridged sand. Walking past the hanging corpse without looking at it, she crossed to the back of the crypt; where her former brother-warden was losing himself in a fit of brutal, helpless rage.

"Alistair," Flora said, and her quiet, flat intonation was enough to break through the muddied crimson haze of Alistair's fury.

He turned with the guard's pike still gripped in his fists, eyes wide and staring. Flora stepped forward, kicking the remains of a manacle across the dusty tile, and reached up to touch his face.

*Calm down, her eyes warned him, torchlight catching on the gold flick embedded within the pale iris. Brother-warden."

"Flora," the king said, raw and despairing. "He wanted to torture you. I... I could tear him apart with my teeth, like a Mabari."

"Alistair."

"Look at all this stuff, Flora! He wanted to hurt you – to punish you. Maker's Breath!"

"It's pointless to get angry about things you can't change," she replied, with Herring-instilled practicality. "Think about what you can do stop such things happening in the future. It's more productive."

Alistair deflated, anger draining out of him like a spilt wine glass as he saw the logic behind her argument. He let the pike drop from his hand as though it had scalded him; the wooden length clattering onto the fractured tiles. Flora gazed hopefully up at him and he reached out to cradle her cheeks in his hands, framing her face with his cupped fingers.
"My northern star," he said at last, the words emerging soft and rueful. "Right, then."

The king turned to the others crowded within the crypt, his face filled with grim purpose.

"I want the body cut into four pieces and hung over each entrance to the city," he said, referencing the standard punishment for traitors. "And Fergus, you've a Mabari bitch in pup?"

"Aye," replied the teyrn, with a nod. "Saela. She's from the same litter as Jethro, very good blood. Due in a month or so, according to the kennel-master."

"I want two of the pups – the strongest two – for Flo. To guard her, and the babe."

"I think that sounds very good," replied Fergus, relief infusing the words. "I was saying to Finn the other day; if only my father had had more hounds at Highever, Howe's treachery might have been averted."

Alistair exhaled unsteadily, his hand stretching blindly behind him. Flora's fingers wrapped themselves dutifully in his, and the king drew his mistress to stand close at his side.

"And Zev, Leliana, anything that you want, you'll have it," he said, quietly. "Anything within my power to give. I can't thank you enough for what you've done."

Both bard and Crow immediately opened their mouths to protest, but Alistair shook his head to interrupt their rejection.

"Think about it," he instructed, firmly. "Let me know."

"Aye," added Fergus, stepping forward to pass a palm over his little sister's head. "I'm a man of great resources, too. I'm sure that between us, we can come up with a suitable reward."

"Your Lordship," murmured Zevran, a faint teasing tone to his reply. "We once swore that we would protect our Warden from all who wished to harm her. That oath did not end when the Blight did."

Flora, inexplicably touched, extracted her fingers from Alistair's and stepped forward; avoiding the Cousland retainers as they busied themselves retrieving the dangling corpse. She embraced both of her companions in turn, not quite sure how else to express her gratitude.

That night, Alistair took far longer than normal to part from his mistress; unable to remove images of rusted manacles and other cruel devices from his mind. He stood in Revanloch's outer courtyard, mindless of the pouring drizzle, his arms wrapped around Flora's waist as he gazed down at her in the torchlight. She stared back up at him, the fire moving across her face like the setting of the sun; hair hanging in damp tendrils before her ears.

"I love you," he told her for the third time in a half-hour; for the thousandth time in six months; earnest as when he had first confessed it in the bedchamber at Redcliffe Castle. "I love you more than I can say. Maker, I can't wait for this month to be over."

Flora smiled up at him, grateful that some of the tension had drained from her brother-warden's furrowed brow. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the remains of Thomas Howe being brought out wrapped in undignified hessian sacking; a cart waiting in readiness to transport the corpse to the city.
Despite everything that had transpired, Flora felt a pang of sympathy for a young man who had been born into a cruel family through no fault of his own; who had been warped by the twisted predilections of his father, and consumed by a subsequent need for revenge.

_I hope you find some peace in the Fade_, she thought, swallowing her sorrow so that Alistair did not see it. _I hope the spirits are kind to you._

Turning her gaze from the hessian sacking as it was dumped unceremoniously in the back of the cart, Flora stood on her toes to kiss her best friend on the mouth.

"I'll see you tomorrow," she said, as Fergus waited patiently on horseback nearby. "I love you too."

Alistair bowed his head to close the ten inch difference in height between them, kissing her on the nose, both cheeks and mouth in rapid succession; clearly reluctant to leave.

"Alistair, any much longer and it's going to be your birthday," Fergus called down impatiently from the saddle. "Justinian will end, and you'll still be attached to my sister's face."

"Is it my birthday soon, too?" asked Flora, with vague curiosity.

"Aye, Floss," replied Fergus, smiling at her. "The day after. First of Solace. Are you looking forward to it?"

"As much as any other day," said Flora, honestly. She had never celebrated her birthday, and had only a vague understanding of when in the year it fell. Nobody in Herring put much stock in the day they were born; and they certainly did not expect anyone else to recognise the occasion.

Fergus glanced at Alistair, who had a slightly odd expression on his face.

"Well, you'll be turning two decades of age, Lo," the king said, carefully not looking directly at her. "It's a… special moment. It needs to be properly commemorated."

"I'm not going to be 'two decades', whatever that means," Flora corrected, shooting him a puzzled look. "I'll be _two-ty._ One up from nineteen."

As she held up a finger to illustrate Alistair bit back a laugh, kissing her on the mouth to hide the grin.

"That's right, darling. My mistake."

Chapter End Notes

OOC Author: Classic Flora at the end there, lol. Maths is not her strong suit! Or writing, or reading, haha.

I wanted to have a bit of Leliana being a badass in this character – and also show off her bard/rogue-y type skills! With the masquerading as Flora in her mourning gear (including the veil), to lure Thomas Howe into showing himself.

The chopping the traitor into bits and hanging them at the city entrances sounds messed
up, but was a legit tactic used in Medieval times to dissuade criminals! But I also wanted to show a bit of hardened Alistair. Flora still has some residual guilt after blowing up Rendon Howe's head (oops), so she would have shown some compassion towards his son.
Three days later, the morning of Flora's celebratory feast arrived. It was an unusually fine Fereldan summer day, the sky a clear and uninterrupted swathe of duck-egg blue, blurring into an Amaranthine ocean unruffled by breeze.

Within Denerim, the people chattered amongst themselves excitedly; the gossip on the streets being that the Lady Cousland was returning – albeit temporarily – to the city. Royal Guardsmen were bribed to leak details of her route up to the palace; which gate would be used, and whether she would be travelling on roadways or taking a barge. Fortunately, Theirin soldiers were loyal – and wary of the king's reprisal - and they betrayed no details of the lady's chosen course.

Still, nothing could dampen the spirit of excitement within the city – all districts rustled with a buzz of gleeful gossip, save for the docks. This part of the city still housed near two hundred refugees, those who not yet managed to scrape together the coin for passage out of Ferelden. These unfortunate travellers huddled in grubby clusters beneath the tiles of an abandoned fish market, hungry and forlorn; many of them from Gwaren, Lothering, and Honnleath.

Revanloch, hunched on its rocky promontory, managed to somehow defy the brilliant sunshine and remain as dour and sombre as ever. The late-Justinian warmth could not penetrate the crumbling stone walls, and made little headway within the shadowed courtyards.

Up in the guest chamber, Flora had been awake for several hours in anticipation. She was perched on the edge of the bed, wincing as Leliana wove a half-dozen slender braids within her heavy mass of hair. The bard was determined to emphasise Flora's Alamarri heritage; knowing that her colouring of pale skin, watercolour grey eyes and oxblood hair harkened back to these first ancient rulers of Ferelden.

"Ow! Ouch."

"If you'd brush your hair and braid it in the evening, like I tell you, it wouldn't work itself into such a bird's nest by morning!" retorted the bard, whose own strawberry blonde locks were already neatly coiffed. "Anyway, have you changed your mind about the robe?"

"No!"

Flora, having successfully negotiated her way into her usual navy tunic and boots, now watched Leliana put the final touches on her makeup. The bard had managed to perfect the art of enhancing her features so subtly that it was impossible to tell that cosmetics had even been applied. The lay sister tsked at herself in the mirror, licking her fingers to mute some of the rouge decorating her cheeks.

"Too much maquillage for this outfit," she murmured absent-mindedly, smoothing a hand over her damask Chantry robes.

"Mack-a-what?"

"Cosmetics," replied Leliana, taking one final glance in the mirror. "Are you ready, ma petite? Ugh, are you wearing those boots? I despair!"
Flora finished tightening the leather strap around her knee, feeling the usual reflexive defensiveness that rose whenever Leliana criticised her footwear.

"These boots have been with me since Ostagar! They've been in the Deep Roads, the Brecilian Forest… I killed the Archdemon in these boots!"

"All the more reason to throw them out," retorted Leliana, immediately. "They're probably covered in all sorts of-"

"Lady Cousland?"

A servant clad in a Chantry tabard made a demure entrance, head bowed.

"Oh, is the escort from the Palace here?" Leliana asked, glancing around for her silken purse. "Tell them we'll just be a moment. They're early. Is Bann Teagan with them?"

The Chantry servant bowed once more, while simultaneously shaking his head.

"No, lay-sister. The Lady Cousland has a guest, they're waiting downstairs."

Flora frowned, she was not expecting anyone in particular. Leliana's face settled into a more prominent scowl, her powdered nostrils flaring.

"They've picked a poor day to visit," the bard grumbled. "We need to depart for the feast; they'll either have to accompany us, or wait here until we return. Who is it?"

The servant swallowed, and Flora noticed beads of sweat breaking out on his forehead.

"An Orlesian, by the name of G-Gasper Deshallyon."

"Gasper Deshallyon?"

"Gasp... Gaspard Deshallon..."

Leliana inhaled sharply, her fingers fluttering towards her mouth.


"He's a long way from Val Royeaux," Flora said, unimpressed by a string of titles. "Do you think he's lost?"

Leliana shook her head slowly, finely plucked eyebrows lodged within her auburn hairline.

"Non."

"Then why is he here?"

"I believe he has a purpose, though I know not what it could be," the bard murmured. "Still, there is only one way to find out. Are you ready for your first diplomatic exchange with the Valmonts, ma crevette?"

Flora grunted, grateful for the natural haughtiness of her fine-boned features; solemn and enigmatic as any Orlesian mask.

"Not really."
Before they left the room, Leliana slid one of her narrowest blades up her sleeve, expression carefully blank. Flora gaped, eyes expanding like saucers.

"Do you think he's dangerous?"

"Not dangerous, exactly," replied the bard, summoning a bright and detached smile. "But ruthless – oui. Very much so."

The Grand Duc was waiting downstairs within the Knight-Commander's office. The Knight-Commander himself had been relegated to the mildewed corridor, twitching and unhappy. The entrance to the office was flanked with Orlesian guards, clad in the argent and blue livery of the Valmonts. Instead of the closed-face helms worn by the Theirin Royal Guardsmen, these soldiers had their faces obscured by ornate silver masks. Their halberds were decorated with finely worked filigree, though the blade's razor-sharp edge proved it a weapon well enough.

As Flora and Leliana entered the room, Gaspard de Chalons was inspecting a moth-eared tapestry depicting Andraste and her disciples. Hearing the door open, he turned on a heel with militaristic swiftness; crossing the room in a handful of strides.

"My lady Cousland," he said, bowing down with a practised flourish. "It is a privilege and an honour to meet you."

He gripped her fingers and kissed them in typical Orlesian manner; Flora took advantage of this brief interlude to dart her eyes quickly over this mysterious new arrival. The duc was a stocky, powerfully built man who appeared to be nearing his sixth decade, greying hair cropped close enough to his head to see the pink skin below. He was regally clad in crimson and ochre, and small, clever green eyes were framed by a silvered mask.

Flora continued to gaze at the duc thoughtfully as he straightened, not entirely sure what to say. The Orlesian noble graciously pulled out a chair for her to sit, taking a seat on the opposite side of the desk. Leliana elected to remain standing; made subtle by the demure camouflage of a Chantry sister.

"May I first pass on our gratitude to the nation of Ferelden for the defeat of the Fifth Blight," Gaspard said quietly, peeling off his leather travel gloves one finger at a time.

Flora nodded slowly, her pale eyes meeting the glass-green irises of the duc. He was staring at her with unblinking intensity, as though trying to penetrate the ambiguous mask of her haughty features in order to perceive the girl underneath. Flora, who had once looked the Archdemon in its scaled, hooded eye, was unimpressed.

"Is he trying to intimidate me?"

There came no response, and Flora gave an inward sigh; wondering if she would ever get used to the silence that now followed her thoughts.

Well, I think he is trying to intimidate me. What is it with these Orlesians?

On getting no reply from Flora save from a vacant stare; Gaspard continued, a small smile pulling at the corner of his mouth.

"Orlais would have stood ready to assist… if assistance had been requested."

"Ferelden managed well enough alone," said Flora blandly, fixing her pale, Cousland eyes on him.

Gaspard nodded, settling back in the chair and touching his fingertips together.
"Oui, especially considering that your nation is not exactly renowned within Thedas for its military prowess."

Flora felt outrage flare within her stomach; with effort, she kept it from her face.

"I'm surprised that Orlais doesn't remember the strength of our army," she replied, innocently. "How many decades has it been since the rebels ousted you from Ferelden?"

Gaspard's grey eyebrows rose from behind his mask, his fingers steepling together.

"Forgive me, my lady," he countered, in arch tones. "Were you even alive during the Orlesian occupation, or the Fereldan war of independence? You do seem very… young."

"You're right," replied Flora, with the impudence of any adolescent girl. "I'm not old enough to remember a time when Orlais was a great military power. I'll have to check my history books later."

Leliana had to bite back a smile, inordinately proud of her young charge. The grand duc looked astounded for a moment, and then let out a gruff bark of laughter, looking a fraction friendlier.

"My lady, I have a gift I wish to formally present to you, on behalf of the Empress and I."

Gaspard barked out an instruction in his native tongue, and two livery-clad retainers came struggling in; clutching something large and covered in a silk cloth. With mutual grunts of exertion, they deposited the item onto the desk, bowing low before making their exit.

The grand duc rose to his feet, taking hold of the navy satin and pulling it free with a triumphal gesture. A great golden fish rose up from a sculpted wave; each fin and scale carved with exceptional care. Flora stared at it, utterly nonplussed.

"It is, ah, how do you say it? Un hareng."

"A herring," she translated, having recognised the shape of the fin.

"Oui. The story of your… unusual upbringing has been a source of much fascination in the salons of Val Royeaux."

The duc eyed her from behind the ornate mask, his curiosity no less assuaged by meeting the Hero of Ferelden in person. Florence Cousland gave nothing away, her face as ambiguous and fine-featured as any Orlesian mask.

"Hm," Flora said at last, reaching out to run her finger over the gilded scales. "I'm not sure how good a swimmer this fish would be. But thank you for this imaginative present."

Gaspard made no reply; merely curled his lips upwards at her beneath the mask.

Leliana took advantage of the pause to clear her throat delicately. When she spoke, the Orlesian accent had been smoothed away to near-nothingness, her tongue shaping words like a Fereldan.

"Lady Florence, the feast will be starting soon. We ought to depart."

"Please," interrupted the duc, inclining his head politely. "Allow me to escort you to Denerim, my lady. I have a carriage and horse waiting in the courtyard."

In a split second, Flora weighed up the benefits and drawbacks to accepting the Orlesian's offer.

He's not going to hurt me. It'd start a war.
What's a carriage, anyway? Some sort of fancy cart?

If I say no, it'll look like I'm afraid.

Leliana will be with me, I'll be fine.

"Thank you," she said at last, unable to stop herself from casting a final, dubious glance at the golden fish statuette.

As it happened, a carriage turned out to be more than just a fancy cart. A sweating coachman held open the gilded door, as Flora eyed the ornately worked metal with increasing wariness. Leliana clambered in beside her, with a soft purr of appreciation at the velvet furnishings.

"I'm not sure carriages have caught on yet in Ferelden," the duc commented idly, settling back against the cushions as Flora sat rigidly opposite, trying hard not to let her apprehension show on her face. "Does your king still ride around on horseback?"

"Yes," Flora replied, summoning some spirit into her reply. "The king of Ferelden is loved by his people and can ride freely among them. From what I've heard, it's no surprise that some Orlesian nobles require a layer of protection between them and their subjects."

The duc snorted once more, eyeing her with increasing appreciation as the carriage set off.

"You are… not what I expected, Florence Cousland. That child is the king's, yes?"

Flora nodded, already deciding that she hated this new form of transport. They went over a large pothole and the entire carriage rattled, the occupants within jolting up and down. Grimly, Flora anchored herself to the velvet bench with her fingertips, offering a silent apology to the little creature within her belly.

"I see," replied Gaspard, seeming to retreat into his own thoughts. "Interesting."

The journey took longer than it would have done on horseback, due to the need to navigate the crumbling roadways and clifftop path. The horses made a wilful effort, sweat breaking out on their flanks as they heaved the carriage down the final long incline towards the city walls.

To one side, the Alamarri plains stretched out to the west of the city, the river estuary gleaming in the sunlight as it snaked leisurely towards the Bannorn hills. The land had been irrevocably scarred by the battle that had taken place there a month prior; only a few scant patches of grass remained amidst a sea of mud and earth. The remains of the dwarven trenches and gullies could still be seen, along with the tangled wreckage of field weaponry too broken for redemption.

Flora did not want to look at the plains, memories of the battle too raw and sharp still for palatable recall. Gaspard, conversely, appeared fascinated by them; shifting position along the velvet bench to gain a better view.

Meanwhile Leliana hummed softly to herself, peering out of the window and fiddling with the lacy edge of her glove. By some miracle – or a set of well-honed abdominal muscles – she barely seemed to register the uneven surface; remaining perfectly serene and stable as the carriage lurched about her.

"It appears that Ferelden's roadways are in need of some maintenance," offered the grand duc at last, relying on his muscled bulk to keep him steady on the cushions. "You may wish to whisper
something on the matter to your king, my lady."

Flora, who was jammed into one corner of the bench in an attempt to wedge herself in place, managed to summon up a retort.

"My king is committed to rebuilding the nation after the Blight," she replied, feeling the little creature nudge irritably against her kidney. "Filling in holes in the roads is not a great priority for him at the moment."

Gaspard opened his mouth to respond, but was interrupted by the sound of approaching hoof-steps, and the shouts of men. Leliana peered out of the carriage window, her sky-blue eyes lighting up like Dalish lanterns.

"It's Bann Teagan and the escort. Stop the carriage!"

The bard reached out to open the carriage door as the bann reined his horse expertly to a halt alongside them.

Teagan's expression was a mixture of raw suspicion and naked alarm; he had clearly identified the Valmont coat of arms painted on the side of the carriage. Surprise was quickly added to the blend as his gaze settled on Flora, rigid and unhappy in one corner. He stared at her, and she made a tiny grimace back at him.

"Grand-Duc," the bann said, after a short pause. "You're aware that you've arrived a fortnight early for the coronation?"

"I am aware, bann," replied Gaspard, equally coolly. "I have some personal business with the new teyrn of Highever."

Teagan made a quick gesture inside the carriage, his Guerrin eyes hawklike in their unblinking focus.

"This is not the teyrn of Highever," he stated, evenly. "And your decision to visit the teyrn's sister at Revanloch is in deliberate defiance of protocol. She is not of voting age; there ought to have been elders present."

The grand duc smiled, though his eyes behind the mask stayed sharp and thoughtful.

"My apologies," he murmured, after a moment. "Although I do not believe that the lady had any need for elders. She defied me as belligerently as any Landsmeet veteran."

Teagan flashed Flora a fleeting smile.

"Still," he continued, voice steady. "I'll take the Lady Cousland to the city from here, grand-duc. Lay-sister Leliana, would you like to accompany us?"

"I'll be fine," a demure Leliana replied in her Fereldan-accented guise, folding her fingers in her lap. "We'll follow you in the carriage."

*And I'll see what I can find out about this man's purpose,* her eyes added, silently.

Teagan gave a slight nod of acknowledgement, then reached out his arms towards the carriage. Flora clambered to her feet, awkwardly stepping over the grand-duc's boots to reach the doorway. The bann leaned over and lifted her onto his saddle, feeling an internal twinge of relief as she settled back against his chest.
"À bientôt, my lady," called the grand-duc out of the window, his mouth curling upwards in an amused smile beneath his mask.

Teagan barked an order to his retainers, and they turned their horses back around towards the city of Denerim. The city walls were now only a few minutes ride away; they were close enough to see the great banners of Theirin hanging crimson and gold against the lofty stonework.

The bann let out a low exhalation, keeping one arm wrapped tightly around Flora's abdomen as they rode slowly towards the western gate.

"I'm sorry that I was late," he said after a moment, removing a strand of her hair that had blown back against his face. "Are you alright, poppet?"

"Mm," replied Flora, letting go of the pommel and trusting in the bann's strong grip to keep her astride the saddle.

"Do you know who that was?"

"… Gosper?"

"*Gaspard de Chalons*, one of the most notorious members of the Orlesian court and ruler of Verchiel." Teagan wrinkled his nose, his distaste for Val Royeaux politics apparent. "Outmanoeuvred to the Sunburst Throne by his cousin Celene, his wife Calienne engineered the death of Celene's mother in a *hunting accident*, then was murdered herself by Celene's father."

Flora twisted in the saddle and gaped up at him. The bann laughed at the expression on her face, shortening the reins expertly as they approached the gate.

"I know, pet. Stuff of stories, isn't it? The Orlesian Court is a snake-pit."

"It sounds horrible," replied Flora, bluntly. "I can't believe someone as lovely as Leliana came out of all that. Why would he want to see me?"

Teagan let out a low, ambiguous grunt, his grip tightening a fraction around her waist.

"Well," he said, softly. "You're a valuable political pawn now, Flora. A Cousland girl, Hero of Ferelden, and carrying a royal child."

_In addition to the incalculable advantage of that face_ the bann thought, but did not add.

"A valuable political *prawn*," replied Flora, remembering his attempts to teach her chess. She smiled to herself, feeling a low rumble of laughter within the bann's chest.

"Indeed. Looking forward to your feast? I hope you didn't break your fast too extensively this morning."

"Oh, I ate a *ton* earlier. But I've always got room for more," Flora replied, blithely. "I think I must have two stomachs, like a starfish. You know, a starfish isn't actually a fish? It's part of the mollusc family."
OOC Author Note: I always headcanon Alamarri culture as being based on the Celts, since they’re meant to be the tribal ancestors of Ferelden’s greatest families. So I envisioned an Alamarri hairstyle to be very Celtic, lots of little braids and woven bits!

I like this chapter because Flora is inadvertently showing her capability to be Queen – Ferelden needs leaders who can be defiant and independent in the face of Orlais. But I think it’s important to note that her ability to engage in political wordplay with Gaspard isn’t a product of her Cousland blood, but her Herring childhood – she was raised in a community of grim-faced fishermen, who feared the sea and little else. Her fisher-father, Pel, wouldn’t have taken any shit from an Orlesian duke; and neither will Flora, lol.

Orlais is definitely still a great military power, haha, Flora is just being obstinate! I think Gaspard appreciates the verbal sparring, though. Imagine her face when she sees the giant gold fish, though! Part of her is like OMG GIANT METAL FISH, and part of her is like what’s the point?! Also, she is Bad at Orlesian names... GOSPER.
As Teagan and Flora approached the city gates, a shout went up on the walls. Flora blinked in astonishment as a swarm of soldiers popped up on the ramparts like herons, swords raised in greeting. More armoured men came streaming out from beneath the portcullis, forming a guard of honour at either side of the road.

"What's going on?" Flora asked, peering over her shoulder. "Is this for Gosper?"

"No, petal."

Lady Cousland! the cry echoed down from the city walls. Lady Cousland!

Hearing the outcry of the guards, it was now the turn of the civilians to flock down towards the gate. Children scampered onto the city walls, clinging precariously to the ramparts as they waved frantically at the approaching riders. In mere minutes, a crowd of almost two hundred had formed to greet the lady Cousland as she returned to Denerim for the first time in three weeks. They knew that she had arrived for her celebratory feast, and wanted to gain a glimpse before she vanished behind the fortress-like walls of the Royal Palace.

For a fleeting moment, Flora was genuinely astounded. Safely enclosed within Revanloch's walls, the Templar initiates under strict instruction not to harass her; it had become easy to ignore her new prominence within Ferelden society. To be so suddenly reminded of her own fame was somewhat disorientating.

Lady Cousland! Lady Cousland!

Still, Flora had been the centre of attention before. She summoned a memory from when she had been Warden-Commander - inspecting the troops on the Alamarri plains, with the heat of ten thousand curious stares resting between her shoulder blades.

Teagan felt her stiffen, pushing herself up on the saddle to gain a few extra inches of height.

At least, Flora thought grimly to herself, sweeping her cool Cousland stare across the assembled crowds. They don't expect me to smile and wave. They know I always look sulky.

Don't look at the cage above the gate; it's got a bit of Thomas Howe in it.

She lifted her chin to acknowledge the cries and hails, hearing the excited murmurs reach a frenzy as her swollen stomach came into full view of the crowds.

"The taverns are taking bets on when the royal baby is due," Teagan murmured in her ear, clearly amused. "A great deal of coin is wagered on the workings of your belly."

"What are the odds?" breathed Flora, genuinely curious. A daring youth darted forwards, tucking a flower into Teagan's stirrup before being chased away by a guard.

"Fourth week of Kingsway is the most popular bet, last I checked," Teagan replied with a chuckle, betraying his own vested interest. "But there's an increasing number who believe it'll be the middle of Harvestmere. First children are often late, or so I've been told. Not exactly my area of expertise."
Teagan, the confirmed bachelor, gave a wry shrug.

"Me either," said Flora, bestowing a smile on a small child who was running alongside their horse and squeaking with excitement.

"Soon as you're back in the palace – next week, aye – we'll get the midwife in again."

They had reached the largest bridge, where the main roadway cut a great east-west swathe through the city. Teagan made to turn the horse's head westwards, towards the noble district and royal palace; then Flora reached out to rest her fingers on the back of his hand.

"Not that way," she said, conspiratorially. "That way."

"East?"

"Mm."

Meanwhile, up in the Royal Palace, Alistair had finally acquiesced to some assistance with dressing. He was so distracted by the multitude of events in the upcoming fortnight – Flora's feast, their birthdays, meetings with the trade guilds, the coronation – that he had fastened his tunic incorrectly three times in a row.

Eventually, he let out a frustrated bark for help. The young groom, who had been waiting for this moment for months, scuttled in from the Royal corridor with head bowed decorously to hide the beam of delight. Alistair, a little self-conscious, stood rigid in place as he was laced and buttoned into the garb of a Fereldan king.

Running a finger over the neatly trimmed hair across his jaw – Alistair reckoned that the short beard added at least five years to his age – he glanced around for the crown. Guilluame, the Royal Steward who had served the Theirins for two generations, advanced with the spiked golden band in its protective case.

"Are you coming down to the feast, Will?" Alistair asked, adjusting the position of the band on his head and glancing briefly in the mirror. "The head cook has been back and forth to Revanloch at least three times. I'm glad that Flo has been so enthusiastic about organising it."

"It should be a memorable occasion, Your Majesty," murmured Guilluame decorously in response, knowing far more than he was letting on. "Speaking of the lady Florence."

Alistair grimaced to himself as they headed down the Royal corridor together, making their way towards the great hall where banquets were customarily held.

"I know what you're going to ask."

"Majesty?"

Alistair put on a rather poor attempt at a Nevarran accent, in an effort to emulate Guilluame's distinctive intonation.

"Your Majesty. Does the lady Florence actually know about her upcoming nuptials?" Well, the answer is, no. No, she does not. She has no idea, and the dressmakers' guild keeps nagging me about getting her measurements for the bridal gown. The standard-makers have already made three dozen
banners with our combined heraldry! And she doesn't know!"

Guilluame blinked, running his fingers through the oiled point of his silver beard.

"I see your dilemma," he said at last, as they passed the hunted halla tapestry at the top of the stairs. "If I may presume to ask – why haven't you asked the lady yet?"

"I don't know," replied Alistair, bleakly. "She was so upset after finding out that her spirits were gone. And then – I suppose I wanted to court her properly. She deserves the best, Will, she deserves the best of everything. I wanted the proposal to be perfect. But now the coronation is – ten days away! – and she doesn't know that we're getting married on the same day."

Alistair visibly slumped, head bowed like a chastised Mabari.

"I just didn't want to overwhelm her," he muttered, glancing up at the stained glass Calenhad window. The sunlight shone through, illuminating his ancestor's face in jewel tones. "It took me months to accept becoming king. Marrying me is more than just a ring, it's a throne."

Guilluame gave a soft grunt of acknowledgement, silvery eyes flashing like fish darting through the water as they approached the main hall.

"The lady Cousland seems to be an adaptable creature," he replied diplomatically, ears pricking as booted footsteps approached from a side corridor. "Ah, here come the others. Excuse me a moment, your majesty."

Sure enough, Finian's high-pitched laughter preceded him around the corner; the young, russet-haired noble appearing particularly piratical in a leather eye-patch.

"I'm going to need all my shirts let out before the coronation," he was saying, with a slight roll of the eyes. "This'll be the fourth banquet this month. Fergus, you're getting a little soft about the belly-"

The teyrn, who was deep in conversation with Leonas, managed to elbow his brother in the ribs without interrupting his sentence.

"Morning, Alistair."

"Morning, uncle," Alistair returned his uncle's greeting as Eamon clapped a hand on his shoulder. "Has Teagan gone to collect Flo?"

The arl of Redcliffe gave a nod, having seen Teagan off with several retainers on horseback earlier that morning.

"Aye, lad. There was a short delay, but he's well on his way. They ought to be here by now."

Alistair beamed, delighted to have his best friend back within the confines of the palace.

"Where is she?" he asked, immediately. "Is she with the others – oh."

The king trailed off as they entered the entrance hall, brow furrowing. The cavernous space was dim and smoky as usual, the fireplaces lit in defiance of the sunlight filtering in through the high windows. Gathered in one corner were several of Flora's companions – Wynne was talking animatedly to Oghren, while Zevran leaned against a hearth and fiddled idly with a blade strapped to his forearm.

"Ha, it's Prince Charming!" Oghren bellowed across the entrance hall, waving a meaty arm in
greeting. "All hail! You know," he said, to a wide-eyed passing servant. "I knew the king when he were just plain Warden Alistair, blue-ballin' over a lass he hadn't even bedded-"

The dwarf let out a cough as Wynne's bony elbow swung with surprising strength into his ribcage.

The senior enchanter advanced across the entrance hall, her eyebrows rising into her silver hairline.

"Dear boy," she murmured, kissing Alistair on the cheek as her shrewd blue gaze searched his face. "The beard suits you. You look the spit of Maric."

Alistair smiled distractedly at her, eyes moving towards Zevran.

"Morning. I thought Flo would be with you?"

"No, mi rey," replied the elf, frowning."I haven't seen her since I last saw you."

There was a brief, puzzled silence. Oghren squinted about the entrance hall, which was deserted save for a handful of servants.

"This feast don't seem very well attended," he said at last, brow furrowing. "Who did she invite?"

Alistair gave a helpless shrug, as Fergus and Finian glanced at one another in similar confusion.

"I don't know. She's been quite vague about the whole thing. Shall we check the great hall?"

A handful of minutes later, and both nobles and companions were staring with mild consternation into a shadowed and entirely empty hall. The hearths were unlit, the long tables deserted; the candelabras hanging in darkness overhead. The hall's only occupant was an old Mabari, greying in the muzzle, snoring beside a cobwebbed suit of armour.

"I don't understand," said Alistair, at last. "I know the feast was definitely happening today – the cooks have been preparing the food since Tuesday. The kitchens have been going all night."

"Could it be taking place outside?" suggested Finian, brushing against a wall tapestry and sneezing at the subsequent expulsion of dust. "In the gardens? It's sunny enough."

They gazed at one another in the shadowed hall, equally perplexed.

Eventually Zevran cleared his throat, the noise echoing up to the rafters overhead.

"My little peach does have quite the ravenous appetite," he said at last, at a loss for any other explanation. "Perhaps she has arrived, descended upon the feast like a horde of locusts, and it is all gone?"

There was a moment of silence as those present considered this possibility.

"I don't think she could eat that much," said Alistair, uncertainly. "I mean, I know she eats a lot, but-
"

"Your Majesty, my lords!"

Guillaume had arrived behind them, looking slightly out of breath; a pink flush illuminating his tawny skin.

"I apologise, King Alistair. I meant to tell you earlier – the lady Cousland's feast is not being held within the palace!"
"She's not here?" Finian repeated, a furrow forming in the centre of his noble brow.

"Where's my wife?" the king chimed in, somewhat plaintively. "My future wife."

"I believe the lady is at her feast," continued the Royal Steward, quietly. "Which is being held down on the docks."

"The docks? With the fishermen?" Fergus asked, confused. "I suppose that makes sense."

"Not with the fishermen."

Wynne corrected the teyrn gently, the corner of her mouth turning upwards in a wry smile.

"With the refugees."

Horses were called for and brought quickly to the gravel forecourt before the great palace gates. The sun bore down on them brilliantly from above; not a single scrap of cloud marring the sky as midday approached.

They made good time through the city, Royal Guardsmen sent in advance to ensure that a path within the crowds was cleared. The people of Denerim, who had come onto the streets to welcome back the lady Cousland, now received further compensation with a glimpse of their popular young king.

*Theirin, Theirin!* the cry went up, and Alistair lifted a distracted hand to acknowledge the hails; preoccupied with thoughts of his former sister-warden.

Despite her grief for the loss of her spirits, the concern over the assassins, the isolation at Revanloch; Flora had not forgotten about the plight of the refugees, whom she and Alistair had seen every day during their residence at the Pearl. There were hundreds of them, from Loghain's ravaged teyrnir of Gwaren, from poor lost Lothering, from Cullen Rutherford's home-town of Honnleath. Their regional accents may have been different; but they all wore the same hollow and hopeless expression, the faces of those who had lost everything.

"We came down here a dozen times," Leonas was saying to Fergus, their horses abreast in the centre of the road. "So the lass could offer her mending services. Even in the days right before the battle."

"Heeling here too-day (free)" murmured Zevran, riding close behind. The elf recalled the clumsily painted sign that Flora had hung up on a bedsheet loaned from the Pearl, standing on a crate and offering her liberal talents to any who required them.

Denerim's docks lay at the eastern edge of the city; consisting of a dozen wooden jetties extending into the muddy green estuary. An eclectic collection of buildings were clustered on the dockside itself; whores' houses, warehouses and fish markets competed for space on the salt-stained boardwalk.

The old fish market – little more than a tiled roof perched upon crumbling stone arches – had been left as temporary shelter for the refugees. When Alistair had last been there, it was a forlorn and desperate place; with families huddled in miserable clumps around the remains of wooden stalls.

Now the sound of sizzling meat and chatter echoed about the stone arches, the hollow space filled with long tables that had been brought down from the palace and quickly assembled. Each surface was crowded with platters and dishes, jugs of ale wedged into any available space; vast cauldrons of
stew and soup were stationed to one side. The head cook at the Royal Palace was directing several of his underlings as they carved meat from a pig precariously balanced on a makeshift spit.

The homeless families were gathered at the tables with plates piled high, speaking with mouths full as they conversed animatedly. Such was the level of chatter that Alistair's arrival was not immediately registered. Only when the Royal Guard flanked the entrance, did the news begin to spread like wildfire.

*The king is here! King Alistair is here!*

Those nearby dropped their forks and scrambled to stand, in mild panic. Alistair held up his hand, shaking his head and raising his voice so that it reverberated through the old market.

"Don't interrupt your meal on my account," he instructed, gesturing for them to remain seated. "We've come to join you."

"Sounds good to me," chimed in Oghren, who had his eye on a nearby pork pie.

So it followed that the most prominent nobles in Ferelden – including the Royal General and the teyrn of Highever - sat down on the benches amidst the common folk and began to gather food onto some hastily provided plates.

Meanwhile Alistair was scanning the old market like a hawk, the green veins in his irises standing out stark against the hazel. After a few moments, he caught sight of a splash of crimson in a far and unobtrusive corner. With a heart throbbing irrationally hard against his ribcage, the king made his way through the tables and free-standing cauldrons.

Flora was standing away from the crowds, deep in conversation with an auburn-headed man whose fingers were twisting nervously in his ragged sleeves. She was listening earnestly to the man's shy muttering, while simultaneously resting a grubby, copper-haired baby on her swollen belly. Teagan was standing close by, leaning against a pillar; bann flashed king a wry smile of greeting as Alistair neared.

"I can't believe haddock season starts so *early* down south," Flora breathed in wonder, shifting the infant expertly to her hip as it wriggled. "Fishing in Gwaren sounds very different. I wonder if the seawater is warmer?"

Alistair stopped abruptly in his tracks, mesmerised by the sight of his mistress with the widower's baby. The rational part of his mind reminded him that Flora had spent ten years in a tiny village; it made sense that she had helped to look after the younger children and was thus comfortable in their company.

Yet he had never *seen* her with any before, and her natural ease with the baby made his heart swell with affection in his chest. The infant made a snuffling noise, wrapping its fingers in her hair, and she kissed it tenderly on its plump little cheek.

"Flora," Alistair said quietly, and Flora startled, having been so immersed in conversation with the Gwaren fisherman that she had not noticed the king's arrival.

The widower froze in momentary panic, unsure how to respond. Flora carefully extracted her hair from the baby's clenched fist, tickling it under the chin before handing it back to its father.

Turning back to Alistair, Flora smiled up at him anxiously; hoping that he wasn't annoyed that she had neglected to inform him of her plans to relocate her feast to the docks. The king stepped forward, cupped her cheek in his hand and lifted her chin; gazing down into her solemn, earnest face.
"My sweet-hearted girl," he said softly after a moment, shaking his head. "This was meant to be your feast."

"Eh, I don't need a feast," Flora replied, with northern candour and a shrug of the shoulders. "I'm going to get fat enough by Kingsway – or Harvestmere - I ought not stuff my face with food."

The old market had fallen quiet behind them, those at the tables pausing with forks halfway their to mouths as they watched the king greet his mistress. More of Denerim's citizens had crowded in beneath the arches, curious and wide-eyed; always eager to catch another glimpse of their handsome new Theirin, and the girl who had ended the Blight.

Alistair made as though to kiss her, then felt the heat of several hundred eyes raising the hairs on the back of his neck. As though on cue, Eamon sidled out from a nearby pillar, lowering his voice to a murmur.

"Florence, they're waiting for you."

Flora grimaced, she had not expected to actually address the crowd. However, public speaking was something that she had grown reluctantly accustomed to over the months, and so she headed towards the auctioneer's block at the front of the market, judging it to be more stable than standing on a crate. The throngs parted to clear a path before her, hungry fingers still clutching pieces of cooked chicken and broth-soaked bread.

Alistair followed in her wake, overtaking Flora easily on the last few strides to offer her assistance onto the auctioneer's platform. There must have once existed a wooden scaffold or makeshift step; yet this had clearly been scavenged for fuel. In the absence of any stairs, Alistair lifted his mistress bodily up onto the raised stone plinth.

Flora looked out over the gathered people, her friends and companions blending in amidst the refugees, with the people of Denerim clustering on the fringes of the crowd. She caught sight of her brothers – their tall, russet-haired frames distinct – and half-smiled at them. Zevran was loitering near Finian; murmuring something quiet in her slender brother's ear. The elf looked up to meet her gaze, then blew her a kiss.

The crowd fell silent beneath Flora's pale Cousland stare; the cool, watercolour appraisal that her ancestors had used to hold Ferelden's wild north in check. Flora licked her lips - relatively certain that the baby had left a handful of apple sauce in her hair – and began to speak.

"I remember what it's like to be hungry," she began, quietly. "When I grew up – in Herring – there were some weeks when the catch was bad, and all we caught had to be sold. There were times when we cooked seaweed into a stew because there was nothing else to eat."

Flora hoped that the compassion in her voice made up for the haughty beauty of her face; which she resented and had no control over.

"This food doesn't in any way compensate for what's been lost," she continued, earnest and solemn. "It doesn't make up for the homes, the towns, the family that you've left behind. I've never been to Gwaren or Honnleath, but I... I have been to Lothering. I think of Lothering all the time. I had Lothering in my heart when I killed the Archdemon."

Flora paused for a moment, wondering at how clear poor, lost Lothering stood out in her mind; the village preserved with especial clarity despite featuring so fleetingly in her life.

"I just wanted to do something to help," she said at last, a raw echo to the words. "Since I can't mend
you any more. I'm sorry that I can't mend you, I wish I could. I was useful when I had my spirits. I think – I don't really know what to do without them. I feel a bit useless, to be honest."

Flora half-smiled to take the edge from her northern frankness, but the candour in the words gleamed like pyrite in a river stream. Each phlegmatic cough she heard from the crowd cut her like a small, pernicious blade; as did each glimpse of a bandaged limb that she now had no hope of mending. To her horror, Flora felt tears pricking in the corners of her eyes.

Don't cry! You don't cry in public!

If you do cry, blame it on the little creature unbalancing you.

"Your Majesty!"

The cry rose first from the back of the market hall, thin and defiant.

Flora blinked in slight surprise, a faint line of confusion forming on her brow as the tears arrested themselves on her lashes.

"Aye! Your Majesty!"

Seconds later, the hail came again, louder this time and joined by several more voices. It continued to build upon itself, a dozen more voices joining with each repetition; swelling in volume and vigour until the words blurred together in a great roar of sound that rattled the roof tiles.

Your Majesty! Your Majesty! Your Majesty!

Flora had no idea what was going on, except that she was relatively certain she was now partially deaf. She stood on the auctioneer's platform, feeling incongruously as though she were for sale; and stared solemnly out at the cheering crowds.

What are you cheering me for? she thought, in mild bewilderment. I didn't make this food. I can't heal your coughs or that old man's broken arm.

Why are you calling me 'your majesty'?

Down on the market floor, Fergus nudged Alistair's elbow; a half-laugh emerging from his throat.

"You'd better get up there, Theirin," he murmured, eyebrows wedged in his hairline. "Or my little sister might unwittingly usurp your throne."

Alistair grinned, his face suffused with immeasurable pride. In a swift, effortless gesture he had climbed up onto the auctioneer's platform and put an arm around his best friend's waist, one hand spreading affectionately across her stomach.

"I adore you," he breathed in Flora's ear, wishing that they were alone.

Flora beamed, delighted, and the sight of the solemn young Cousland smiling for her king was enough to set off a fresh wave of approval from the crowd.

"Alistair," she whispered, grateful for his steadying arm about her waist. The smell of roast pig had been wafting up her nostrils for an hour, and the meaty aroma was enough to curdle her stomach.

"Yes, my love?"

"There's an Orlesian here. He's with Leliana."
"An Orlesian?" Alistair repeated, managing to convey incredulity through his smile. "Who is it?"

"Gosper."

"Who?!"

"Gosper De...Deshally. I don't know what he's here for. Leliana says that he's a duck."

"?!"

Chapter End Notes

OOC Author Note: A DUC, Flora, not a duck!!

OK, so Flora hasn't exactly covered herself in glory so far in this sequel! By chapter 30 in the original story, she'd saved the Circle Tower, healed refugees in Lothering, defended Redcliffe…. all she's done so far, in this story, has been cry, brood and hang around in a monastery!

So I wanted to show her finally able to do something to help, something true to her nature that wasn't taken with the death of the Archdemon. In this case, hosting the feast for the refugees! Her best quality is her kindness, and that didn't go away with her spirits. As greedy as she is,

Lol, she doesn't really understand why people are chanting Your Majesty at her, though. Even the people of Denerim know by this point that Flora is going to be Alistair's Queen, hahaha
Once they had returned to the Royal Palace, it became quickly apparent why Gaspard De Chalons had arrived two weeks early for Alistair's coronation.

The nobles met formally with the grand duc within the castle's most unashamedly Ferelden audience chamber. There was not a single gilded curlicue or delicate mural to be seen on the windowless stone walls – they were carved with finely worked reliefs of Mabari and horses mid-hunt, the wooden beams overhead painted with old Alamarri patterns. A tapestry of Calenhad loomed above the receiving platform, eight foot high and nearly twelve in length; while a statue of the Rebel Queen dominated the chamber's opposite flank. Candles hung from the ceiling in wrought-iron rings, casting a flickering light onto the faces of those gathered below.

The Valmont soldiers were stationed at one side of the door, while the Theirin Royal Guard eyed them suspiciously from the other. The grand duc stood in the centre of the room, his stance straight-backed and militaristic despite his advancing years.

Alistair was seated alongside his advisers, his chair raised a fraction higher to denote his status. The crown – which he had removed to eat amongst the refugees – was now placed firmly back atop his head. Eamon, Leonas and Fergus sat about him with varying degrees of suspicion writ plain across their faces.

Teagan was leaning against the far wall, head tilted towards the newly invested Arl of Amaranthine. Finian had relayed all that he had learnt about the grand duc during his five years immersed within Orlesian society; and none of it was particularly palatable.

"You're a fortnight early," Alistair stated flatly, leaning forward and disposing with pleasantries. "What's your business within Ferelden?"

"And with the mother of my child," he added grimly to himself.

"You can take off that mask, Orlesian," Leonas interjected, his voice gruff. "This isn't Halamshiral. We don't speak through flowers here."

Gaspard de Chalons acquiesced without comment, removing the silvered domino. Beneath was the bitter, weathered face of a man who had survived decades of the Orlesian Great Game, only to emerge with second prize.

"A force of habit," he murmured, soft and amused. "No offence intended, my lords. But my business is with the Couslands – the young lady is not here, and I am loathe to start without her."

Alistair narrowed his eyes, feeling a small pulse of anger form in the back of his skull. Beside him, he felt the teyrn bristle in his seat.

"As you said: Florence is young. In fact, my sister has not even reached the age of voting majority," Fergus interjected, stiffly. "Any dealings with her will go through me."

"Comme vous voulez," replied the grand duc, a faint smile tugging his thin lips at the mention of Ferelden's 'primitive' politics. "I have come to throw my hat into the ring."
"Speak plain and not in guise, man!" Teagan called out irritably from the wall, tiring of the Orlesian's wordplay.

"Bien sûr. I wish to sign my name to the list of the lady Florence's suitors."

There was a long and charged silence, during which Alistair felt his blood pressure increase in gradual increments.

"What do you mean: list of suitors?" he half-growled, visibly struggling to keep a grip on civility. "What bloody list?"

The grand duc raised an eyebrow, taking a gulp from an ornately carved hip flask.

"As far as I'm aware, there are at least a half-dozen noble families within Thedas who have put forward propositions of marriage. The Vaels of Starkhaven are looking for a match for their eldest son. The Pentag hasths of Nevarre have made enquiries. There was even a suit from a Tevinter magister, although I believe they redacted their offer on hearing of the lady's severance from the Fade."

Alistair sat in stunned silence for a moment, mouth slightly parted. Fergus cleared his throat, a scowl ingrained deeply within his handsome, prematurely lined face.

"Those proposals all went to me," he stated, bluntly. "I didn't care to pass them on to my sister. She's not leaving Ferelden. Neither the Landsmeet nor the people would countenance it."

There was a murmur of general agreement amongst those present.

"Floss wouldn't survive in Nevarre," Finian whispered conspiratorially in Teagan's ear. "She can barely cope with the Fereldan sun. Anyway, you know this duc's last wife was murdered?"

Alistair interjected then, his face contorted in naked outrage.

"But she's carrying my child," he retorted, the words harbouring a vein of distinct Theirin threat. "She's my- my-"

The grand duc gave a shrug, the silvered epaulet on his shoulder catching the torchlight.

"To raise a king's child would be no burden," he replied; and almost said more before changing his mind.

"No, I imagine it'd be quite the strategic asset," retorted Eamon, quick as a whip. "Especially for one in your position, with a claim to the Sunburst Throne."

Alistair, struck dumb at the prospect of his unborn baby becoming a hapless pawn in the Orlesian Great Game, gaped; a rush of angry colour flooding his cheeks. Abruptly, he shoved back his chair with a scrape across the flagstones, a retort emerging as a bellow.

"Enough!"

The prospective bride herself had not joined them in the audience chamber due to a sudden and demanding burst of nausea, mostly likely brought on by inhaling the smell of roasted meats for several hours. On return to the Royal Palace, Flora had turned an unappealing shade of green, and been quickly whisked away into a servant's back corridor by Wynne and Leliana.

Zevran sauntered after them, pulling the door closed as Flora huddled miserably over a convenient
bucket. She was sick three times in a row, expelling the contents of her stomach in spectacular fashion. Leliana charmed a wide-eyed servant into fetching some water and fruit, while Wynne gripped Flora's hair and patted her back with business-like affection.

"There, there-" the senior enchanter murmured, softly. Long lost memories of being in a similar position rose to the surface of Wynne's mind, like flotsam cast onto the seashore.

"This baby hates me!" Flora croaked, sitting back on the flagstones and wiping at her watering eyes. With the departure of her spirits, she was no longer able to self-soothe the raw lining of her throat.

Wynne stood to retrieve the water and fruit, pausing to exchange a few quiet words with Leliana. Zevran slid down to take her place, reaching out to push a strand of sweaty hair gently away from Flora's forehead.

"Don't talk nonsense, mi corazón. How could the baby hate you? It is an impossible thing, abejorro."

Flora made a little unhappy gesture with her mouth, hunching her shoulders.

"Everyone told me the sickness would be over by now," she complained, taking the water pouch gratefully from Wynne and gulping down several mouthfuls. "But, no. The little toad is not content with poking me in the kidneys all night, it has to punish me for sampling my own feast!"

"You can't call the baby a little toad!" Leliana chided, reproachfully.

The baby also did not appreciate being called a toad. Flora opened her mouth to reply, then went several degrees paler and grabbed for the bucket once again.

Zevran grimaced, reaching to clamp her hair in a restraining fist.

"Get it all up, lovely," he murmured, rubbing his thumb into the base of her neck.

Flora proceeded to do so, clutching the edge of the bucket so hard that her knuckles went white. Eventually, her stomach had nothing left to yield and so went dormant; producing only the occasional ominous rumble. Feeling rather sorry for herself, Flora sat back on the cold tiles and sniffed. It hurt to swallow – the lining of her throat was inflamed from bile – and there was a foul taste in the back of her mouth.

"Finish the water," Wynne instructed, and Flora followed the command, grimacing as her sore throat muscles contracted around the liquid. "You need to get into that audience with the grand duc. Have you been sick down your tunic?"

"No, wait-yes."

Leliana was commandeered to fetch something clean from the Royal chamber, while Wynne busied herself refilling the water pouch.

Zevran cast an expert eye over the tray of fruit, then made a shrewd choice. He offered the spherical yellow fruit to Flora without comment; as he had hoped, she was distracted from her own self-pity.

"Oh," she croaked, entranced. "It's a lemon. I dressed up as one of these for a Satinalia party at the Circle."

"I remember you telling me, mi florita," the elf crooned, watching Flora work her finger beneath the rind. "Bite - it'll chase the sourness away."
Flora took a large bite, then almost spat it out; the corners of her mouth turning down. She turned a wide, accusatory gaze on Zevran, who couldn’t hold back a chortle of laughter.

"I used to eat lemons raw all the time as a child," he told her, fighting to regain a solemn expression as she eyed him malevolently. "Like a mouthful of pure Antivan sunshine."

Flora swallowed, grudgingly admitting to herself that the elf had a point; the stale taste of bile had been thoroughly purged from her mouth.

Leliana appeared with one of Alistair’s shirts, her brow furrowed with intense dissatisfaction.

"You have no clothes, Florence! I believed your meagre allowance at Revanloch to be a fraction of your wardrobe, but now I realise the truth – you have nothing to wear. This is a situation that will need to be remedied once you return to the city!"

Flora grunted, squirming her way out of the navy tunic and waving her arms for Alistair’s garment.

"In Herring, I wore the same 'outfit' every single day," she retorted, buttoning the linen shirt over her breasts. "And it only got washed when it rained, or if I fell in the sea."

"Aah! The stuff of nightmares, ma petite."

Emerging back into the public passages of the palace, Leliana led the way towards the audience chamber she believed was being used to hear the proposition of Gaspard de Challons.

"It's the most Fereldan of the receiving rooms," she explained over her shoulder, guiding them expertly down a corridor lined with dust-covered suits of armour. "Mabari painted on the walls, sculptures of horses; a giant depiction of the Rebel Queen. The perfect chamber to meet with a grand duc of Orlais."

"Did he tell you what he wanted- " Flora began, then cut herself off abruptly as Alistair’s angry bellow echoed about the passage, the sound emanating from a nearby set of double doors.

"Enough!"

Flora blinked, head swivelling to her three companions in turn. Wynne looked bemused while Zevran seemed more intrigued; yet Leliana did not appear to be taken aback by the king’s sudden outburst.

What, Flora mouthed at the bard, her eyes wide. Whaat-

But Leliana’s gaze slid away like a jellyfish, and then the guards were pushing open the doors into the audience chamber and it was too late to ask why Alistair had sounded so angry.

"The lady Cousland," announced the steward dutifully at the entrance.

Flora blinked against the torch-lit brightness, which was in stark contrast to the gloomy corridor. When she managed to focus on the figures in the room, the grand duc was standing – appearing somewhat amused – in the centre of the chamber, while her brothers and the other nobles were seated at the far side. Alistair had already risen to his feet, with lip curled and a flush heating his olive skin.

"Ah, la dame herself," murmured Gaspard, turning and bowing with the consummate finesse of a lifelong courtier. "Shall we ask the lady what she wishes?"
Flora did not reply, her eyes moving from the Orlesian noble across to where Alistair stood, face contorted in anger. The grand duc, deciding to take matters into his own hands, strode across the chamber to face Flora directly.

"This is my offer," he said, bluntly. "Verchiel is in need of a new duchesse. You are a Cousland; I a Valmont. It would be an profitable alliance for us both."

Flora had a sudden, peculiar sense of déjà vu. For a moment she was standing back in the garden at South Reach, and Arl Leonas was making a similar proposition; so discomfited that he was barely able to look her in the eye.

But he was doing it to protect me, because he was a friend of Bryce Cousland, and felt responsible for my safety. Such a marriage would have brought him no advantage; I was still a mage when he proposed.

This Orlesian seeks my hand just for his own gain!

"My cousin Celene has been childless for a decade, and as it stands – I am her only surviving relative," continued Gaspard de Chalons, persuasively. "It would be logical for her to name this babe as heir, if we were married. You possess one of the oldest pedigrees of Ferelden; I am a Valmont."

One of the few quality bloodlines, his tone implied.

"And you would control a child with a claim to both the Fereldan and Orlesian thrones," pointed out Eamon, his lip curling.

Flora heard a low rumble of anger, sensing that the others were preparing to rally to her defence. Alistair looked as though he had stayed out in the sun for too long – his entire head was a shade of furious crimson.

Yet, the thought of their baby becoming entangled in the complex skeins of Orlesian politics, made the blood boil in her veins like an overlooked cauldron.

I kept you safe from the Archdemon, my little toad, Flora thought to herself, determinedly. I can keep you safe from this man's ambition.

"Usually when people are trying to charm me, they praise my hair, or my eyes," she replied, grateful for her flat Herring intonation and the solemn ambiguity of her features. "They don't usually praise my blood."

"Lady Cousland, you know full-well that you're a beautiful girl," replied the grand duc, lightning quick. "Surely, there's no need for me to reaffirm that?"

"Hm," retorted Flora, already bored of this arrogant noble and his presumptions. "Do your weddings take place in counting-houses, rather than Chantries?"

The duc narrowed his eyes, trying to divine the purpose of Flora's question.

"You would be celebrated within Val Royeaux," he continued, in the stilted tones of a man not used to cajoling. "And a lifestyle far beyond what you could imagine awaits you in the Hall of Mirrors at Verchiel. Your every desire would be catered for."

Flora paused, her stare wide and accusatory, feeling the little creature nudge against the base of her spine.
"But, I'm Fereldan," she countered, quiet and firm. "And this baby is Fereldan. We aren't going anywhere."

Flora could almost hear Alistair's exhalation of relief from across the room. She wanted to pull an incredulous face at him: as if she would ever have said yes!

"Anyway," she continued hastily, feeling her stomach give an ominous lurch. "I would never even consider a proposal unless it was done in true, traditional Herring style."

The grand duc narrowed his pale, clever Valmont eyes thoughtfully, scrutinising her features as though he hoped to learn something. Yet Flora's face was as solemn and ambiguous as any Orlesian mask; and he could glean nothing from it.

"A shame," he murmured, softly. "Our union might have achieved great things."

Flora, worried that she was about to be sick once again, decided to make a rapid exit.

"Sorry, Duck Gosper," she said, not unkindly. "Your... rod isn't big enough to catch a fish such as me."

Feeling her guts churn, Flora turned on her heel and sailed out of the room; wanting to put as much space between herself and the audience chamber as possible. Finian and Zevran followed in her wake; the elf openly snickering.

Oh shit, Alistair thought to himself, as Eamon cleared his throat and stood up. What's a Herring-style proposal again? I'm sure Flo has mentioned it before.

"The lady Cousland has spoken her mind," the arl of Redcliffe murmured, trying not to laugh. "You are permitted to stay within Denerim until the coronation, grand duc."

Gaspard scowled, lifting the silver mask and placing it firmly back on his unhappy features.

"That girl is as obstinate as Celene," he muttered to himself, darkly. "Merci for the audience, Your Majesty."

Alistair grunted, frantically searching his memory for any mention that Flora had made of Herring proposals. He rose to his feet, barely sparing a further glance towards the Orlesian duke; head turned towards the corridor where his mistress had headed.

Fergus put up a hand to intercept the king, the teyrn's face caught between reproach and wry amusement. He lowered his voice, ensuring that the grand duc could not hear.

"Alistair, you are going to propose to my sister before the wedding day itself, aren't you? I understand that you wanted to give her time to grieve for her spirits, but... it's less than a fortnight away now."

"You're northern. Do you know what these 'Herring proposal traditions' are?" Alistair retorted, hoping that Flora had been referring to a regional – rather than strictly local – custom.

Unfortunately, Fergus looked blank; raising a shoulder in a shrug.

"Sorry. I gave Oriana a ring and a gold necklace when we were betrothed, but I doubt that's a practice shared by the villagers of Herring."

Alistair grimaced, feeling a bead of nervous sweat break out on his forehead as he straightened.
"Maker's Breath. I'd better go and find her dad tomorrow. I hope he's still in the city!"

OOC Author Note: Haha, I bet you thought it was Alistair finally proposing to Flo… NOPE!

OOOH, this was a fun chapter though! I love anything to do with politics and proposals, haha. It reminds me of work! But I love my job, lol, so it's understandable. So the news has spread across Ferelden that the new Hero of Ferelden is an unmarried Cousland daughter, which is literally marriage market material! Even the fact that she's pregnant with a king's child isn't necessarily a bad thing – it proves that she's fertile, and the baby could be used as a valuable bargaining chip. Of course Fergus, knowing that Flora isn't going to agree to any of these proposals, doesn't even bother to relate them to her. But Alistair is Not Happy, lol.

Flora did end up telling Alistair what a Herring-style proposal was, all the way back in TLATL lol

Gaspard's wife was murdered in a family power struggle! There was no date for that event on the DA wikia page, so hopefully it's not too far out of canon for him to propose to Flo within this time period.
In the shadowy servant's corridor Flora sunk down against the wall, looking distinctly green about the gills. Finian was pacing back and forth before her, flapping his hands and offering unhelpful medical advice. His silhouette lurched erratically across the unplastered wall, making Flora feel even more nauseous.

"Quick, put your head between your legs!"

"Alright," said Flora, obediently bowing her face between her knees. "Uergh."

"Does that feel any better?"

"Noooo."

"Perhaps you need someone to put their head between your legs," Zevran volunteered, slyly. "I volunteer!"

Finian swatted the elf on the elbow, crouching down beside Flora as she slumped unceremoniously on the flagstones.

"I think the head between the legs might be for dizziness, actually. Do you feel dizzy, Floss?"

Flora shook her head, taking several gulps of musty air while talking her stomach down from the metaphorical ledge.

_You don't need to do this. There's nothing left to expel. You've already punished me for daring to eat something at my own feast._

To make herself feel better, Flora summoned a mental image of Gaspard's startled face, open-mouthed like a fish laid out on the sand. This had a palliative effect on her nausea, and to her relief - she felt her stomach settle down once again.

The next moment, candlelight spilled into the corridor as Alistair manoeuvred his way impatiently inside.

"I didn't even know this corridor existed. It's so dark. Where are you, baby?"

"Down here," said Flora, from somewhere near his feet. "By your boots."

Alistair squinted, his eyes gradually adjusting to the gloom. As he focused on her slumped against the wall, his face crumpled in sympathy.

"Oh, my love," he breathed, crouching down before her on the dusty tiles. The crown slipped forward and he removed it impatiently, setting the golden band on the flagstones at her feet. "Why are you in here? This is a servants' passage."

"I thought I was going to be sick," she replied, leaning forward into his embrace and winding her arms around his neck. "I didn't want to be sick on Gosper's silky shoes. I'm not sure what diplomatic message that would send. Not a good one."
"And on top of the 'your rod isn't big enough to catch me' comment," Finian murmured in Zevran's ear, archly. "It might start another Orlo-Fereldan war."

Alistair slid his fingers around the back of his best friend's head, holding it against his shoulder.

"What can I do to help, darling?" he murmured, rubbing his hand up and down the length of Flora's narrow back; feeling the hard ridges of her spine. "Anything at all, just say the word."

"Keep doing that," she mumbled into his tunic, pressing her cheek against the fine crimson velvet. "Feels nice."

Alistair dropped a kiss to the top of Flora's head, feeling her yawn into his shoulder as he slid his palm back up to the nape of her neck.

"You're wearing my tunic," he murmured, fingering the collar. "I've missed seeing you in them, Lo. You lived in my shirts when we were journeying."

"Mm," she replied, inhaling his familiar, masculine scent. "Leliana doesn't think I have enough clothes. She kept saying I'd need to get a new dress very soon. She was mysterious."

Alistair grimly resolved that he would go and find Pel – Flora's fisherman-father – the very next morning, and question him about the ominous-sounding Herring-style proposal.

"Sweetheart, I wish you would stay here tonight," he said, instead. "I can't see any reason for you to stay at Revanloch another week. We have the Divine's letter, the Landsmeet has approved it already. I want you back with me."

Flora considered this longingly, the urge to acquiesce overwhelming.

*No more damp, draughty, overcrowded chamber.*

*No more Templars watching my every move.*

"I think I should stay at the monastery," she said reluctantly, and Alistair's mouth turned down as he heard the rejection in her tone.

"But?"

"You ought to do as you said," Flora continued, letting her finger run down the collar of his tunic. "You said I'd be there for a month. It's only been three weeks. You ought to keep your word, since … since you're so new on the throne. Even about something like this."

Finian let out a soft grunt of confirmation; he could see the logic in his sister's argument.

"She's right, Alistair."

Alistair grimaced, clutching her a fraction more tightly against his chest. Flora wound her fingers in his collar, brushing her thumb over the copper-gold hair curling at the nape of his neck.

"I just miss you," he said, slightly plaintively. "I don't sleep well without you in my arms. I wake a thousand times a night."

"I miss you too," Flora whispered, tracing the strong band of sinew in his neck down to his throat. His collarbone stood out against the taut, defined bulk of his chest; the velvet garb of a king would never fit him as well as a suit of armour. "I miss being in bed with you. It's been ages."
She shot him a look beneath her eyelashes, curling her fingers more persuasively into the velvet collar of his tunic. Alistair's irises darkened, feeling the first tendrils of lust sprouting in his gut. He knew that look all too well; it had led him into empty stables at South Reach and behind trees in the Brecilian Forest, it had tempted him into violating the hallowed space of the Chantry. Flora's clear seawater eyes, dark-lashed and limpid, communicated her wanton urges far more eloquently than her Herring-shaped vocabulary. They misted over with desire like a humid summer rain; pupils dark and hot as coals.

"It's been... twenty eight days," he replied, throatily. "Not that... not that I've been counting."

"Twenty eight days since what?" asked Finian cluelessly, averting his eyes as Alistair dropped his mouth to the hollow of Flora's throat "Oh, for Maker's sake- really?!"

Alistair raised his head and cast a heavy-lidded glance around the narrow corridor. Intended for servants, it was gloomy and ill-kept, with cobwebs decorating the ceiling beams. More importantly, it was private.

"Finn, Zev," he instructed, words blurring together with desire. "Find somewhere else to be."

"For the love of Andraste!" Finian, eyes bulging, made a vain attempt at protest. "You can't rut my little sister in a servant's passage! Why not at least take her up to the bedchamber?!"

"No time," Alistair retorted, unbuttoning his breeches with swift, desirous fingers. "I just heard the sixth bell - the Templars will be here soon."

"Let's give the king and his mistress some privacy, Finían," Zevran purred, smiling very widely to hide the raw edge in his tone. "Come on. Have fun, amores. I cannot promise that I will resist the temptation to peek."

Alistair let out a grunt, more than aware of the elf's voyeuristic tendencies. Finian fled up the corridor with a squawk of horror, vanishing into the depths of the labyrinth used by the servants to navigate the palace unseen. Far more nonchalantly, Zevran sauntered in the young arl's wake. Being in masochistic mood, instead of following Finian into the safety of an audience chamber, he slid into a convenient recess half-hidden by shadow. Leaning back against the wall, the elf pricked his ears back towards the gloomy corridor; heart racing uncharacteristically in his chest.

Meanwhile, Alistair was enthralled by the new inches added to his best friend's bust. He slid his hands inside the unbuttoned shirt to cup her naked breasts, gently weighing them against calloused palms.

"Is it selfish that I don't want to share these with the baby?" the king murmured, letting his thumbs brush lightly over her nipples.

"Yes," she replied, reaching down to pull impatiently at the fastening of his belt. "Hurry, hurry-"

Alistair let out an involuntary groan at her unashamed desire; single-minded need transforming his kind, handsome face into something primitive. His mouth dropped to Flora's neck, working the delicate skin with teeth and tongue until she cried out in frustration.

"Alistaaaaair-"

He growled against the softness of Flora's throat, licking a long stripe down to her collarbone as his fingers began to inch her leggings down around her thighs. As he did so, his wrist inadvertently nudged against the swollen swell of her stomach. A clear ray of affection broke through the lust saturating Alistair's features, quickly accompanied by a matching streak of worry.
"It's not going to hurt the baby, is it? Us doing... this?"

"Nooo," mumbled Flora, her hand working busily inside his own breeches. "I don't see how."

"Is it going to hurt you?" Alistair continued, anxiously. "It's been ages."

"Dunno. Don't care."

She let out an impatient little grunt, successfully freeing his rigid length from the confines of the leather.

"I don't want to hurt you," he repeated, anxiously. "Maybe I should just- Maker's Breath!"

This strangled blasphemy was in response to his best friend repositioning herself – somewhat awkwardly, considering her weighted belly and sore knee – so that she could take him in her mouth. Alistair let his head drop back against the wall, fingers clenching involuntary fistfuls of her hair. Something raw and heated was burning in the pit of his belly; a desire which she was stoking unashamedly with the workings of her tongue. He opened his mouth to speak but a strangled croak emerged, his pelvis thrusting involuntarily against her yielding lips.

"Flora," he managed to mutter at last, her name emerging hoarse and peculiar. "Sweetheart-"

Abandoning coherency, the king let out a moan; reaching with clumsy fingers to slide the shirt from her shoulders. Flora paused to breathe, secretly delighted at the effect of her mouth's purposeful exertions.

*I thought I might have forgotten how to do this.*

*Well, we did spend enough time practising during that month at South Reach. There wasn't really anything else to do –*

Flora smiled up at Alistair and he flashed her a dazed grin, the cool olive tone of his cheeks warmed by an uncharacteristic flush. As she took him in her mouth once again, Alistair let his hand rest on the crown of her tangled head, gentle and affectionate.

Just then, in sonorous tones from the other side of the door, came the unmistakeable chiding of Chanter Devotia.

"'And thus with creeping indolence did the sinners while away their hours; spurning the Maker in the pursuit of WANTON PLEASURE!""

Flora almost choked, recoiling from him as Alistair let out a strangled curse.

"Oh, for fuck's sake-"

There came a loud, pointed cough from the audience chamber. Flora sat back on her haunches and gazed at Alistair in mild irritation; he stared back at her, eyes narrowed.

"They can't tell us off," he said, slightly uncertainly. "Can they? I'm the king."

For a moment they blinked at one another through the gloom of the servant's passage; a stable-boy and a fisher-girl who – through a series of inexplicably strange circumstances - had somehow ended up in the Royal Palace.

There came an experimental rattle at the door knob, and Alistair swore under his breath; reaching down to tuck himself back into his breeches.
"Fine. To be continued, darling."

As Flora shrugged her arms into her shirt, Zevran manifested from the shadows and made them both jump.

"Maker's Breath!" hissed Alistair, using the crown to flatten down his rumpled hair. "Why don't you just join in next time? You were close enough!"

"Don't tempt me, mi amor," purred the elf, buttoning Flora's shirt from the bottom while she started from the top. "I'm only sorry that you were so rudely interrupted."

Flora raked her fingers through her own tangled locks in an attempt to calm them.

"We'll just say that I felt poorly and Alistair was looking after me," she said, hopefully. "Do you think they'd believe us? Do I look sickly?"

"You look as though you've just been bedded, mi sirenta," replied the elf honestly, casting an eye over her flushed cheeks and swollen lips.

"Didn't even get that far," grumbled Flora, reaching up to adjust the angle of the crown on Alistair's head. "Oh well, let's just get this over with."

Chapter End Notes

OOC Author Note: Lol foiled again! I promise they will get it on one of these days, haha. Finian's basically lost forever in the maze of servants' passages now lol
Like stern parents collecting a recalcitrant youth from the city guard's custody; Knight-Captain Gannorn and Chanter Devotia escorted Flora from the castle with expressions of mutual disapproval. The Chanter had offered a few choice excepts from her limited source material – mostly focusing on sinners who fell victim to *lusty urges* – while Gannorn had asked (with a straight face) whether there were no bedchambers fit for purpose within the Royal Palace.

The sun was just setting as they rode along the cliff top, casting lazy tendrils of ochre and apricot across the green expanse of the Amaranthine Ocean. Revanloch monastery hunched like a crow on its low, rocky promontory; dark basalt towers standing out in stark contrast against the pastel twilight.

Flora, who was riding on Chanter Devotia's saddle, found the Templar's quiet, disapproving murmurs oddly soothing. Before they had begun to ascend the low gravelled path that led up to the monastery's main gates, she had fallen asleep; head against the officer's breastplate.

Chanter Devotia had looked down at her silently, the corners of her mouth pulling taut. When the stable boys came scampering out to take their horses, she quietened them with a ferocious *ssh!*, her pale violet eyes flashing behind her helm. Knight-Captain Gannorn reached up wordlessly to receive the yawning Flora; she let herself be transferred from one officer to another as readily as a sleepy child.

Without exchanging more than a few choice words, the two Templars manoeuvred their snoring charge up to the guest chamber. Once Flora had been deposited onto the bed – with exceptional care, considering the precious cargo she carried – Knight-Captain Gannorn went to draw the curtains while Chanter Devotia prepared the bedroll before the door.

The night drew in, close and unusually humid, the stars lighting one by one like distant lanterns in the heavens. Flora, worn out by the long day, snored contentedly; lost in soft and dreamless sleep. The Templars watched over her in staggered intervals, their purpose not to watch for any hint of magic – it had long become apparent that Flora's Fade connection was severed – but out of sheer curiosity.

When Flora had first arrived at Revanloch, it had been hard for them to reconcile this sulking adolescent with the great string of titles that she bore – *Hero of Ferelden, Warden-Commander, Ender of the Fifth Blight, Dragonslayer*. They had not been impressed by her immaturity or her recklessness; and wondered at her illiteracy and lack of education. They had also found her grief at the loss of her spirits entirely perplexing – why would one *mourn* the loss of their magehood?

Now, although neither one would dare to admit it, the Templars had become oddly fond of their young charge. They had watched Florence Cousland near-incessantly for the past three weeks; and had found in her many admirable qualities to balance out their unfavourable first impression. She was unfailingly polite to the monastery servants, and had an uncanny knack of remembering their names. She laboured away for hours each day in an effort to improve her poor literacy; stubborn in the face of her own ignorance. Even Knight-Captain Gannorn had to admit to himself that this assignment had been a welcome change from escorting pilgrims across the Anderfels.

In the last days of Justinian, Flora received a most unexpected visitor at the monastery. With help from her Templars, she had dragged the small table into the shade within the inner courtyard. Whilst
the bard positioned herself tactically in the only patch of light and warmth within Revanloch; Flora huddled near the apex of two conjoining walls, aware that the summer sun wrought havoc on her pale skin.

"It's not natural for the sky to look like this," she said at last mid-afternoon, abandoning her writing and squinting upwards with a look of distinct suspicion.

Leliana, who had rolled up her Chantry robe sleeves and was draped horizontally atop a long planter, turned her head and frowned.

"What do you mean, ma petite?"

Flora jabbed a finger upwards as the bard returned to a sitting position, stretching herself like a cat.

"Look how... blue it is," she said, indignantly. "Blue and cheerful. There's no cloud. In Herring, there was always cloud. I thought the sky was naturally grey until I moved south to the Circle."

Rising elegantly to her feet, Leliana drifted across the courtyard and took a seat at the table beside Flora; pulling over the scrawled sentences to correct them.

"In the south and the east, these skies are quite normal in the summer," the bard reassured, a slight crease forming on her forehead as she tried to decipher Flora's unintelligible text. "Ma crevette, I do not understand what this word is meant to say?"

"Indubitably."

Leliana's eyebrows shot into her hairline as she stared at the tangle of consonants.

"So you have attempted to write, 'I love fish, indubitably'? Don't run before you can walk, ma chérie. Let's concentrate on spelling the basics correctly before we get too ambitious, hm?"

Flora blinked in dismay. "What did I get wrong from the first bit?"

"L-o-v-e. Not l-u-v!"

"Oh." The Cousland drooped for a moment and then perked up again, casting her eyes once more towards the sun. "What's Orlais like in summertime?"

Leliana let out a little sigh, leaning back to finger the wilting leaves of a nearby pot-plant.

"Unmatched in beauty," she murmured, softly. "I remember travelling through the countryside alongside Lake Celestine, when the pasque flowers were just beginning to bloom. They sprouted in such abundance that they had overtaken the path, and we had to walk waist-high through lavender and clumps of gentian. The smell, you cannot imagine – even those flowers that lay trodden underfoot had been dried by the sun, so that each step brought forth the most delicious aroma. And the skies overhead were not simply blue, they were aquamarine."

"Aqua-what?"

"Aquamarine. There is nothing within Ferelden that can compare."

"Oh," replied Flora, thoughtfully. "Well, it sounds very nice."

"I will have some lavender bushes imported from Montsimmard, ma petite, to be grown in the Royal Palace. The smell is meant to help babies sleep; Orlesian mamas hang clumps of it in their nurseries."
"Thank you!"

"De rien, mon chaton."

"Derry-ann," repeated Flora, wistfully. "Derryann. I wish I could speak two languages, you're so clever."

Leliana smiled, her teeth white against skin rapidly bronzing in the sunlight.

"Perhaps focus on becoming adept with the King's Tongue first, eh, ma fleur?"

"From what I've heard in the taverns of Denerim, Florence Cousland is already fluent in the King's Tongue!"

The comment was delivered in a thick and immediately recognisable brogue; and Flora's face broke into a beam. Pushing back her chair, she rose to greet the dwarf as he strolled across the cobbles.

"Oghren!"

"Eh, don't get up, lassie!"

Flora obediently sat, leaning forward to peck Oghren's cheek as he bent down expectantly. She was delighted to see him in what seemed to be excellent health and spirits – his eyes were sparkling and unclouded, there was no stench of alcohol about his person. His leathers, although crumpled, seemed to be relatively clean.

"You look well," Flora said, irrationally proud of her dwarven companion.

Oghren grinned, his eyes roaming unashamedly over her figure.

"And you've got quite the beer belly on you, princess. How many months we at now?"

Flora snorted, looking down at the swell of her stomach as it stretched out the navy lambswool of her tunic.

"Six," she said after a moment, slightly vaguely. "I think."

"It is six," called Leliana from across the courtyard; having relocated herself to a sunnier spot. "And you're right, Oghren. It's going to be a big, strong baby when it's born."

Flora immediately scowled as the dwarf cackled, clapping a reassuring hand onto her non-bound knee.

"Good luck! You'll be fine, you're a sturdy little maid. Anyway-"

Oghren took a deep breath, ginger whiskers quivering. Flora shot him a slightly curious look, wondering at the uncharacteristic apprehension on her companion's florid face.

"The reason why I'm here, is that… well. I got somethin' to tell you."

Flora blinked at these portentous words, fiddling with the gold Cousland ring on her little finger.

"Before yeh and Prince Charming came to Orzammar, I spent… a long time not doin' anythin' in particular. Became acquainted with a lot of tavern floors, but tha's about it. Then… well. I joined yeh both on this crazy journey, didn't I? Gave my life a bit of meanin'."
The dwarf nodded as though to himself, one thick thumb running absentmindedly across the knotted wooden surface of the table.

"Anyway, now the Blight's over… I don't want to go back to tha' old life, you know? So I- I got an idea. An' don't try and talk me out of it, my mind is made up."

Across the courtyard, the bard's ears pricked and she sat up, curiosity piqued. Flora stared at Oghren with increasing trepidation, feeling a small knot of anxiety form at the bottom of her belly.

"So I thought I might… join the Grey Wardens," the dwarf said, his tone nonchalant but his eyes steady and purposeful. "Keep on fightin' the good fight against the Darkspawn, now that you an' the king have retired. Reckon they'll need a few more soldiers."

The knot of anxiety solidified into a hard lump of fear in Flora's throat, sudden and irrational. A memory ignited in the back of her mind; Daveth choking on a froth of Darkspawn ichor at his own failed Joining.

The canny dwarf spotted the flicker of worry, and sought to offer some jovial reassurance.

"I know there's a risk. But, far as I can see, the alternative is endin' up a bloat-bag of booze on a tavern floor in ten years. And we dwarves know the Darkspawn, we've been fightin' 'em for years."

Flora remembered how Oghren had volunteered to keep vigil over Riordan's body, how he had stood stiff and straight-backed alongside the Orlesian Warden-Commander, head held high. Now, the dwarf looked at her with mild apprehension; trying hard not to show how much he desired her approval.

Swallowing her nerves, Flora smiled back at him, reaching out to rest her fingers on his arm.

"I think that the Wardens will be lucky to have a warrior of your strength and bravery," she replied, earnestly.

Oghren grinned at her, cheeks flushing a deep pink that clashed with the lurid ginger of his moustache.

"I'll give the Darkspawn a thing or two to think about!" he continued, gleefully. "I'll happily introduce 'em to the sharp end of my ax."

"Will you travel to Vigil's Keep to join the Order?" Leliana called, rolling up her sleeves to let her arms catch the sun.

"I wrote to Loghain," replied Oghren, then amended his statement. "Well, I got Wynne to write, askin' what would be best. Turns out the new Warden-Commander is comin' down for Alistair's coronation next week; gonna do some recruitment in the city at the same time."

Flora leaned forward, impulsively reaching her arms around the dwarf's broad frame to embrace him. Oghren patted her gently on the back, a grin spreading behind his thick moustache.

"Your tits have definitely gotten bigger, queenie."

Leliana, from across the courtyard, let out a little hiss of disapproval.

"You're as bad as Zevran, dwarf! Worse, actually; because at least he would try and be poetic in his lechery."
The dwarf snickered unrepentantly as Flora withdrew, tapping his fingers against the mottled wood of the tabletop.

"Speakin' of the elf, Flo, has Alistair let him shag you yet? Ouch, nughumper!"

This was in response to Leliana picking up a small pebble from the soil of the planter and flicking it deftly at the back of Oghren's head. The dwarf shot her a scowl, making a less-than-polite gesture with his fingers.

"Anyway, lass, jus' wanted to let you know what the plans were. Glad I've got your 'proval. Means a lot, you know?"

Flora smiled at him wistfully, remembering how she and Alistair had first met the dwarf while he was in the process of being manhandled from the Diamond Quarter, drunk and disorderly.

"Oghren, you're a different man from the one we met in Orzammar," she said earnestly, and the dwarf seemed to swell several inches; his chin lifting a fraction. "Will you stay for dinner?"

"You want me ter… ter stay? Usually people are pleased ter see the back o' me!"

"I want you to stay," Flora repeated, firmly. "I'd like to hear all about what you've been doing over the past few weeks."

The dwarf left just after sunset, passing Alistair and his escort of Royal Guard at the gate. Waylaying the king a moment, Oghren revealed his plans to join the Grey Wardens; glancing hopefully up at the taller man out of the corners of his eyes. After expressing initial surprise, Alistair had grinned and clapped the dwarf on the back, offering sincere congratulations.

When the king turned reflexively towards the guest chambers, Oghren had called out; halfway through heaving himself up into his long-suffering pony.

"She ain't up there, Alistair. She went off ter the Chantry."

"Oh."

Alistair blinked; somewhat surprised. Flora was not particularly religious, and tended to avoid the Chantry if her presence was not required. From what he remembered of monastery routine and ritual, the evening service wouldn't begin for another hour.

All became clear once he had arrived within Revanloch's Chantry, the cool stone interior a welcome sanctuary from the muggy humidity of the evening. The hollow space appeared near-empty at first, a lone Chantry Sister refilling the incense holders with fresh sage.

Then a shifting of movement caught Alistair's eye, and he caught sight of Flora's two Templar guardians; standing still as suits of armour at the entrance to a side chapel. The glow of candlelight emanated from the recessed hollow, and Alistair headed duly towards it.

Flora was sitting cross-legged on the flagstones, her dual arcs of remembrance set out neatly before her. The wax had trickled down the stalks of the candles, stretching out in pale rivulets across the dark basalt tiles; she had clearly been sitting there for some time. An abandoned taper drooped between her fingers, the end still smoking.
Not wanting to disturb her contemplation, Alistair managed to fold his powerful frame unobtrusively down to the flagstones beside her. Flora blinked, as though awakened from some waking dream; peering at him as though he was a stranger. There were damp streaks on her cheeks, eyelashes clumped together with the remnants of stray tears.

The king leaned forward and kissed his mistress on each side of her face in turn, tasting salt against his lips.

"My sweet girl," he murmured and said nothing more, waiting for her to speak in her own time.

"Nobody understands why I'm still sad," Flora mumbled after a moment, without further clarification. Alistair bit back his question, reaching out and smoothing a wispy curl of hair away from her forehead.

"About my spirits being gone," she explained, realising that her tears could theoretically have been for any of the dead commemorated before her. There was a candle to represent each of those who had been lost over the course of their journey; from their ill-fated Warden-Commander Duncan, to a lowly husk of a dwarf named Ruck, cowering in the darkest recesses of the Deep Roads.

"Because they weren't people. But they were like people to me," Flora continued, tearfully. "They were my friends. They made me who I was. They helped so many, they gave up existing to end the Blight, and… and nobody cares. There'll be memorials for all the others who gave their lives for Ferelden, but my spirits... nobody will remember them, except for me!"

She stared at him, part-tearful and part-indignant. The glimmering tangle of candle-flames was reflected in her pale irises, illuminating the gold fleck left by the Archdemon's soul. Alistair gazed back at her for a long moment, a line creasing his noble brow as he mentally crafted his response.

"Darling, we've all been saved by your spirits at one time or the other. Whether it was from some deadly blow deflected, a fatal injury healed, or a poison cured. We all ought to remember them."

The king nodded, warming to his idea as he enunciated it.

"Let's have a memorial for them tomorrow evening. We'll invite everyone."

Flora blinked at him, damp-eyed and hopeful.

"You… you think they'll come?"

_For you, they will_, the king thought to himself as he nodded, firmly.

"Of course, my love. We owe our lives to them."

Alistair reached out and brushed his thumb gently beneath her eyelashes, lifting away the wetness clinging there.

"But no kneeling in vigil for eight hours this time, eh?"

Flora inhaled unsteadily, then lunged forwards, shoving herself ingloriously against the solid bulk of his chest. The king leaned back, gathering his mistress into his arms and kissing the top of her head with sudden, fierce affection.

"You grieve as long as you need to," he murmured into the untidy mass of dark red hair, his fingers sliding down to clasp hard into hers. "My sweet girl."
Alistair's gaze settled on a tall, dripping candle that he somehow knew was meant to represent Duncan. For a moment, he fancied that he saw their old Warden-Commander standing in the hollowed recess of the chapel, his dark Rivaini eyes shifting thoughtfully in the candlelight.

Are you looking after your sister-warden as I requested, Alistair? Remember: she's younger than you, and wholly inexperienced in the ways of the world.

Actually, Duncan, she mostly ended up looking after me. After all of us.

But I swear, I'll take care of her now. For as long as she lives, I'll keep her safe: my sister-warden.

"Don't set yourself on fire," muttered Knight-Captain Gannorn darkly from the chapel entrance, eyeing the ring of burning candles. "Or our Chantry."

Chapter End Notes

I like this chapter because it has Oghren in it, a character who I slightly neglected in TLATL! I hope to give him a bit more of an interesting role in this one. Plus, it's a nice excuse to bring Loghain down for the coronation, plus some of the new characters from Awakenings. It has a bit of joviality in it, and also a bit of sadness – Flora, realistically, still isn't over the loss of her spirits. But I think having a memorial for them - like they did for the other dead – will help her grieving process. GOOD IDEA ALISTAIR!

In other matters, the coronation/wedding is NEXT WEEK and Flora still knows bugger all, lol.
The following day rained incessantly, the drizzle only abating when the murky sun began to sink into the western horizon. A veil of mist settled over the cliffs; softening Revanloch's harsh basalt edges and restricting vision to a few dozen yards. As the twilight deepened into a rich, lustrous navy; stars emerged like little jewels from the heavens, rays of moonlight scattering the mists to reveal the great dark swathe of the Amaranthine Ocean.

To Flora's relief, Alistair and Leliana had taken charge of organising the impromptu 'memorial' for her spirits. It didn't seem appropriate somehow to hold such a service within the Chantry, in light of their less-than-flattering view of mages. Instead, they decided to hold it atop the Revanloch ramparts, in view of both sea and star-studded sky. In lieu of the customary pyre, the remnants of Flora's staff were brought down from the palace; though Guilluame discreetly kept one fragment behind to use for future display.

Alistair had sent frantic messages about the memorial around the noble district and across to the Circle camp – the mages alone had remained on the Alamari plains, in an effort to purify the tainted soil so that it could be used for crops once more. As sundown drew near, a whole caravan of people passed beneath Revanloch's crumbling main gate. Many of them did not quite understand what exactly they were attending, but they came out of regard of their young Cousland; who had taken the loss of her spirits very hard.

Leonas Bryland arrived first on horseback, proving that his maimed hand was no deterrent to skilled ridership. Shortly afterwards, the Cousland and Guerrin brothers arrived as part of a small group; talking in low voices to each other as they rode beneath the old stone archway and into Revanloch's large courtyard.

Flora's companions arrived next in a slow trickle; Oghren on his stout little pony, followed shortly by Leliana, who had been perusing robes in the newly restocked Denerim market. Now that the Blight was ended, imports had begun to trickle back through Ferelden's ports; including a fresh shipment of raw silk from Orlais. Sten, who had never trusted Flora's spirits but appreciated their utility, arrived in their wake. The stableboys, awed and intimidated by the Qunari's bulk, scuttled to take his horse while not quite daring to look him in the eye.

Wynne arrived just as the drizzle began to abate, the senior mage murmuring animatedly to Ferelden's First Enchanter. Irving had done his own quiet research into the identity of Flora's spirits; beings of such blatant antiquity and power tended to have legends attached to them. This was now a pointless pursuit – the spirits had been blasted apart by the Archdemon's soul, and would take millennia to reform – but Irving wished to honour their contribution regardless.

Meanwhile, up in the guest chamber, a miserable Flora was sitting on the edge of the bed, pulling compulsively at a loose thread in her sleeve. Alistair had half-finished pruning his facial hair of authority, squinting at his reflection in the mirror with shaving-blade in hand.

"Does it look alright, Lo? I'll take it all off if it looks ridiculous."

"You look very handsome," she replied with forced cheer; turning her head to give Alistair a quick and entirely unnecessary once-over. "But you'd look handsome if you were bald-headed and had a moustache like Oghren."
Alistair smiled at Flora over his shoulder, appreciative of her effort to find kind words in the midst of her sadness.

"Thank you, darling, but I'm not ambitious enough to pursue dwarven-style facial hair."

Flora dropped her gaze to her lap, and then blinked as a shadow fell over the floorboards. She looked up to see Zevran already partway across the room, clad in a dark leather tunic with a high collar that rose about his throat. The elf's expression was sombre, and he clutched a bouquet of sunset-hued flowers.

"Mi florita," he murmured, glancing swiftly behind him before bending down to kiss both of Flora's cheeks in quick succession. "Lo siento."

"I see you still hate doors," commented Alistair amiably. Moments later the king cursed as he accidentally nicked his cheek with the shaving-blade, pressing his thumb to the minute wound in annoyance.

Flora smiled wanly up at Zevran, her eyes moving curiously to the bunch of flowers clasped in his hand. They were exotic in appearance, made up of dozens of clustered tiny petals in hues of amber and peach.

"What are these?" she asked curiously, touching one delicate green stem with a finger.

"They are caléndulas, carina," replied the elf, softly. "The flower of mourning, according to Antivan custom."

Flora felt tears beginning to well in the corners of her eyes, and blinked them back furiously.

"They always warned me never to cry in front of anyone," she mumbled, aware in retrospect that her spirits had subtly been preparing her for the role of Warden-Commander. "I think they'll be disappointed in me tonight."

Zevran pressed the flowers into Flora's bitten-nailed hands, patting her knee gently with his own elegant fingers.

"I think such a thing would be impossible," he murmured quietly, withdrawing his hand and glancing behind once again. "You have another visitor, I will see you on the ramparts."

As the elf made a quiet exit, Flora and Alistair peered at one another in confusion. The guest chamber was ostensibly empty, the corridor outside quiet, save for the shifting boots of Flora's Templars against the creaking floorboards. A humid evening breeze filtered in through the ajar window, ruffling the curtains with a gentle whisper of fabric against glass.

"Wha- " started Alistair, then his eyes were drawn to a flutter of movement in the centre of the window frame.

A raven, its feathers glossy and indigo, was perched with claws digging into the wood. Small, clever eyes were focused on the occupants of the room; as though establishing who was present before committing to entrance. Flora rose to her feet, using her palms to propel herself upwards from the mattress, wide-eyed and with her mouth part open.

The raven let itself drift slowly inside, wings spread. Before it made contact with the floorboards, it's outline began to blur and unfold outwards, a dark silhouette that shifted into female form. The feet that landed on the floorboards were those of a woman, bound in strips of leather and with nails darkened by earth.
The Witch of the Wilds stood before them clad in her usual rustic garb, small beads and animal bones woven into strands of ink-black hair. It had been the first time that Alistair had seen the witch since pleading with her to help Flora in the Fade; and the first time that Flora herself had seen Morrigan since the roof of Fort Drakon, with the Archdemon snarling in the far corner.

"Well," Morrigan began, determined to begin the conversation on her own terms. "It's been some time. Don't lie and claim that you missed me-"

Flora scuttled across the room with surprising vigour for someone in her advanced condition. She came to an abrupt halt before Morrigan with face contorted, fists clenched at her sides; simultaneously desperate to embrace her and respectful of the witch's personal space.

Morrigan's carefully blank expression flickered as she gazed downwards. A moment later, the witch sighed and raised a hand.

"If you must. Such sentiment, 'tis enough to make the stomach roll!"

Flora wasted no more time, throwing her arms around the witch's waist and embracing her with a delighted squawk. Alistair responded with slightly more measured enthusiasm; flashing Morrigan a rueful smile over Flora's head.

"We thought you'd gone back to the swamps, Mor."

Morrigan let out a small sniff, letting her hand brush abrupt but affectionate down Flora's back.

"I could call your city a swamp of humanity, but I do not; in the interest of maintaining civility. I certainly hope that you do not expect me to address you as Your Majesty!"

"I can say with absolute certainty that I did not expect that," Alistair replied mildly, as Flora continued to cling to the witch's bosom.

"Hmph," said Morrigan, eyeing the top of Flora's dark red head. "I see you have not abandoned your limpet-like qualities. Will it take another Blight for you to release me?"

Yet there was no harshness in her tone; and a modicum of affection could be found within the soft reproach.

Finally Flora withdrew, her eyes bright and appreciative. She beamed up at their most longstanding companion, who had first joined their cause in the Korcari Wilds after an instruction from the inimitable Flemeth.

"I'm so glad to see you," she said, honest and without ornament. "I thought you'd gone. Are you coming to my memorial?"

"Not your memorial, Flo," replied Alistair, a stern note in his tone. "The memorial for your spirits."

Morrigan's dark-painted lip curled and she swung her head from side to side in the negative, with a little accompanying shudder.

"I have spent most of my life avoiding the wrath of Templars. I do not think it wise that I – technically, an apostate – reveal myself within their inner sanctum."

The witch reached down to Flora's stomach with a business-like hand, letting her palm follow the curve of the baby.
"You're carrying high and full," the witch murmured, feeling a twitch of movement beneath her fingers. "In the animal kingdom, this means that the child is male. Perhaps it is the same in the human kingdom also."

Alistair felt something constrict in his throat at Morrigan's words; his stomach clenching within his gut.

"Really," said Flora cluelessly, her fingers settling instinctively on the rounded swell. "What about in the fish kingdom? Oh, fish lay eggs."

Morrigan shot her a mildly incredulous look, and then cleared her throat.

"I came to tell you that I intend to return to the Wilds, to see if they are indeed Blighted. I also go in search of my mother; though I doubt she lingered if our home was in immediate danger. I do plan on – oh, blast and damnation!"

This was in response to Alistair sniffing and brushing a hand quickly over his face. Flora turned towards her former brother-warden in alarm, spotting the beginnings of tears in the corners of his hazel eyes.

"Sorry," Alistair muttered, embarrassed. "It's just-"

He made a little gesture towards Flora's stomach, using his sleeve to dab at his face. Flora smiled at him, while Morrigan rolled her eyes in blatant derision.

"And here I thought it was the woman who became unbalanced with the growth of a babe," the witch muttered, reaching to adjust the leather thong circling her neck. "Anyway, I did not wish to leave without… saying farewell."

Flora took a deep, steadying breath. She had been preparing herself for some time for this moment: when one of her companions made their goodbyes.

"Will you be back for the baby?" she asked, hopefully.

Morrigan shot her a quick, darting look from the corner of her gilded eye.

"Why, 'tis up to you," she murmured, in faintly mocking tones. "Would you desire the presence of an apostate such as myself at the bedside of a newborn infant? I might turn it into a frog."

"Of course," Flora replied immediately as Alistair narrowed his eyes in a scowl. "I want the baby to meet one of the bravest women I know."

"The bravest?" repeated Morrigan, one eyebrow rising. "How so?"

"Leaving the Wilds must have been like me leaving Herring," Flora explained, earnestly. "But you were in the Wilds for even longer. It must have been very strange."

"Let's not forget that her mother all but forced her into it," muttered Alistair quietly, who had not forgiven the witch for her flippant comment about transforming the baby into an amphibian.

"Still," repeated Flora, firmly. "It was brave of you to come with us. Thank you."

Morrigan inclined her head, lifting her chin and taking a step backwards.

"Alistair, it may be possible for me to write to you on the state of the Wilds, and the condition of the land which I pass over," she murmured, not quite meeting his gaze. "Would this perhaps be useful to
"you, considering your new position?"

Alistair's eyebrows rose, and he looked at the witch with a guarded gratitude.

"Well, yes," he replied, warily. "Eamon is planning some sort of royal progress for after the coronation, but it'll only reach as far as Lothering. It'd be useful to learn the extent of the Blight's damage further south. Thank… thank you, Morrigan."

The Chasind woman inclined her head with a wordless, feline grace, retreating rapidly towards the window as she heard the booted sounds of Templars outside. Flora bit at her lip, resisting the urge to embrace their oldest companion one final time.

The witch clambered up onto the window bench, lithe and graceful as any Theodesian predator; as the door opened, she folded herself into a beating of feathered wings.

Alistair wrinkled his nose at the faint, acrid tang of magic; whereas Flora had been so utterly severed from the Fade that she could not even smell its residue.

Moments later, Knight-Captain Gannorn entered, with the slightly wary expression he adopted whenever coming into a room where the king and his mistress had been left alone. Upon seeing them both fully dressed and at a chaste distance, he opened both of his eyes and cleared his throat.

"The visitors are gathered upon the ramparts, Your Majesty."

Alistair looked down at Flora, just in time to see her flinch. He reached out to anchor his best friend's fingers tightly within his own, bringing her hand to his mouth.

"Ready to say goodbye to your spirits, my love?"

"No," she replied in a small voice, then took a deep breath and channelled her best Herring stoicism. "But, let's go."

Chapter End Notes

OOC Author Note: Aaaaah, Alistair getting sentimental about his unborn baby is def my aesthetic, lol. I love Morrigan, I love every part of her acerbic personality – I don't want to soften her spiky edges at all. The orange flowers that Zevran gives Flora are marigolds, which are actually a Mexican flower of mourning, not Spanish!
The shroud of dusk settled upon Revanloch, the stars like hanging ethereal lanterns overhead. The moon was so low that it appeared almost to be submerged within the deep green vista of the Amaranthine Ocean. In the distance, the city of Denerim could be seen smouldering away; the light from several hundred braziers creating an ochre haze above the clustered buildings.

Atop the ramparts, Flora's companions both noble and common gathered about an empty iron brazier; a salt-edged breeze ruffling hair and clothing. It was not like the usual Fereldan memorial – there was no priestess present, no effigy of Andraste, none of the recognisable Chantry funereal trappings – and yet this was not a usual memorial. There was no body and no pyre, only a few fragments of charred wood placed carefully on a silver tray.

Leliana, who had taken charge of this strange service, cleared her throat. She had dressed up in her lay-sister robes, her hair neatly pinned behind her ears and her expression very solemn.

"The Maker gathers all souls and spirits to his side," the bard began, her voice carrying clear and melodic across the ramparts. "Yet there are some spirits which forsake their deserved eternal rest to serve a greater purpose. In this case, to assist Ferelden in the defence against the Fifth Blight."

Flora inhaled unsteadily, grateful for both Alistair's hand clamped firmly around her own, and Finian standing close at her elbow.

"The contribution of these spirits – of Valour, and Compassion – cannot be denied," Leliana continued, softly. "First Enchanter?"

Irving stepped forwards, fingers tucked into the sleeves of his robe and lined face wreathed in thought.

"To be a spirit healer is a rare calling," Ferelden's most senior mage mused, contemplative. "It is unusual for spirits to show any interest in the waking world, let alone for them to reach out and make contact with a mortal. I am only sorry, Flora, that I was unaware of your skills whilst you were at the Tower. You would not have been so neglected."

"It's alright," Flora replied, in a small voice. "I didn't stand out at all."

"And yet the spirits chose you," Irving countered, his shrewd eyes settling on her. "Out of all the mages within Ferelden."

There was silence for a moment, during which a seagull gave a long and mournful cry. Leliana, who had been intending to ask Flora to share her first memories of her spirits, saw the agonised look on the young Cousland's face and rapidly changed her course.

"I don't think there's one amongst us here who haven't benefitted from Flora's spirits in some way," the lay sister said, softly. "Would anybody like to share one of these memories?"

Without pause, Teagan Guerrin raised a hand. All eyes turned to the bann, including Flora's own damp gaze.

"When the dead surged out from the gates of Redcliffe Castle, they didn't split their forces," Teagan
murmured, his voice low. "Our defences at the southern barricade would have been overwhelmed in minutes. Then the lass went running off towards the enemy. Her shield went up over the bridge, and it bought us time to bring in reinforcements from the east path. As a result, the village – and our lives - were preserved."

Flora blinked at Teagan as he shot her a quick glance, both of them remembering distinctly that cold and rainy night when the dead had stormed Redcliffe.

*Light the oil! she had bellowed, slithering over the mud towards the defenders as the barrier disintegrated behind her. Light it, light it, light it! The fire was ignited, and she had brought up her shield; crashing through the flames with sparks licking the hem of her battered woollen coat.*

Leonas put up his hand next, the coarse stitches still lodged in the ruins of his maimed fingers. When the arl of South Reach spoke, his voice was rueful and reminiscent.

"An assassin once poisoned my flagon. I saw my life pass before my eyes – my throat burned as though a fire had been stoked in my belly. I couldn't see the great hall or even those sat around me – all had gone dark – and then the lady Cousland came crashing over the table, elegant as always - " here, the general flashed a wry smile sideways at Flora "- and she *drew* the poison from me, breathed it in as though it were… as though it were perfume. I would have been dead in minutes, if it wasn't for the healing that Florence imparted."

Arl Eamon then told of how his son's life had been saved when Flora had ventured into the Fade; a strange golden light blistering the demon until it had burnt from the inside out. Fergus recanted the terrible moment when the South Reach assassin had severed a chandelier above Finian's head; only for the glass to shatter harmlessly against a gleaming, gilded shield expanding from Flora's outstretched fingers. Zevran, his expression uncharacteristically sombre, told of a girl who had spent all day patrolling about the army camp, and then all evening standing hopefully beneath a *heeling Here too-day! (Free)* sign in the most dangerous parts of the city.

Wynne had told of a shield being summoned across a tower roof in Fort Drakon; protecting Flora's companions while also preventing them from intervening as she limped alone towards the snarling Archdemon. The senior enchanter's words echoed across the ramparts, and Alistair felt a low curdling of nausea in his stomach; recalling the horrific moment when he had realised what Flora was intending. His grip tightened on her fingers, and he had to suppress the urge to embrace her.

Throughout each recanted memory, Flora had listened avidly as though she were not the central protagonist in each one. She had never taken credit for any of these actions – always deferring praise to her spirits, from whom she derived all her magic. In her hands, she clutched the fragmented remains of her staff; the wood charred and smeared with fingerprints. It was so unassuming in appearance that it could have masqueraded as a broken broom handle, and none would have been the wiser.

Finally, Alistair stepped forwards; the king's expression carefully neutral but his green-flecked eyes stern and determined.'

"I could stand here all night listing each fatal blow that Flo's magic has deflected from me," he said, bluntly. "I would be dead a thousand times over, if not for her spirits. Ferelden is saved, and the Blight *ended* because of them."

Alistair glanced down at his mistress, the purposeful amber gaze softening.

"They saved your life, and… and the life *within* you, Lo. I owe them more than I could ever hope to say."
Flora swallowed, feeling her stomach constrict in a single, painful twist of sadness. There came a moment of silence, and she realised that everybody was waiting for her cue; giving her the chance to speak, if she so wished.

*How can I possibly explain what you meant to me?* she thought furiously into the silent void, tears forming in the corners of her eyes. *You were part of my own self. How can I describe that? My Silver Knight and Golden Lady.*

Not wanting to look at anyone’s expectant face, Flora dropped her gaze to the shadowed expanse of the Amaranthine Ocean, opaque as the surface of a mirror. The reflected night sky appeared to lie drowned beneath its placid surface; submerged stars wreathing a sunken pearl of a moon.

"You were there from the beginning to the end," she whispered at last, fingers tightening compulsively around the broken shards of wood. "You were the family that the Templars couldn't take from me."

Flora felt the edge of the wood bite into her white-seared palm, a bead of blood rising where a splinter had dug itself into the flesh. Whereas before she would have pressed her lips to the wound without a second thought; now, Flora gazed down at the tiny cut with horrified fascination, aware of her own new impotence.

*Come on: this is their memorial. You have to do them proud, do this properly.*

Swallowing and forcing herself to look away, Flora cleared her throat and continued, in a small and determined voice.

"In the Circle, I cleaned corridors during the day, but you taught me how to mend in the Fade. When the Archdemon forced its way into my dreams, you made me face it until I could stare it in the eye without flinching. Now, every night… I'm on my own in the darkness. I see nothing, I- I hear nothing. I don't dream of anything. I'm alone, *properly* alone. For the first time in my life."

Flora took a deep breath, not wanting to look at Alistair as his handsome face creased in distress beside her. She had a sudden vision of her dad, Pel, frowning at such a display of *melodrama*; his inherent Herring stoicism thrumming in disapproval.

*Sorry, papa. Can I blame it on the baby unbalancing me?*

After another steadying gulp of air, she stepped forwards to place the fragments of her staff into the iron brazier. The scattered shards of wood seemed small and insubstantial against the metal belly of the vessel; Flora had to resist the urge to scoop them out and press them protectively to her chest.

*No,* she thought fiercely to herself. *No matter what you did with this staff once, it's just kindling now.*

Wynne stepped forward, touching the head of her own staff to the fragments of wood. An ochre flame sprung up, catching the dry shards almost immediately. They burned as ordinarily as any other wood, a thin trail of smoke curling upwards towards the twilit heavens.

Flora watched the remains of her staff burn within the makeshift pyre; her heart beating with such rapid ferocity that it almost frightened her. She had to physically stop herself from reaching into the flames and pulling out the smouldering splinters, reminding herself furiously that she no longer had the ability to summon a protective sheath around her hand.

Although she had been able to watch Riordan's body as it was engulfed on the pyre weeks prior, Flora found herself unable to keep her eyes on the shards of wood as they began to burn and blacken. She looked down at her feet, feeling the tears finally spill over her eyelashes; no longer
caring if the others saw her cry.

Before the first tears had made their way down past her nose, Flora felt her former brother-warden reach around her waist, drawing her back beneath the protective crook of his arm. Catching sight of Alistair's expression from the corner of her eye, Flora was startled at the grimness and the guilt fighting for dominance across his handsome features.

*He didn't realise how alone I felt at night. But how was he supposed to know? I didn't tell him.*

Now Flora could feel Alistair rigid and unhappy beside her, his arm clamped tightly about her shoulders. She gave him a reassuring nudge with her elbow, and he shot her an agonised glance in return from the corner of his eye.

Within minutes, the shards had become charred curlieques of carbon, lying in the bottom of the brazier like the leavings of a hearth-fire. Leliana, who had conducted the service for Flora's spirits with the same solemnity as she would have done for any fallen soldier, murmured a Chantry incantation; passing her hand gracefully before her chest.

"Let us take a moment."

There followed a short silence as those gathered on the ramparts paused to reflect; some thinking dutifully on Flora's spirits, others focusing more on the girl who had channelled their mighty will. An owl let out a mournful hoot from somewhere within Revanloch's rafters, the sound echoing about the crumbling walls and shadowed courtyards.

Zevran caught Flora's eye skilfully from the other side of the brazier. She blinked at him and he held up tan, elegant fingers twisted into the shape of a heart. Flora attempted to smile at him, the corner of her mouth curving into a miserable grimace.

At a subtle cue from Leliana, Alistair cleared his throat; keeping a tight grip on his mistress as she slumped miserably at his side.

"Thank you all for coming," he murmured in a quiet undertone, aware that a memorial for departed *spirits* was somewhat of an odd concept. "I appreciate it."

Leonas Bryland grunted, touching his maimed hand to Alistair's shoulder.

"For the little lass," he murmured under his breath, nodding to where Flora was still hunched and unhappy beneath Alistair's protective arm. "Look after her."

Just as the group was on the verge of splintering, a low and steady voice came from the steps leading down into the courtyard.

"I still think about that golden ship sometimes."

Chapter End Notes

OOC Author Note: I think this will help Flora in her grieving process! I thought it would be a nice thing to do, to have a memorial for her spirits considering they played such a major role in The Lion and the Light. It was nice to revisit some of their
contributions from the previous story, though!
Those still gathered on the ramparts turned to see the young Templar lieutenant, clad in travelling leathers and with a full pack slung over his shoulder. In the courtyard below, they could hear the chatter of the stable boys as they readied a lone horse for departure.

"I still remember it. The golden ship that your spirits made," Cullen repeated steadily, his tawny eyes fixing themselves on Flora's face. She stared back at him, astonished by the lack of customary shyness in his stare.

"The one from South Reach," she breathed, recalling a clouded spring evening and a fine mist of drizzle. "Connor's ship."

*We stood on the cobbledstones in the courtyard,* Flora remembered, a lump rising to her throat. *Me, Connor Guerrin, this young Templar. I wanted to show Connor that magic could be a… a beautiful thing to possess, rather than just something to be feared.*

"It was meant to be a constellation," Cullen said after a moment, not well versed in astrological lore. "Do you remember going up to the tower roof, with the arl's son?"

Arl Eamon stiffened slightly, his ears pricking with interest. Flora nodded, remembering how she had sent her gleaming simulacrum of the *Peraquialus* on a slow, glimmering ascent; while Connor had tugged her with *excited-child* haste up the winding tower steps.

*We came out on the roof – this Templar behind us, keeping pace – and Connor's face was bright with pleasure and excitement. He wasn't scared of the magic anymore; he was fascinated by it.*

"I'll never forget the sight of that golden ship rising into the sky," Cullen said, earnest and – for the span of several heartbeats – unashamed of his own admiration. "It was one of the… one of the most beautiful things I've ever seen. The boy couldn't stop talking about it on the journey to the Circle."

Flora inhaled unsteadily, grateful for Alistair's steadying arm about her waist. Cullen continued, the words emerging in a heated rush as though he were spilling his sins in a Chantry confession box.

"Anyway, I wanted to give you… to give you this."

The young officer turned to his pack and reached down, retrieving a roll of parchment sealed with a wax Chantry emblem. Uncomfortably aware of the eyes of Ferelden's most powerful nobility resting on him, Cullen strode across the ramparts and thrust the roll of parchment into a startled Flora's hand.

"I'd like to request that you don't open it right away," he mumbled, retreating quickly towards his travel pack. "Or, at least – not in front of me."

Alistair narrowed his eyes a fraction as Flora blinked, astonished. She clutched the roll of parchment, wondering at its length and weight.

Finian watched the Templar curiously as he went to retrieve pack, sword and shield; one fine russet brow lifting.
"Are you going somewhere, Lieutenant Rutherford?"

Cullen gave a slight nod in response, clearly anxious to remove himself before Flora could break the seal on the parchment.

"I've been posted to Kirkwall, in the Marches," he replied, quietly. "I'm hoping it'll be less… eventful up there."

Without another word, the Templar slung his pack over his shoulder; nearly dropping sword and sigil-marked shield in his haste. Head bowed and gaze set determinedly forwards, Cullen made his way down the steps leading into the lower courtyard.

The moment that the officer's curly blond head disappeared below the ramparts, Finian reached out and snatched the roll of parchment from Flora's hand.

"Wasn't that the Templar who kept mooning over you at South Reach? I bet this is a love letter," he said gleefully, picking at the wax seal as Flora squawked in outrage. "A declaration of undying passion!"

"Undying passion!?" demanded Alistair, nostrils flaring. The king had still not fully recovered from the revelation that Fergus had already turned down a half-dozen proposals for his younger sister's hand. "Let me see!"

"Nonsense," countered Leliana firmly, her eyes focused with predatory interest on the roll of parchment. "It's far too large for a letter."

Flora, nonplussed, watched her brother break the seal on the wax, unrolling the full dimension of the thin vellum. It was about an arm's length in width, and Finian said nothing as he stared at the parchment's contents.

"What is it?" demanded Leliana, making an impatient gesture. "Show us!"

Wordlessly, Finian turned the parchment so that Flora could see it.

The vellum, made of finest calfskin, was decorated with an illustration scribed in ink-pen. The Templar had replicated near-perfectly the fine-boned structure of Flora's features, her eyes half-closed and her full Cousland mouth part-open. Her hand – accurate down to the bitten fingernails – was raised before her face, oddly graceful. Using the gold ink usually reserved for decorating copies of the Chant, Cullen had illustrated curlicues of light radiating from the outstretched fingertips; coiling effortlessly to the edges of the vellum. Flecks of metallic ink surrounded the portrait like a misting rain, and veins of gold ran through the windswept hair.

Flora had never seen her old abilities depicted in such a way before. In conjunction with her new inability to dream, she had resigned herself to the fact that she would never again see how her magic looked. The Templar's inked drawing had preserved that which Flora had believed would gradually slip into the darker recesses of her memory. Breathless, she reached out to touch the vellum with a fingertip, tracing the metallic outline of the emerging magic.

"How beautiful, ma petite," Leliana murmured, her eyes moving over various painstaking details. "What a kind parting gift."

Squinting down at the uncanny replication of Flora's face – exact down to the curve of the mouth and delicate hollow of the throat – Arl Leonas' eyes narrowed a fraction, and he nudged Fergus in the ribs.
"I'd wager that's not the first time that the Templar has drawn your sister," he muttered in an undertone. "That's a practised hand."

Fergus nodded, keeping his response similarly low.

"Aye, I was thinking the same thing," he replied, grimly. "Still, he's headed off to Kirkwall. The Marcher wind will blow any inappropriate desires out of his head."

Down in the courtyard, Cullen finished loading up the horse with the last of his possessions. He had gathered scant belongings during his decade at the Chantry, and the horse was not especially weighted. After attaching his shield to the saddle, he reached for his sword, which was propped up against a nearby barrel.

Sliding the long blade carefully into its travel scabbard, Cullen took a deep breath of damp Revanloch evening air. The Templar knew it could be the last time that he would ever stand within the crumbling walls of the old monastery. Yet Cullen felt no sorrow at the prospect – Ferelden held an excess of vexing memories, of both torture and temptation in equal measure. There was a considerable part of the young man which hoped that Kirkwall would prove to be a place that he could call home; where he could both serve the Maker and sleep easy in his bed.

"Lieutenant Rutherford?"

The officer turned around and startled; if he had been holding something in his hands, he would have dropped it. Flora was standing on the cobbles, slightly flush in the face from the exertion of scuttling across the ramparts and down the steps. She stared up at him, wide-eyed and solemn, shifting from foot to foot in an effort to stop herself from lunging forward.

"Thank you for the picture," she said after a moment, impulsively. "Sorry for opening it. My brother is bad at following instructions; not like me."

Cullen dropped his stare to the cobbles, self-consciousness flooding his cheeks with a rush of pink.

"It's… it's fine," he muttered to his boots. "You're welcome."

Despite the veil of dusk settling over Revanloch like a shroud, torchlight illuminated the young man's flushed face. Abandoning caution to the wind, Flora stepped forwards. Relatively confident that Cullen would not reject her – nobody had ever recoiled from one of her earnestly offered embraces – she stretched her arms towards him.

Sure enough, after a moment of fleeting indecision, the Templar accepted her hug; at first rigid, and then relaxing in small increments. He patted her awkwardly and rather forcefully between the shoulder-blades, as though trying to dislodge some stuck food.

"Good luck in Kirkwall," Flora mumbled into his shoulder, before withdrawing in the hope that she had not embarrassed him too extensively. The Templar summoned stoicism to his face to disguise any careless fragment of emergent emotion; nodding tightly as he made to mount the saddle.

Flora stepped back, shielding her eyes against the torchlight as Cullen nudged the horse's flank gently with his knee. With a final, gruff nod in her direction, he turned his mount's head towards Revanloch's main gate.

This doesn't feel like a forever-parting, Flora wondered, watching his silhouette diminish as he rode away. I can't explain why.

I don't regret anything, the young Templar thought defiantly to himself as the horse picked its way
over the cobbles.

Once Cullen's horse had disappeared into the shadows, the others joined Flora in the courtyard. The stable boys moved quietly about them, leading their horses out from the stables. By this time, the moon had risen full and plump; a swollen white peach casting a watery hue over Revanloch's damp cobbles.

Flora watched her friends and companions prepare to mount up, talking softly amongst themselves. Eamon was murmuring to Finian about the need to re-open Amaranthine's port for trade; while Wynne and Irving exchanged wry smiles at the suspicious glances they were receiving from the Templar guards. The courtyard quickly became crowded as retainers clad in Guerrin, Cousland, Bryland and Theirin livery emerged from the servants' hall, ready to escort their noble charges back to the city.

Flora stood to one side, watching the preparations to depart. A light, misting drizzle had begun to fall and she tucked the roll of parchment into her tunic to protect it.

Eamon clambered up onto his horse, rubbing at a sore knee with a grimace before sliding his boot into the stirrup. The arl of Redcliffe glanced around for his retainers, one eyebrow rising as he saw Alistair standing motionless on the cobbles. The king's horse was waiting patiently, head held still by a dutiful young stableboy.

"Alistair?"

"I'm not coming back to the palace with you, uncle," replied Alistair, low and steady.

Flora blinked across at him, clutching the folds of her tunic shut over the roll of parchment.

"I'll be there for the guild meeting tomorrow," the king continued, his gaze not leaving his mistress' face. "But I'm staying with Flo tonight."

Alistair rounded the back of the horse, coming to a halt on the cobblestones just before Flora. Flora wondered at the seriousness of his expression, pressing her cheek reflexively into his palm as he cupped the side of her face. Staring up at him, she saw her own miserable confession from earlier writ plain across his features.

*Every night, I'm on my own in the darkness. I see nothing, I hear nothing. I don't dream. I'm alone, properly alone.*

Flora's best friend gazed back down at her through the misting drizzle, hazel irises bruised with concern. His thumb traced the high bone of her cheek, and the affectionate gesture brought incongruous tears to Flora's own eyes.

"I'm so sorry that I sent you away after the Blight ended," he said after a moment, the regret running raw in his voice. "I should have been there with you, Lo. I'm such an idiot."

Flora shook her head silently, a protest rising to her lips. Yet Alistair had already turned away, his eyes boring into her two Templar guards standing unobtrusively to one side.

"Your presence won't be required tonight."

Eyes lighting like candles, Zevran leaned across the space between the saddles and whispered in Finian's ear, his expression gleeful. Finian grimaced and looked as though he wanted to elbow the elf in the ribs; neither requiring nor desiring Zevran to enunciate Alistair's intentions more explicitly.
"That's my little sister," he retorted indignantly, sole remaining eye wide and accusatory. "I don't need to hear you say it out loud."

Chapter End Notes

OOC Author Note: So Cullen being good at drawing is ENTIRELY headcanon, lol! Though I think it's not too outlandish, since Templars spend all their time observing and people-watching; I imagine he would be quite good at picking up on facial details. Anyway, I thought this would be a nice way to say farewell to Cullen – though good luck finding peace and quiet in Kirkwall, hahaha…
As much as Alistair may have desired complete privacy, such was an impossible thing if one was the king of Ferelden. Although Knight-Captain Gannorn and Chanter Devotia had been relegated to their own rooms for the night, a half-dozen Royal Guard had been posted outside the guest chamber.

Still, as the king closed the door firmly in his wake, he was grateful for even a semblance of seclusion. Stopping short of actually turning the key in the lock – he knew from experience that this would cause great protest from the guard – he hoped that the door would sit well enough in its uneven frame to stay closed.

Moonlight spilled across the bedchamber from the opened windows, illuminating soft swathes of dust on the floorboards and disguising the patches of damp on the plastered walls. Flora, who was sitting on the edge of the bed, watched a small spider drop from a ceiling beam; the thin silken thread left in its wake caught the luminescence filtering through the clouded glass.

The sound of boot-steps roused Flora from her reverie, and she looked up as Alistair sat beside her on the mattress. He slid over his hand and she took it reflexively, gazing at the contrasting skin tone of their entwined fingers - alabaster woven through olive. His thumb immediately began to rub around her knuckles in slow, comforting circles; the gesture both intimate and familiar.

"Lola," Alistair said quietly after a moment, a raw note of self-doubt in his voice. "Did I do the wrong thing in sending you here after the Blight? I didn't have to listen to Eamon and the council; I am the king."

Flora thought for a moment, her brow furrowing. Alistair leaned forward, unable to help himself, and pressed a kiss to his solemn sister-warden's cheek. Her skin felt cool against his lips – with the departure of her spirits, Flora had lost the residual heat that loaned her body perpetual warmth.

"No, I think it was right," she said, slow and careful. "It gave me a chance to understand how I'd… how I'd changed. And it was quiet here. I – I think I needed some quietness, after what happened."

A small part of Alistair's worry was alleviated with this response; though he still kept a tight and anxious grip on her hand.

"It broke my heart what you said earlier, Lo," he muttered, so quiet she could barely hear him. "About being alone at night, surrounded by darkness. It – it felt like I'd been punched in the gut by a Qunari."

Flora looked down, feeling a sudden, sharp sting of sadness. The tears began to well on her eyelashes and Alistair inhaled, immediately distraught on her behalf.

"I'm so sorry, my love."

Flora shook her head, not trusting herself to speak. He reached out to turn her face towards his own, leaning forwards to let their mouths come naturally together. His lips worked hers open, a bold tongue immediately staking its claim. She let out a muffled gasp into his mouth and Alistair responded with a soft grunt of approval.

"But I'm here now," he murmured, letting his mouth drift over Flora's ear. He could feel her
shivering as he traced the shell-like curve with the tip of his tongue, savouring each breathy squeak that escaped from her lips. The pale line of her throat was too tempting to resist; Alistair's mouth meandered down her neck in a slow progression of little sucking kisses. Flora squirmed helplessly beneath them, her fingers anchored in the folds of his tunic.

"Alistair," she breathed and he let out a low groan of desire against her skin, tracing the hollow of her collarbone with his tongue.

"I'm here, baby."

As the king made love to Flora's throat with the increasingly enthusiastic workings of his lips, his hand was busily divesting her of her clothing. He unfastened the lacings of her tunic with quickly-remembered fleetness, letting the folds of navy lambs-wool fall open to bare her breasts. Flora went to help him, shrugging her shoulders free of the garment so that it pooled around her waist. Her boots were already discarded halfway across the floor; it took but a moment to wriggle her smallclothes down around her thighs. She leaned back against the cushions, eyes heavy-lidded with desire; he followed her movement and began to kiss his way with clumsy ardour down her body.

"You're so beautiful," he mumbled into her skin, tongue now tracing the underside of her breast. "I can't believe you're mine. You exquisite creature."

There was but one thing in Ferelden that could distract a lust-ridden Alistair; and that was Flora's plump stomach, the skin stretched taut over the rounded curve that housed their growing child. He raised his head, gazing in wonder at the mound of flesh rising gently beneath her breasts.


Flora eyed the top of his bronzed head beadily as he planted a gentle mouth on the swollen flesh, kissing it as though the child itself could feel the pressure of his lips. Although she already loved her little toad beyond measure or reason, it had also made her sick that morning and given her indigestion in the afternoon.

"Hm," she said in response, waiting for him to move further south. When he continued to gaze at her belly, transfixed; Flora decided to take matters into her own hands.

Pushing herself up from the cushions, she squirmed her fingers into the waistband of Alistair's loosened breeches; delving them over the hard muscle of his abdomen and down through the nest of tangled hair.

Alistair inhaled unsteadily as she took him in hand, finally distracted from the mound of her stomach.

"Baby," he breathed into her ear, pushing himself hard into her fingers with a shift of his pelvis. "Maker, I've missed you."

Flora smiled against the new king's shoulder, curling an arm around his neck and inhaling the familiar masculine scent of his skin. She could describe the planes and hollows of her best friend's chest from memory, knew intimately the location of each faded scar and old callous.

Abruptly, lust flickering in the depths of his pupils, Alistair shoved his breeches awkwardly down his hips. Reaching out, he placed large hands on Flora's waist and manoeuvred her gently onto his lap. The fire in the hearth had burnt down to embers, just bright enough to ignite the green veins in his tawny irises.

Flora reached out to caress the side of her best friend's face, brought equal in height by her position
straddling his naked thighs.

"I need you," she whispered, touching her thumb to his bearded chin. "Please."

Lost for words, Alistair kissed her in response, hard and desirous. As he leaned forwards, his arousal pressed insistently against her abdomen. Lips parting wetly, they both looked down at it and Alistair's brow furrowed in consternation.

"I don't want to hurt you," he said, a grimace creasing across his olive brow. "Or be too rough. Will you tell me if it's uncomfortable?"

Flora nodded impatiently, using her strong knee to raise herself several inches above his thighs. Alistair took a deep breath, summoning deep from the reserves of self-control, then took himself in hand and began to work inside her, an inch at a time. She was good and slick, which made it easier; but it had still been almost a month since he had last penetrated her. Beads of sweat began to rise to the king's forehead, teeth gritted with the effort required not to hilt himself in one deep thrust. Flora was also grimacing; growing used to the sensation of Alistair's considerable length within her.

Once he was sheathed fully between her legs, she gave an experimental little wriggle. Alistair let a low, helpless groan in response; fingers tightening on her waist.

"Darling," he whispered against her ear, in slightly strangled tones. "Give me a moment, I just almost spent myself."

Flora obediently arrested her momentum, letting Alistair take several deep, steadying gulps of air. Once some fragment of composure had been regained, he gripped Flora by the hips, easing her gently up and down. She matched his movements; letting her pelvis rock in slow synchrony against his own.

"Is – is it alright, Flo?"

Alistair's words blurred as he sunk himself repeatedly inside her, his buttocks clenching with each deep thrust. She let out a squeak of assent as she rode him; increasingly confident as she grew accustomed to her new shape. He groaned, eyelids half-closed with desire as the sounds of their lovemaking expanded to fill the room. The slickness of bodily arousal blended with the cadence of wet flesh meeting and parting; their moans and pants muddying together into a tangle of lust.

Flora's eyes were open, albeit clouded. She was dazedly watching the reflection of her best friend in the mirror; admiring the sweaty muscles of his back as they worked in rippling unison. Then Alistair's lips were at her ear, some coherent words managing to escape between the grunts and groans of pleasure.

"Not – alone," he gasped, urgent, forceful. "I'm here, baby."

At last, at last.

Flora wrapped her arms around his neck, crying out helplessly as she felt her abdomen convulse; waves of energy spreading outwards from her core like a pebble dropped into a rockpool.

This raw whimper was the signal that Alistair had been waiting for; seconds later, he let out a strangled half-snarl of desire and dug his fingers into Flora's shoulders as his own pelvis spasmed violently. The room seemed to darken as his vision contracted; for several moments, he was only aware of his own frantically reverberating heart. Shortly afterwards his sweaty forehead dropped onto Flora's shoulder, the air escaping his lips in a rush. She reached up to slide her arms about his neck, strands of sweaty hair plastered to her cheeks.
Momentarily lost for words, Alistair shifted on the rumpled furs; leaning back against the cushions and bringing Flora with him. She rested her cheek against his chest, feeling him settle his chin on top of her head.

"Well," the king said, somewhat hoarsely. "That was definitely worth the wait."

Flora smiled dazedly into the taut muscle, a thin layer of sweat adhering her cheek to the skin.

"I love you," she whispered, feeling him inhale sharply and grip her a fraction tighter.

"And I adore you," he replied, voice ragged and earnest. "Maker's Breath. You are magnificent, my queen."

Alistair darted an eye towards Flora to see her reaction, yet she was huddled yawning against his chest; well mired in the stupor that followed good lovemaking.

"Ouch, my foot has gone to sleep."

In the passageway, one of the Royal Guardsmen posted at the doorway let out a muffled curse, while his counterpart snickered.

"Ha! A quarter-candle length, jus' as I said. Told you the king wouldn't last a full half, it's the first time he's bedded her in weeks. That's five silver you owe me!"

The first guard extracted a handful of coins from his pocket, belligerent and sulky as he handed them over.

"I still got my other wager," he retorted, defiantly. "Twice more tonight."

"Nah, the lady's got a fat Theirin babe in the belly, she'll be tired. Once more in the mornin', that was their custom in the palace."

Unfortunately for the latter guard, the third bell had just rung when the tell-tale noises began once more. It was the deepest, stillst part of the night, and the silence was broken by the moan of a girl filtering out beneath the door. The moans increased in need and tangled together into an incoherent feminine whimper; raw and pleading.

The first guardsman looked triumphant, and the second made to check his glee quickly; ducking down to squint through the keyhole.

"Tongue-wagging doesn't count!" he protested, indignantly. "It has to be a proper rut."

Unfortunately for him, shortly afterwards the unmistakable sound of wet flesh slapping together emerged from the chamber. The throaty grunts of a man joined with the girl's pants, interspersed with the sound of needy kisses. This bout of lovemaking was lengthier than the first; as they learnt how to best accommodate Flora's stomach.

The first guard grinned, making a rude gesture with his fingers at his scowling comrade.

"Ha! Once more, and I get double back, as agreed. Come on, your Majesty!"

The morning dawned damp and drizzly, an insipid sun barely bothering to show its face behind an Orlesian mask of cloud. Water ran in rivulets down Revanloch's tiled rooftops, flooding gutters and gathering in pools on the flagstones.

Teagan arrived on the tenth bell to escort Alistair back to the palace in good time for the trade guilds
meeting. As the bann ascended the stairs to the guest passageway, he was greeted with one grinning Royal guard and a sulking counterpart.

"My lord," the first guard said, with a diplomatic clearing of the throat. "The king is… indisposed at the moment. He shouldn't be long."

Teagan snorted, leaning against the wall and taking out some correspondence from Rainesfere.

"Good lad," he murmured, dropping his eyes to the sheriff’s report.

"The lady Florence is a lovely lass," offered the second guardsman, for want of anything else to say. "King Alistair is a lucky man."

"Aye, she's beautiful," agreed Teagan, amiably. "And… he is."

"Jealous, my lord?" added the first, slyly. He had once been a man of Redcliffe, and was more familiar with the bann than most.

"Ha!" replied the younger Guerrin, forcing a note of humour into his voice. "I doubt I could keep up with a nineteen year old."

A short while later, the heated sounds from the bedchamber abated and Teagan duly tucked his correspondence away, a little warm under the collar himself. He counted to two hundred under his breath, then strode forwards and delivered a sharp rap to the door.

"The Bann of Rainesfere!" chirped out the triumphant guard as Teagan entered the guest chamber, carefully arranging his features into neutrality.

The room was lit by a weak, insipid sunlight; the cries of seagulls echoing from the cliffs outside. Alistair, clad only in unbuttoned breeches, was in the process of opening the window. The bed itself was in a state of disarray, with cushions strewn halfway across the room and furs tangled beyond recognition.

"Morning, uncle," Alistair called jovially over his shoulder, keeping his breeches up around his hips with one hand as he swung the window open.

"Morning, Alistair," Teagan replied, wryly. "Slept well, I trust?"

Alistair was unable to prevent a grin from spreading across his face as he nodded.

"Well enough."

Just then the attention of both men was drawn by a mournful wail from Flora. She was standing in front of the mirror clad in Alistair’s shirt, twisting her head from side to side to view her neck.

"What's wrong, sweetheart?" Alistair demanded, shooting across the room with remarkable speed for a man his height.

Outraged, Flora turned to face him, gesturing at herself.

"I can't heal these anymore!"

Her throat and shoulders were bruised with the aftermath of Alistair's sucking kisses, dark red marks scattered lewdly across the pale skin. Alistair blinked at her for a moment, and then – mistakenly – chuckled.
This was very much the wrong response to make. Flora bent down, scooped up a cushion with her fingertips and launched it at the King of Ferelden's head. It exploded in a puff of feathers and he sneezed, several wads of fluff shooting directly up his nostrils.

"You feasted on me like a… a moray eel! I'm maimed!"

When Alistair emerged from the storm of feathers, wiping his eyes, Flora was still glowering at him. Trying not to laugh, he reached out his arms towards her.

"Alright, darling. You can plant one on me, if it'd make you feel better- "

Before he had finished speaking, Flora lunged forwards. Instead of pressing her lips to his neck or bare chest, she fastened her mouth around the end of his nose; firm as a limpet. When she withdrew, there was a distinct purplish bruise left at the very tip.

Alistair stared at himself at the mirror, eyebrows lodged somewhere within his hairline. In the background, Flora now appeared somewhat mollified.

"Ha! Haha."

"I'll have to say I was bending down to pet a dog, and it bit my nose," the king of Ferelden said after a moment, breaking into laughter. "My little she-Mabari."

He shot Flora a look that was both intimate and full of meaning, and she immediately blushed; memories from the previous night rising to the surface of her mind.

Teagan cleared his throat, sensing the atmosphere in the room heighten.

"Come on, lad," he said, not unkindly. "There's a hall full of guildsmen and ministers waiting for you."

Chapter End Notes

OOC Author Note: SMUUUUUUUUUUT! I think I have been pretty restrained so far in this story on those grounds, lol. Still, I wanted to draw a little bit of a parallel with when Floristair shag for the first time in TLATL – on that occasion, Flora initiated it to comfort Alistair as he comes to accept the reality of becoming king. Now, Alistair is initiating it to comfort Flora after the loss of her spirits!

also great job on the love bite to the nose, Flo, lol
On the twenty-ninth day of Justinian, the people of Denerim began preparations for their new king’s birthday. Although they were saving much of the best ale for the coronation in five days time, Alistair Theirin turning one-and-twenty was still an excuse for revelry. Merchants intended to close up shop early, taverns would stay open until late; in the wake of the grimmest year in Ferelden’s memory, its people did not require much cause to celebrate.

Before the sun had fully risen over Revanloch's steeply tilted roof, Leliana found herself being shaken awake. The bard groaned, opening one eye to gaze into Flora's alarmed face.

"What's wrong, ma petite? Ugh, it's barely dawn!"

Flora rolled awkwardly over into the bard's half of the bed, the mattress dipping down with their conjoined weight. She gripped Leliana's shoulder, curling her fingers anxiously into the pink silk of the Orlesian nightgown.

"Leliana, it's Alistair's birthday tomorrow," Flora whispered. "He's going to be twoty-one."

From his position by the door, Knight-Captain Gannorn snorted quietly under his breath.

"Flora - ence, we have been over this – how many times?" protested the bard, exasperated. "It's not two-ty, it's twenty. You aren't 'one-ty' nine, are you?"

"It would make more sense if I was," Flora replied, thinking of sixty, seventy, eighty. A moment later she continued, impatiently. "Anyway. Don't people give each other... presents on their birthday?"

Such a concept was utterly foreign to Flora; in Herring, one's birthday was barely mentioned, let alone celebrated. The giving of gifts was unheard of.

Leliana nodded, stretching against the cushions with a yawn.

"Yes, it is customary to do so. On my twentieth birthday, one of my suitors gave me a hollow nightingale carved from jade. When one breathed into its wing-tip, a beautiful high-pitched note sounded from its beak."

"I need to get Alistair something," Flora breathed, horrified. "I can't be the only person to not give him a gift. Not a bird that you blow, though."

Leliana bit back a laugh, reaching up to tuck a loose strand of Flora's hair behind her ear.

"Ma fleur, you need not get him anything. Your love is more than enough, I suspect."

"No," Flora protested, looking about her as though a merchant might miraculously manifest in the corner of the room. "I need to go to the big market, in the city. There's lots of stalls there."

She slithered awkwardly down the end of the bed, her knee giving a twinge of protest at such unorthodox movement. Leliana sat up against the cushions, her brow creasing.

"Flora, you know the effect your presence has on the people. You can't just wander about the city anonymous, like you used to. There'll be a crowd five-deep."
Flora chewed on her lip, thinking hard. A seagull gave a piercing cry from outside, and its mate responded in equally high-pitched timbre.

"Then I won't go as **Lady Cousland,**" she said at last, triumphantly. "I'll tie my hair back, and wear a hat. And a big coat."

"In **summer?**"

"Yes! And I'll go by myself, since everyone is used to me being escorted by guards and Templars – why are you laughing?"

Flora stopped mid-sentence, gazing in perplexion down at Leliana. The bard was cackling, one elegant hand beating out the rhythm of her shortles on the cushions.

"What's so funny?"

"The thought of you being allowed to wander the streets **alone,**" retorted Leliana, wiping a tear from her pale eyelashes. "Such a circumstance is less likely than the Veil itself dissolving."

Flora fell into a sulky silence, and the bard relented a fraction.

"Alright," she murmured, sliding elegantly out from the blankets. "We will bundle you up beyond recognition, and I will escort you myself. Find all the clothing you can, **ma crevette;** I am going to send a quick raven to the city."

An hour later, Flora and Leliana were riding along the cliff-top path towards Denerim; the sea breeze ruffling the bard's short braids around her ears as she gripped the reins. They had not told the Knight-Commander where they were going – Leliana rightly assumed that the man would go apoplectic with fear at the lady Cousland making an unaccompanied journey under his purview – and, after much persuasion, they had left behind Flora's Templar guards.

"Don't fall off," Leliana directed sternly over her shoulder, feeling Flora shift around on the saddle behind her. "If any harm comes to you, Alistair will have my head on a pike alongside Thomas Howe's."

"Ooh, he would never," replied Flora automatically, keeping one arm wrapped around Leliana's taut stomach as she adjusted the buttons at her neck. "My head feels all sweaty. My entire **body** is sweaty."

This was the unavoidable consequence of having her hair bundled up beneath a wide-brimmed hat, and her body covered with a lumpen and unflattering wool jacket. Flora actually didn't mind the coat – the coarse fabric reminded her of Herring – but she would not have chosen to wear it during high summer, in normal circumstances. However, her distinctive oxblood hair and the swell of her belly – the two features that identified her mostly strongly as Lady Cousland – had been somewhat disguised.

The horse slowed its pace as they embarked on the steep gravel descent that led down to the estuary. The muddied expanse of the Alamarri plains stretched out to the west, vast and desolate. The walled city itself lay over the mouth of the estuary, the tributaries repurposed into canals.

"What are you **doing?**" Leliana asked, as Flora fidgeted and murmured quietly to herself, the brim of her hat bumping into the bard's neck.
"Sorting out what I've got to barter with," Flora replied, gripping Leliana's belt with one hand as she delved into her pocket with the other. "I don't have any money, hm. I do have a nice shiny rock. And some sea-shells."

Leliana snorted, guiding the horse carefully around a pothole.

"I'll give you the coin for anything you desire," the bard replied, trying not to laugh. "One of your brothers can repay me later."

Flora beamed at Leliana's shoulder-blades, watching the tightly-hewn muscle move beneath the thin fabric of the lay-sister's tunic.

"Mercy!"

"Merci."

Once they had reached the western gate, Flora found that her heart was beating exceptionally – and irrationally - fast. As always, there were guards stationed beneath the iron portcullis, checking all those who wished to enter Denerim for smuggled goods. Fortunately, a long caravan of Marcher traders was passing through just ahead of them; the guards were so preoccupied with searching the contents of each cart that they waved Leliana past without a second glance.

After they had passed into the city itself, Flora's attention was immediately captured by the newly embroidered banners hanging from each archway and balcony. They depicted a Theirin lion, rearing upwards, with the curving arc of a Cousland laurel wound about its flank and caught in its outstretched paw.

"Are they to mark Alistair and I's contribution to ending the Fifth Blight?" Flora whispered in Leliana's ear.

Leliana paused, then gave a soft and ambiguous grunt in response; not wanting to lie outright. The bard turned the horse towards a nearby stables, using her knee to guide it skilfully away from the crowd of chattering Marcher merchants.

"We'll leave the horse here and go on foot," she said, sharp eyes alighting on a figure leaning unobtrusively against the wall. "Ah, parfait."

The horse came to a halt near a water trough, and Leliana leaned forward to unclip the reins. Flora eyed the drop to the cobbles, wondering if she dared risk attempt the descent unaided – then a familiar voice came drifting from somewhere below; half-laughing and half-chiding.

"Don't even think about it, mi florita."

A pair of sinewy arms reached up, and Flora let herself slither down obediently into them, beaming up at Zevran as far as her outlandish headgear would allow. Zevran - who had just been hit in the nose by the hat's wide brim - let out a little snicker.

"Mi sirenita," he murmured, stepping backwards and surveying her. "You look like a sausage, all bundled up. Is this our bard's best attempt at subterfuge? I thought you had been trained in the courts and salons of Orlais, Leliana."

"I had limited means at my disposal!" Leliana retorted, flashing the elf an evil glance as she led the horse into the stables.

Zevran snickered, flicking the wide brim of Flora's hat with elegant, tattooed fingers. "Mi florita."
"You can't call me Flora," Flora told him sternly, her voice dropping on the last word. "When I'm in this cunning disguise."

The elf, whose eyebrows had shot upwards at the application of the word cunning, tried not to laugh.

"What should we call you then, nena?"

"Fred," said Flora vaguely after a moment, selecting a solid sounding northern name at random. "It starts with the same letter, doesn't it? F? Fuh?"

"Fred!" announced the elf, a grin curling the black marks scythed in ink across his cheeks. "My sweet little Federico. Hey, you have not yet given us the kiss of greeting. Don't cheat me, now!"

"Good luck getting under this hat," replied Flora, and the elf's dark eyes lit up like ignited coals.

"That is a challenge I readily accept, carina."

Zevran ducked his head beneath the wide, floppy brim and planted a kiss against Flora's cheek, his lips brushing the corner of her mouth. She smiled vaguely at him, turning her head in the direction of the market square. In the background, Leliana embarked upon negotiations for the cost of renting a horse-stall, batting her eyelashes at the young stable-hand. Not to be outdone, Zevran soon chimed in, and the dual charm offensive resulted in a bargain price.

Bard and elf turned around in triumph, only to realise in slight horror that their charge had wandered off into the crowds heading towards the markets. Leliana hissed a most un-Chantry-sister like string of curses under her breath, shooting an accusatory glower at Zevran.

"The one time you don't have your eyes glued to her…!"

"Relax," murmured the elf in response, swinging his sharp gaze across the crowd of traders, travellers and townsfolk. "She's just there, by the Chanter's board."

Flora had paused in the middle of the street; gazing around at the buildings and bridges absentmindedly as she tried to remember the fastest route to the market square. The sun had emerged from behind a thin screen of clouds, and she felt several beads of sweat rise to her forehead beneath the felt hat. The city was larger and noisier than the Herring native remembered; the sheer quantity of people bustling along the streets was a tad intimidating.

A trader with a handcart barked impatiently for Flora to move! from somewhere behind her left shoulder. She stepped hastily to one side; not quite far enough, as it transpired. The handle of the cart knocked into Flora's hip, hard enough to make her flinch.

"Ow!"

"Idiot boy, get out the way!"

The next moment, the trader's hand-cart came to an abrupt halt, the handles dropping to the mud as the trader drew in a shocked breath. Zevran had manifested in the road just ahead, his face contorted into a death's head smile without a shred of humour. Without moving his unblinking stare from the trader's face, the elf drew back the flap of his leathers to show several inches of gleaming, newly sharpened steel. With the colour draining rapidly from his face, the travelling merchant picked up the cart – fumbling the handles several times – and scuttled off into the midst of the crowds.

Flora, oblivious to the elf's voiceless threat, had turned to face an indignant Leliana. The bard drew her to one side, towards the wall of a boarded-up blacksmith's.
"Flor- Fred – I swear, if you run off one more time, we're going straight back to Revanloch!"

"Oh NO!"

"Ah, oui!" The bard relented a fraction, seeing the look of alarm on Flora's face beneath the wide-brimmed hat. "Are you alright, ma petite? The cart didn't knock you in the stomach?"

"No," replied Flora, as Zevran sidled towards them and slid his arm about her waist. "Just my hip. Which way is the market?"

They made their way over a crowded bridge towards the market square, following the main flow of the crowds. A mere five weeks after the end of the Blight, commerce had flourished once more within Ferelden's capital; mercantile companies putting out tentative roots to replace those routes that had been destroyed by war. Trade ships from other nations were dropping anchor in the estuary once more, importing exotic spices from Antiva and scent from Rivain.

Zevran and Leliana walked at either side of Flora, outwardly nonchalant but alert to the movements of every passer-by. A street urchin had eyed the deep pockets of Flora's coat with interest, fingers twitching; only to flee in terror as Leliana bared her teeth at him in primeval warning.

They had almost reached the great bridge that spanned Denerim's main canal – a placid tongue of the estuary wide enough for six barges to float parallel - when the sound of metallic bootsteps echoed from the streets ahead. This was accompanied by the yells of guards, their shouts echoing between the tall waterside warehouses.

"Make way for the king! Make way for King Alistair of Ferelden!"

Flora's initial, instinctive reaction of delight was quickly tempered. She shot a frantic glance towards Leliana, who looked equally alarmed at the prospect of Alistair discovering his pregnant mistress wandering the city streets with only two guardians.

"Quick," the bard hissed after a moment, as the sound of horses' hooves drew closer. "Back here."

The three of them ducked into the arched porch of a tavern, trusting in the sudden surge forward of the eager crowd to hide them. Leliana and Zevran had mastered the art of blending into the environment; the elf reached out to tug the brim of Flora's hat low over her face.

No more than a minute later, two columns of Royal Guard came marching over the bridge, pikes raised to form a protective barrier. The crowds obediently flattened themselves against the sides of the buildings, chattering excitedly to one another as they stood on their toes to gain a first glimpse of the king.

Flora, trapped in the tavern doorway with Leliana at her side and Zevran at her front, could barely see anything. Although she knew that the blood-connection between herself and Alistair had been severed with the purging of the taint, she still found herself cringing back against the doorway; irrationally worried about being spotted.

The excited babble reached a crescendo, cheers breaking out as the king's retinue approached. Fergus came first, gripping the reins in a leisurely hand and conversing with Teagan, who was riding at his side. A handful of Cousland retainers followed close in the teyrn's wake, their navy and olive Highever livery standing out distinctly against the crimson of the Guards' tunics.

The cheers escalated in volume as Alistair came into view, clad in tan, fur-edged leathers. The gold band rested on his temples, his head was held high, and he looked both authoritative and wholly at ease. Flora felt a sudden surge of pride in her best friend; she knew that Alistair was not yet entirely
comfortable in his new status, yet he was simultaneously determined to make a good job of it.

The king raised his hand to acknowledge the cheers, leaning over to murmur in Eamon's ear. The sharp eyed Leliana noticed something strapped to Alistair's saddle, and she nudged Zevran pointedly.

"I see it," murmured the elf, whose eyesight was sharper still.

Flora, too, had been immediately drawn to this deeply familiar object, her eyes widening.

"It's a fishing pole!" she exclaimed excitedly, unable to keep her voice muted. "At last, after all my nagging, Alistair is finally embracing the delights of the rod!"

"I wish Alistair would embrace the delights of the rod," replied the elf with a lewd cackle.

"You know, he's never been fishing?" Flora continued, oblivious to Zevran's crude remark. "Better late than never!"

"Ssh!" hissed Leliana, shooting both of them a glower over her shoulder. "Keep your voices down!"

Sure enough, Flora's distinctive northern accent had cut through the excited babble of the crowd like a fish-gut knife. Atop his bay mare, Alistair paused mid-conversation, breaking off a reply to Eamon to glance around, perplexed.

Flora immediately shrank back into the doorway, trusting in the gloomy archway and wide-brimmed hat to mask her face. After a moment more, the king resumed his conversation with the arl; and the royal retinue gradually made their way further down the street and out of sight.

"Are you ready to go, ma petite?" Leliana asked at last, resting her fingers on Flora's elbow. "I thought for a moment that you were going to launch yourself towards Alistair's horse, waving your arms."

"Nooo! Can you imagine! Let's go to the market."

Chapter End Notes

OOC Author Note: Flora is not the sharpest blade in the armoury – Alistair has definitely taught her how to count beyond twenty (two-ty one, really?) and she sees the entwined Cousland-Theirin banners and doesn't realise that they are for her own upcoming wedding. Which is... in five days time, hahaha. But never fear, Alistair has bought a fishing rod – which is the first step in the traditional Herring-style proposal he was so worried about, lol... which involves the catching of a fish!

I always like a chapter involving a DISGUISE! Although it's not so much a disguise, as Flora wearing about eight layers worth of clothing and a big hat, haha.
Once the king's procession had passed, Flora, Zevran and Leliana made their way over the main bridge, past the fish-sellers and canal-side merchants, towards Denerim's market square. This was a large and sprawling space in the eastern part of the city, lined on all four sides with taverns, smiths and other assorted shopfronts. There was a diminutive Chantry – a fraction of the size of the Grand Chantry in the Square of the Bride – and a guard post located nearby.

A tangle of stalls were clustered without any semblance of order about the auctioneer's platform in the centre. Goods from all corners of Thedas were displayed for sale; raw silk in a rainbow spectrum of hues from Orlais; pungent baskets of spice from Antiva; as well as Surface dwarves showing off their admirable metalworking skills. One ginger-bearded smith was sending up showers of sparks as he hammered away in a demonstration of his craft; while a nearby cheese-maker sweated and hoped that his produce wouldn't melt in the forge heat. There were butchers gathered into a far corner, swatting flies away from swathes of dangling meat. A group of bowyers huddled nearby, irritated at being assigned a spot near the offal-filled gutters. An elven herbalist sat proudly atop a raised cart, amidst a plethora of oddly coloured glass vials. During the Blight, the market had only ever been half-full and limited to mostly Fereldan crafts, due to the drying-up of trade routes. Now it had swelled to almost full capacity, bustling and noisy; traders bellowing their wares over the hiss of the forge and snorting of animals.

Flora came to an abrupt halt at the western entrance, wide-eyed and shocked at the sheer scale of the market. Although she had seen such quantities of people before – her gathered armies – they had been ordered in strictly regimented rows. This – on the other hand - seemed naught but a chaotic mass of people; loud, unruly and intimidating.

She glanced to her companions for a measure of reassurance. Leliana was eyeing the spectrum of raw silk hanging from the Orlesian dressmaker's stand, while Zevran was leaning towards the Antivan spice-stall as though physically drawn towards it. Flora looked down at her feet, berating furiously herself for her own nerves.

"You killed a dragon. Why are you scared of a crowd?"

Finally, Zevran noticed Flora's hesitation and reached out, sliding his fingers through her arm.

"It is as if the whole world was compressed into a single space, no?" he said, kindly. "Let us start at the outside and work our way inwards."

They began at the blacksmiths' quarter, avoiding the sparks flying from the collision of hammer against anvil as a dwarven smith sweated over his forge. Flora mulled over getting Alistair a piece of armour – a helm, or a breastplate – but then decided against it; not knowing the actual measurements of a body she could describe as well as her own. Leliana lingered behind at the armourer's stand, testing a wickedly curved blade against the flat of her finger. The weapon met with her approval and she handed over a small pouch of coin, sliding the dagger up her sleeve unobtrusively.

"Come here, Federico. I want to show you something."

Zevran wound his fingers in Flora's own and pulled her across to a certain stall which the native
Fereldans seemed to be avoiding. As they neared, Flora could understand why – the scent emanating from the wares was so overwhelming that it made her eyes water. It was not an unpleasant smell exactly, but strong.

The elf ventured towards the stall, which was manned by a slender, dark haired merchant with fox-like features and a single golden nose-ring. The two men exchanged a few words in Antivan, before Zevran grinned and beckoned Flora forwards.

Baskets of ground spice were laid out in enticing array, in warm hues that ranged from bright ochre to brick red. Flora sniffed, mopping at her streaming eyes, as Zevran exulted the wondrous properties of the goods before her.

"Here, carina, we have the secret to what all Fereldan meals sorely lack – flavour. We have cinnamon, saffron, star anise, caraway, cardamom…"

"Arl Eamon had some cinnamon in his kitchen," Flora said, remembering a stew that she and Morrigan had once made, many months ago in the servants' quarters of Redcliffe Castle.

The elf wrinkled his nose, giving a little toss of the head.

"Well, his cook surely never used it."

Zevran then leaned forwards, dipping the end of his little finger into the mound of ochre spice.

"Nena, stick your tongue out," he instructed, and Flora obediently did as requested.

The elf touched his fingertip to the end of her tongue, and she pulled a face, the corners of her mouth twisting.

"That's cardamom, Federico. How does it taste?"

"Strange," replied Flora unhelpfully after a moment, and the elf's dark eyes rolled like marbles.

"Strange? Here, try this one."

He scooped up a small pile of yellow spice on the end of another finger, holding it out expectantly. Flora ducked her head forward and tasted the powdery substance, her face immediately contorting in a grimace.

"What's that?" she demanded, wide-eyed. "It tastes like grass."

The elf wiped his fingers on his tunic, shaking his head from side to side regretfully.

"It is saffron, carina, and it is worth its weight in gold! Quite literally, in fact."

Flora gazed dubiously down at the baskets of pungent seasoning, her brow creasing.

"I don't think I'm going to get Alistair any spices," she said after a moment, then immediately regretted referring to the king so explicitly.

Sure enough, the Antivan trader's ears had pricked at the mention of Alistair by name, his shrewd gaze attempting to slide beneath the brim of Flora's wide and obscuring hat.

"Come on, ma petite."

Leliana manifested behind them, reaching to interweave her arm though Flora's elbow. Flora, who
was now sweating both from heat and horror at her own foolish transgression, allowed the bard to lead her away. Zevran leaned forward to exchange a few words with the trader, the mellifluous rhythm of the Antivan tongue blending into the low background babble of the marketplace.

"I'm such an idiot," Flora bemoaned as Leliana led her towards a nearby row of stalls. "Why did I call Alistair, Alistair? I should have given him a false name. Alistair could have been… Albert. Or Aron. Anything other than Alistair!"

"Stop saying Alistair!" hissed back Leliana, noticing several more civilians turn their heads curiously towards them. "Honestly, ma petite, I recommend that you never consider the path of the bard."

Not that you could ever hope to become one, with that singing voice, Leliana thought grimly, but did not add.

After they had made another rotation of the market, Flora had still not found anything which she deemed to be acceptable. The sun had risen to midday; she was growing hotter, sweatier and more frustrated by the minute. Her weak knee was throbbing, the strapping dangling loose around the injured joint. Leliana and Zevran, conscious of the increasing temperatures, had plied Flora with frequent offerings from their water pouches; seeing her flushed and frustrated face beneath the hat.

"I can't find anything," she wailed as they paused beside a stall selling exotic fowl in cages. "I thought I would be able to get Ali – him - the perfect present, but there's nothing here!"

"Perhaps we should admit defeat and return to the monastery?" Leliana suggested hopefully, feeling beads of sweat rise to her own forehead. "We could arrive back in time for afternoon prayers if we leave now."

The corners of Flora's mouth turned down in dismay, and she dropped her gaze to her feet. Zevran glanced over his shoulder to ensure that nobody was paying a little too much attention; then hastened forward to reassure their young Cousland. Sliding a hand between the buttons of Flora's coat, he let his fingers rest on the protruding curve of her stomach.

"Federico," the elf murmured, wry and rueful. "You are already giving him the greatest gift of all. You could present Alistair with nothing more for the rest of his life, and he would still name you as his greatest benefactor."

"But baby isn't coming for three months," retorted Flora, belligerent and crimson in the face. "It'd be a very late birthday present. And I can't wrap it up and put a bow on it. Actually, I could probably put a bow on it. But still, it's too late! His birthday is tomorrow!"

After making another increasingly agitated circuit of the stalls, Flora selected a hunk of wax-paper wrapped Fereldan cheddar, accompanied by a pair of thick knitted woollen socks in an alarming shade of orange. Flora was not particularly enamoured with either present, but she was becoming tired and overheated after spending so much time on her feet, in direct sunlight.

"Arl Eamon will probably be getting Alistair a… a minor island or something," she complained, feeling sweat running down the back of her neck as the merchant wrapped the socks in a thin skein of fabric. "I don't know how to do presents. I'm not good at it."

"Don't worry yourself," chided Zevran, lifting his water pouch to her lips and tilting it gently. "Take another sip, nena. You ought to get into some shade."

Flora obligingly took a gulp, water dribbling down the side of her mouth as she yawned mid-swellow.
Just then, there came a minor commotion as a caravan of Surface dwarves passed close by, travel-
worm and yet surprisingly jovial. They blocked the road to such an extent that Flora, Zevran and
Leliana were forced to retreat; taking refuge by a silk merchant's stall. Flora glanced to one side, her
attention caught by a flash of familiar forest green.

_I recognise that livery_, she thought to herself, spotting a portcullis badge sewn onto a doublet. _That's
South Reach livery._

_Oh no!_

At that same moment, a piercing young female voice rang out near them; high and petulant.

"Papa, I need three different colours of silk for my gown."

"Why in the seven hells do you need _three colours_?"

"Because I _need_ to have slashed sleeves and an underskirt in contrasting shades," retorted the voice,
insistently. "Otherwise I won't be able to show my face at the coronation!"

"You'll be lucky to even _attend_ the coronation, the way you're complaining, lass," came the blunt
response. "Any more talk of _slashed sleeves_ and I'll send you off to your aunt in Ostwick."

"Papa-aaa!"

"Retreat," hissed Leliana in Flora's ear, gripping her tightly by the elbow. "Let's go."

But they were still trapped by the column of dwarves, pinned next to the silk merchant's stall. Flora
risked a glance over her shoulder, and looked directly into the dark eyes of the curious Habren
Bryland. The young _arlina_ blinked in shock, recognising Flora's flushed face beneath the wide brim
of the hat.

"Lady Florence!" Habren exclaimed, loud and indiscreet. "What are you _doing_ here? Where are
your guards?!"

Flora gaped, lost for words. Leonas Bryland's head swung around, rapid as a Mabari smelling raw
meat. The general's bearded face gave a single contortion of shock as he set eyes on Leliana, Zevran
and the diminutive bundled-up figure between them.

"Florence?" he said, greying eyebrows shooting up into a receding hairline. "What are you _doing_
here?"

His gaze swung around, expecting to see a contingent of Templars positioned in the immediate
proximity. When they failed to manifest, he let out an astonished bark of disbelief.

"Maker's Breath, are there just the three of you?"

"Being with Zevran and Leliana is like being with a whole troop of soldiers," retorted Flora,
obstinately. "Better."

Rumours of Flora's identity had begun to spread outwards, like ripples expanding in a pond.
Whispers darted between stalls, curious heads swivelling in the direction of the silk merchant.

Leonas noted both the increasing attention, and Flora's flushed, weary face, in a single instant.
Reaching out, he took her elbow in a firm, parental gesture, steering her rapidly into the doorway of
a nearby tavern. A battered sign swung overhead, depicting a large rat with a malevolent expression;
the legend *The Gnawed Noble* scribed below.

"Come on, I've got a room here."

Flora, thoroughly overheated and exhausted, let the arl guide her into the tavern. The downstairs was lofty and high-ceilinged, with a gabled roof and ironwork candelabras. It being just past midday, only a handful of patrons sat drinking at the long tables; a barmaid yawned as she scrubbed limply at a stain on the woodwork.

Avoiding the curious stares of the other drinkers, the general nudged Flora in the direction of a narrow stair; tucked unobtrusively in the corner. Staying close on her heels, Leonas glanced over his shoulder to ensure that nobody unwanted had made pursuit. Fortunately, only Leliana, Zevran and a wide-eyed Habren were following in their wake; along with several retainers clad in South Reach livery.

The upper floor of the tavern consisted of two corridors branching in the cardinal directions, with numerous doorways spaced at intervals. Leonas steered the yawning Cousland towards the far end of the corridor, whilst simultaneously removing a key from his sleeve.

The key granted entrance to a reasonably sized room, with exposed rafters and carved oak décor. A four-poster bed, sparsely hung with undyed wool curtains, rested squatly in the centre of the chamber. The shutters had been pulled back over the windows to let in several rays of watery sunlight, and a single stained tapestry of a wounded Mabari decorated the southern wall.

"Here," the arl said firmly, guiding a shuffling Flora towards the bed. "Rest for a while; I'll have something to drink sent up."

"Thank you," mumbled Flora, sitting on the edge of the lumpen mattress and yawning widely as Zevran and Leliana entered.

The arl gave a low grunt in response, steering his gaping daughter firmly out of the room. Before exiting himself, he paused to exchange a few quiet words with Leliana and Zevran.

Once the door had settled back into its frame, the bard went to draw the shutters closed over the windows. Zevran advanced towards the bed, perching neatly on the mattress beside Flora.

"Mi sirenta, how are you going to cope with the heat when we visit Antiva City?" he crooned, removing the hat and peering at Flora's flushed and sweaty face. "You are as red as un poco tomate."

Flora yawned once more in response, unsure whether she was overheating due to the summer warmth, or her own fluctuating temperature. The baby seemed to have seized control from within; taking command of various functions of her body.

"At least I match my hair," she mumbled, the words blurring together as they drifted from her mouth. The elf smiled at Flora, reaching out to divest her of the many coverings bundled about her body.

"Ah, how many layers has Leliana wrapped you in?" he exclaimed after a moment, having unbuttoned a coat and removed two thick tunics. "No wonder you were sweating like the proverbial whore in a Chantry."

"I had to disguise her shape," the bard retorted from the doorway, taking delivery of some watered-down ale from a blinking servant. "A redhead with a swollen belly is bound to draw more attention."

Flora reached up her arms as Zevran pulled the final tunic over her head. Now barefoot in breast-band and smalls, she slumped back against the cushions; dragging a palm over her sweaty face.
Zevran manfully managed to restrain himself from making a gleeful comment on the swollen bust that now- for the first time in Flora's life - required a supporting garment. Instead, he bowed his head and kissed Flora on the top of her bare foot, running his thumb affectionately over her toes.

"Take a few sips, ma crevette," instructed Leliana, crossing to the bed and holding a flagon of watered-down ale to Flora's lips. Flora obediently swallowed, grimacing as the liquid spilled in a pale golden rivulet down her chin.

"Have you got Alistair's cheese?" she asked, anxiously. "And the socks?"

"Oui," replied Leliana softly, lifting the tray and carrying back it over to the dresser. "Do not fret."

Flora leaned back against the cushions, a frown creasing her smooth brow neatly in two. Her knee was throbbing painfully, and the little creature in her belly was nudging against her kidneys.

"I can't believe I need naps now," she said, mildly disgusted with herself. "Sleeping in the middle of the day! Nobody- nobody had better tell anyone from Herring about this, or… or my reputation will be ru - rui"

Flora trailed off in the middle of her sentence, losing her train of thought as sleep rose like a dark tide to claim her waking mind. She turned her cheek into the cushions, each individual eyelash suddenly a leaden weight. The noises of the market faded into the background as she drifted into a quiet and dreamless sleep, fingers curled into the blankets.

An immeasurable amount of time later, Flora awoke with the uncanny sensation that somebody was watching her. She could almost feel their curious gaze prickling against her skin, soft and intrusive. Opening her eyes in the strange half-light of the shuttered room, she turned her head to the side to see Habren Bryland sitting beside the bed.

The arl's daughter must have taken more after her deceased mother in appearance. She had a slender, pointed face and thick, light brown hair bundled into an uncomfortable – but fashionable – style about her ears. The piercing, inquisitive stare, however, was clearly inherited from Leonas; and it was this that was turned on Flora now. Leliana and Zevran were conversing quietly in the corridor, their voices filtering through the wood.

The young arlina was gazing surreptitiously at Flora's skin, her eyes travelling over the pale sunburst scars spread across Flora's hip, shoulder and thigh.

"Are those from the battle with the dragon?" Habren asked, realising that she had been spotted and deciding to brazen it out.

Flora nodded, turning over her hand to show a similar white marking on the flat of her palm. Habren inhaled curiously, fingers twitching at her side.

"Can I – can I touch it?"

Letting her head sink back against the pillows Flora gave a small grunt of assent; used to such inspection. The girl used her fingertip to trace the outline of the sunburst on Flora's thigh, her face transfused with fascination.

As Habren did so the little creature awoke within Flora, nudging a shoulder into her. She let her hand drift down to the mound of her stomach, wondering what exactly it was doing within the warm,
cramped darkness of her belly.

"Did it hurt?"

Flora blinked, reluctantly tearing her thoughts from the baby.

"Did what hurt? Oh," she realised, letting her fingers move to the scar on her hip. "No. It didn't hurt, not exactly. I don't remember much about the dragon."

Now the young noblewoman's eyes had drifted to the uncovered mound of Flora's stomach. Fascinated, Habren reached up to press a finger against the warm, taut skin.

"One of my handmaids caught with child once," she said, eventually. "She wasn't married, either. My father didn't get rid of her, but he did send her to work in the kitchens."

Flora – who was from a village where people only got married on the rare occasion that a Chantry priestess passed through – suppressed a snort.

"Oh, well," she replied mildly, for want of anything else to say. "I don't think anyone is going to send me to work in the kitchens. I'd eat all the food."

Habren was silent a moment, lost in thought.

"So you've lain with the king?"

"He wasn't the king when we first… lain - laid together," Flora replied, wondering if she had used the correct grammar. "But, yes."

Habren nodded slowly, vaguely familiar with Alistair's unusual journey to the throne from overhearing snippets of her father's conversations.

"You're not that much older than me," the arlina continued, her brow furrowing. "Didn't you worry about your reputation, lying with someone who you weren't married to?"

Flora wanted to laugh, but didn't; aware of how acutely different she was to this girl who was so similar in age.

"Well," she replied instead, diplomatically. "We thought we were going to die, so… no."

For a moment she shivered, recalling the thin undercurrent of desperation that had run through their lovemaking during the Blight.

_We'd pitch our tent next to land laid waste by the Darkspawn; then spend all night writhing together on the bedroll, as though we could bring some life back to the tainted soil with our efforts._

"Did it hurt?" Habren asked, with the curiosity of the permanently sheltered. "When you… laid together?"

"The first time, it did," Flora replied, honestly. "And the second. Then… not so much."

Habren turned wide eyes on her, dark eyebrows shooting into her hairline.

"You kept doing it? How many times?"

"Um," said Flora, vague. "Quite… a few more times."
"More than five times?"

"Mm, I think so."

Habren looked mildly scandalised, and Flora shot her a slightly wary look. In Herring, it was not an unusual thing for young people to pair off with each other; with thoughts of marriage far from their minds. Still, she reasoned to herself, perhaps there were different expectations for girls from noble families.

Leonas' daughter looked about to question Flora in more intensive detail, then her attention was caught by a faint flicker of movement from the taut, lumpen belly. The girl's dark Bryland eyes widened in fascination, and she abruptly changed her course of questioning.

"I wonder if the baby is a boy or a girl? Do you have any gut feeling?"

Flora thought for a moment, concentrating on the little creature lodged within her. Truthfully, she had thought of the child as it for such a long time, that it was startling to even envision the child as possessing gender.

"No," she replied, vaguely. "I have no idea. It could be anything."

Habren shot her a surreptitious glance, her eyes igniting like coals as she lowered her voice.

"There is a way," she whispered, portentously. "I overheard my old maid talking about it. A test you can do to determine the baby's sex. Do you have a ring?"

Flora slid the gold Cousland band from her little finger, as Habren pulled out a loose thread from the blanket, snapping it loose. The arlina then tied the thread in a knot around the ring, letting it dangle over Flora's stomach.

It hung still for several moments, and both girls eyed it; Habren excited and Flora dubious.

"I don't understand - " the latter started, and then Leonas' daughter let out an excited squeak, making a gesture.

"Look!"

The ring had begun to swing gently from side to side, swaying like a pendulum at the end of the thread. Flora gazed at it, transfixed.

"What does that mean?"

"A boy," replied Habren, confidently. "Back and forth means a boy, circles means a girl."

"Superstition! It's just the draught."

Leliana had entered the room, stealthy as a shadow; Zevran close at her heels.

"It's not," insisted the arl's daughter, her features infused with stubbornness. "It's an accurate test."

The bard made a little dismissive noise through her nostrils, crossing the room to crouch beside the bed.

"How are you feeling now, ma petite? A little less hot and bothered, I hope."

Flora nodded, smiling up at her companions as she pushed the blankets away from her legs.
"Mm, a lot better. I had a good nap."

"Glad to hear it, mi sirena," added Zevran softly, his dark eyes settling on her face like birds coming to rest. "And, contrary to our Chantry devotee, I believe that the old superstitions have some truth in them."

Just then, there came a slight commotion at the door. Arl Leonas had entered, seen Flora clad in her smallclothes; and collided with the doorframe in his haste to retreat.

"Arl Leonas," called Flora earnestly after him, clutching the blanket to her thighs. "Come back, come back – I don't mind. Honestly, Finian told me that pretty much everyone saw me naked when I was unconscious after the battle!"

Stifling an embarrassed cough, the arl ducked back inside the room; keeping his eyes firmly averted to the ceiling.

"Florence, I'll see you safely back to the monastery," Leonas stated, in a tone that brokered no dissent. "It's sunset, and Alistair will be making his own way to Revanloch soon. He'll worry himself sick if he finds you gone."

Zevran cleared his throat, lightly. The elf had wandered over to the window and was peering out, one golden eyebrow firmly raised.

"That might be trickier than anticipated," he murmured, wryly. "It seems as though your disguise was not quite as effective as we hoped, Federico. There's a sizeable crowd gathered outside."

Leliana let out a muffled curse under her breath; nostrils flaring.

"Well, none of us have any horses nearby. It seems we must beat our way through these nosy citizens!"

Slightly alarmingly, the lay sister seemed rather excited at this prospect. Flora eyed her beadily from the bed, while the arl hastened to intervene.

"No need for that – there's another exit," Leonas interrupted, abruptly. "This tavern's got a reputation as a hideaway for nobles to rendezvous with their… partners. Hence, the need for discretion. And back passages."

Zevran let out a low cackle, reaching down to retrieve one of Flora's discarded shirts from the floorboards.

"Perhaps we will not need to bundle you up quite so like a sausage this time, eh, carina?"

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Chapter End Notes

OOC Author Note: The ring test is a Medieval superstition from England – I don't know if it's in other countries as well? It's just an old wives' tale… but there is some truth in the old tales ;) I wanted to have a bit of a contrast here between Flora and Habren Bryland
(I love taking super minor NPCs and expanding their roles!) – since they're both within a few years of each other in age. Yet Flora is acutely aware of how different she is from Habren – both because of her unusual upbringing in Herring, and because of what she's been through.
The King's Birthday

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

With the assistance of Leonas, they managed to make their escape from the city without attracting too much attention. Hastening along the cliff-top path towards the seaside monastery, Flora and her companions were able to reach Revanloch a half candle before the king’s retinue passed beneath the main gate. By this point, Flora was so coated with sweat that she felt a little like an eel; skin slick and hair stuck to her forehead.

Alistair had arrived in the guest chamber a short time later, breathless from taking the steps two at a time. He burst into the room, a beam already spreading across his face; only to find Flora submerged in the bathtub, wet hair plastered over her breasts, blinking at him with limpid eyes. She smiled, delighted, then reached out a dripping hand.

"Alistaaair!"

The king gazed at his mistress for all of three seconds, before dismissing both Templars with a terse instruction. Kicking the door shut, one hand was already working at the buttons of his breeches as he strode across the room towards her.

Some time later, the blankets lay on the floor in a damp tangle, the cushions knocked halfway across the room. Alistair leaned back against the window, seated on the low bench with his best friend straddling his thighs. Ropes of damp hair hung loose around Flora's face; a fur from the bed was wrapped around her bare shoulders, and her own arms were wound around Alistair's neck. He beamed at her dazedly, still wreathed in post-coital languor.

"My darling girl."

"Alistair," replied Flora, who was not in the habit of using pet names.

Alistair gazed at her for a moment, wondering how exactly to phrase his next words.

"Lola, it's my birthday tomorrow," he said at last, softly. "I'll be- "

"Twenty one," she said, inwardly proud of herself for not saying twoty. "I know. I got you a present in the market."

Oh, that was meant to be a secret! You lobster brain.

Alistair shot Flora a suspicious look, but decided not to pursue the matter. Instead, he continued on the path he had set himself, taking a deep breath.

"I just wanted to say… how much the people value you, Flora. You know they call you the Flower of Ferelden?"

Flora looked nonplussed, unsure how this corresponded to Alistair turning a year older. Still, she let him continue; a faint line creasing itself through her brow.

"Yes, I know," she replied, adjusting her position on his lap. The king inhaled unsteadily, reaching out to trace the line of her jaw with his thumb.
"Anyway, I wanted you to know how… how important you are, Lo. Even though you're not the Warden anymore; you're still the Hero of Ferelden. The people look to you and they see – well. They see beauty, and they see new life, and they see… hope."

Increasingly confused, Flora tilted her face into Alistair's hand; rubbing her cheek against his palm.

"That's good," she replied amiably, reaching up to slide her fingers between his. Kissing his knuckles, she clasped their conjoined hands to her breast. "I want them to be hopeful. The Blight is over, and Ferelden needs to recover, and get strong again. In case anyone takes advantage."

*Duc* Gaspard's supercilious face flashed into Flora's mind and she scowled, shifting against Alistair's thighs as the fur slithered down onto the floorboards.

"Exactly! Exactly, Flo," the king replied, feverishly. "Ferelden's borders need to be reinforced, the Royal Army rebuilt."

He cut himself off abruptly, smiling.

"But enough of that. Tomorrow is about you, my love."

"About me?" she said, bemused. "But it's your birthday. Mine is the day after."

Alistair made no reply, but ducked his head to press a long and lingering kiss against her mouth.

The morning of Alistair's birthday, Flora awoke even earlier than her customary dawn rising-time. The guest chamber was still muted in shades of grey, the last fading stars visible through the parted curtains. Yawning, Flora reached out to pull the blanket up to Leliana's shoulders; passing an affectionate hand over the bard's sleep-rumpled head.

Aware that she would not be able to get back to sleep, Flora was about to clamber out of bed when she felt a ferocious little kick from within her belly.

"Ow," she said out loud, astonished at the vigour of her little creature. "Good morning to you, too."

Alert to the slightest sound of distress, Knight-Captain Gannorn immediately raised his head.

"Is all well, my lady?"

Flora nodded, patting her stomach in an effort to calm the baby down.

"Mm," she whispered, conscious of her sleeping companion. "It just kicked me right in the bladder."

The Knight-Captain relaxed a fraction, only too aware of the consequences if anything ill-fated should happen to the king's expectant mistress under his watch. Flora smiled at him, then clambered ungracefully out of bed. Wandering barefoot across the floorboards, she lowered herself to the window bench and drew the curtains fully open, peering out at the gradually lightening sky. The ghosts of stars were still visible, though veiled in dawn cloud. Below, the Amaranthine ocean was as still as a millpond, mirroring the heavens with crystalline accuracy. In the distance, a thin sliver of sun was just cresting the horizon; bright as a fire-opal.

Flora tucked her feet beneath her to keep them warm – dawn on a Fereldan summer morning was still chilly – and watched the sun rise upwards with slow languidity. The ocean was far more placid and genteel than her wild, tempestuous Waking Sea, yet it was still beautiful enough to take her...
breath away. Starved for any glimpse of saltwater for the four years she had been in the Circle; Flora was not about to complain.

"Happy twenty-one birthday, brother-warden," she said to herself as the sun broke free of the sea; sailing upwards with renewed vitality.

"Twenty-first," corrected the Templar quietly from behind her.

"Twenty-first," repeated Flora, brow creasing.

The Knight-Captain soon came to regret his correction of Flora's numeracy. The young Cousland proceeded to spend the next hour practising her counting out loud, a painful and laborious process which invariably ended up in a tangle of mistakes somewhere between threety and fourthy-first.

Leliana woke as the bell sounded for the breaking of fast, her stretch accompanied by a small, distinctly Orlesian squeak. Opening her eyes, she swept the chamber in a single, appraising glance. Flora was sitting cross-legged on the window bench, reciting what appeared to be a string of painfully inaccurate numbers. The Templar was standing close by the door (as though desperate to escape), and a vein was twitching on his forehead.

"Six-and-four one, six-and-four-two, six-and-fifty-tenth, eight million-" "

"Andraste's Mercy," breathed the bard as she rose to her feet, astounded at such a blatant lack of understanding. "What nonsense is this, ma crevette?"

"It's not nonsense," retorted Flora, secretly delighted that Leliana had awoken in time for breakfast. "I'm educating myself."

"I wouldn't call that education," Leliana murmured in response, peering at her reflection in the dresser mirror. "I'd call it a… numerical massacre. And I saw that, you little minx!"

This was in response to Flora pulling one of her least attractive faces in Leliana's direction.

Flora cackled, leaning back against the window and resting a hand on her stomach, warm and firm beneath the striped pajama shirt. She watched Leliana wash her face in the basin; the bard adding several drops of lavender oil into the water before splashing it over her face.

"It's Alistair's birthday today."

"Oui, ma petite. He won't be down until this evening – poor thing is trapped in a council meeting all day. Fancy that, on your birthday! One's birthday should be celebrated, not punished."

Flora couldn't even remember what had happened on her last birthday, but was reasonably certain it involved getting expelled from class and cleaning corridors – the usual pattern of her Circle day.

"Alistair is twenty one now," she said, half to herself, as Leliana requested a bathtub and busied herself with towels. "It's the last day of Justinian – last day of red-fin snapper season – so he's now a year older."

"Oui," confirmed the bard, now riffling through the dresser.

"So, if he's twenty one, and I'm still nineteen, does that mean that he's now two years older than me?"

"What?! No! Your mathematics is truly terrible, ma petite."
This debate continued even after a filled bath was brought up; Leliana bathing first to take the heated edge off the water.

"One, two," Flora counted stubbornly, perched on a stool beside the bathtub. "There's two years between nineteen and twenty one."

"But you're twenty tomorrow," countered the bard, massaging a soapy lather into her hair. "My grown-up girl. Pass me the pomegranate oil – the red one."

Flora duly passed over the crimson glass vial, wrinkling her nose as Leliana uncapped the pungent scent.

"I wonder what Alistair's doing now?" she breathed, trailing a wistful hand in the water. "I wish he could come sooner than this evening. I want to give him his present."

Leliana smiled to herself, passing slender fingers one final time through her hair before rising to her feet; water streaming in rivulets down her finely-hewn body.

"It means we've got plenty of time to get you ready," the Orlesian replied, slightly evasively. "There'll be a lot of eyes on you later."

Flora wondered briefly if the fumes of pomegranate oil had addled the bard's brain – it was Alistair's birthday, not her own.

"All eyes should be on you," she said instead, gazing up and down Leliana's figure with naked envy as she unbuttoned her pajama shirt. "Your body is like a… a statue. I could chop fish on your stomach."

Leliana, who was duly proud of the well-hewn muscle that had taken years to hone, smiled and gave an Orlesian shrug.

Once bathed and dried, Leliana – much to her own surprise - managed to cajole Flora into wearing a sundress. This laudable feat was accomplished after the bard had pointed out how much cooler the white linen dress would be than Flora's usual breeches: it was only knee-length, Flora could wear her usual boots, and it was sleeveless. After a small amount of persuasion Flora acquiesced; Leliana gleefully tightened the laces at the bodice while the young Cousland gazed distractedly out of the window.

"Should I put the presents in something?" Flora asked distractedly, rubbing the heel of her hand over her stomach as Leliana went to retrieve the hairbrush. "I've never given anyone a birthday present before. Should I wrap them in cloth? What do they do in Orlais?"

"I once received a mirror as a birthday gift from an admirer," the bard replied, drawing the band loose from Flora's hair and spreading it loose over her shoulders. "It came in a case made from turquoise enamel, embedded with flecks of gold and shards of glass in the pattern of a rose."

Flora looked dubiously around the Revanloch guest chamber, grimacing as the brush worked through her tangled mass of hair.

"I'm not sure where I could get one of those at short notice," she replied, solemnly. "And it sounds like quite a fancy box for cheese and socks."

Leliana laughed, placing the brush to one side and reaching for a silken hair-ribbon.

"I don't think you ought to worry about wrapping your present," she murmured, tying a bow at the
nape of Flora's neck. "I think that Alistair will appreciate it very much, with trappings or without. There we go, ma petite. Very sweet. Almost virginal, actually."

Flora eyed her reflection in the mirror, warily.

"I'm not sure how virginal I look with this belly," she replied, smoothing fingers in an absentminded circle over the rounded swell. "Thank you for helping me. I owe you more than I can say."

"You're welcome, ma petite."

Leliana's voice wobbled in a deeply uncharacteristic fashion partway through her reply.

Flora, who was trying to drape Alistair's socks in a decorative manner over the cheese, turned rapidly in astonishment. To her alarm, tears shone in the corners of Leliana's eyes; the bard's pink-painted lips trembling.

"Leliana?"

Having never seen their smooth Orlesian bard so nakedly tearful; Flora scuttled immediately to her, anchoring Leliana about the waist and drawing her down to sit on the bed.

"Leliana," she breathed once again, reaching into the bard's pocket to retrieve a silk handkerchief. "What's wrong? What's wrong? Tell me!"

Flora dabbed the silk handkerchief beneath Leliana's watering eyes, her own gaze threaded with alarm.

"Has someone done something to upset you? Tell me who it is! I'll go and beat them up."

Leliana smiled, shaking her head and sniffing the remainder of her tears back; patting cool fingers against her flushed cheeks to calm them.

"I'll batter them with driftwood, I'll take a fishing rod, and shove it- "

"Non, non- I am not upset, ma crevette. No need for any Herring-style retribution, though I do appreciate the offer."

Flora blinked, mildly confused; the handkerchief still clutched between her fingers. The bard let out a little laugh, briskly wiping her eyes and taking a deep inhalation of air.

"Then why were you crying?" demanded Flora, brow furrowed with indignation.

"Oh – it is nothing," Leliana replied evasively; her duck-egg blue eyes sparkling. "It's just been… an honour to serve you, ma fleur. And it will continue to be an honour, and a privilege. Ferelden will be very lucky to have you as its... to have you."

Flora eyed her dubiously, oblivious to the bard's oblique reference.

_She is Orlesian, though. They do have some strange habits and customs._

Shaking her head, the king's mistress leaned forward and kissed Leliana rather bemusedly on the cheek; deciding not to press her any further.
The morning drew on, languid and lazy. The closing of Justinian had resulted in a typically Fereldan summer day, the sun low and the sky clouded; resulting in a thick, soupy humidity. Flora had waited for several hours on the window bench, peering across at the cliff-top path despite Leliana's warning that the council meeting was sure to last for several hours yet.

The lunch-gong rang; they ended up dining in the main hall with the rest of the Templar initiates. Flora had grown so accustomed to their curious stares that she now barely noticed them. A source of more interest was the obvious disquiet of the Knight-Commander and the Grand Mother of the Chantry; who were seated at her side but could not sit still. They whispered to each other throughout the meal, darting eyes at the Cousland as she ate her stew.

Flora tore a hunk of rye bread apart with her fingers, uncomfortably aware of their surreptitious glances.

"Why do they keep looking at me and whispering?" she hissed from the corner of her mouth towards Leliana, dipping the bread into the vegetable pottage. "They're going to make me spill soup over myself! White is a very stressful colour to eat in."

"Lady Cousland?"

It was the chief Templar, clearing his throat while avoiding looking her directly in the eye. Flora turned her head and stared at him, her brows drawing together.

"Yes?"

"Just so you know – the Chantry will be kept empty for you and King Alistair to meet later. I'll ensure that the recruits are kept away – nobody will disturb you. You'll have as much privacy as is... as is needed for the deed to be done."

Flora blinked at him, nodded wordlessly; then immediately put her mouth to Leliana's ear.

"The Templar is giving me and Alistair permission to do it in the Chantry later!" she whispered, incredulous. "Do you think he has sunstroke?"

Leliana dropped her spoon into her soup, letting out a squawk of indignation.

"That is most definitely not what he meant, Florence Cousland, you perverted little troll!"

"Ha! Hahaha."

They returned back to the chamber, where Flora perched herself once more on the window bench. The sun edged itself lower towards the western horizon; she heaved herself up high on the cushions and squinted along the cliff-top path. It was deserted, save for a group of merchants travelling in a small caravan. She bit at her lip, glancing once more at the forlorn little pile of socks and cheese on the bench beside her.

The heat was growing muggier, the air thick and soup, Flora sensed both her energy and spirits wilting. Strands of hair were falling out of the silk ribbon, she could feel herself sweating into the white linen sundress, and the baby was shifting irritably in her stomach.

"Do you... do you think he's coming?" Flora asked at last, directing the plaintive question over her shoulder towards Leliana. "Maybe they're having a party. Maybe he's partying with winches."

The bard – who had been reading a new and controversial biography of Andraste's life – immediately placed the tome on the blankets and sought to reassure the hormonal young Cousland.
"Nonsense, _ma petite_. He'll be here, I promise you. Come and lie down, you look exhausted."

Leliana patted the mattress beside her; Flora obediently clambered off the bench and went to join the bard on the bed. Curling up onto her side, she rested her cheek against the cushion and yawned; hot and irritable.

"Close your eyes, just for a moment," cajoled Leliana softly, reaching out to tuck a stray strand of hair behind Flora's ear. "Just for a few minutes."

Within moments, Flora was dead to the world; snoring face-down in the cushions with her swollen torso twisted awkwardly to one side. Leliana picked up the troublesome biography once again, her brow creasing with a mixture of disapproval and reluctant fascination.

The next thing that Flora knew, a gentle hand was placed on her shoulder; a familiar Orlesian whisper directed into her ear.

"_Ma crevette_: I see the royal party approaching. Alistair is here."

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**Chapter End Notes**

OOC Author Note: Alistair's not here yet because it's taken him literally six hours to catch the fucking fish for Flora's precious Herring-style proposal! Lol. Oh well, the moment is almost here! Flora is completely oblivious (as usual), both to Leliana's sentimentality, and the Templar Commander offering some privacy for Alistair to propose in. HE IS NOT GIVING YOU PERMISSION FOR #CHANTRYSHAG, FLORA.
"Alistair is here."

Leliana's words hooked into Flora's mind, pulling her from a soft, dreamless darkness. Delighted at the arrival of her best friend, the youngest Cousland swung her legs from the bed and clambered gracelessly upright. Sensing that half of her hair had joyfully escaped the silken bow, she briefly debated pausing to adjust it before abandoning the notion and heading straight for the door.

"Florence!" called the bard, in mild alarm. "You have forgotten your boots. And Alistair's present!"

Flora shot back inside the guest chamber to retrieve the cheese and socks; clearly not willing to spare the time to also retrieve her footwear. Leliana, with a little sigh escaping her throat, stooped to pick up the boots before following Flora out into the passageway.

The sun was just beginning to lower itself into the horizon as the Royal party approached the crumbling main gate. Revanloch was swarming with people; the sunset heralded the end of the day's training, and initiates filled the corridors with chatter as they headed towards the mess hall. Chantry sisters issued stern reprimands from classroom doorways; reminding the adolescent Templars not to run in the passageways! and keep quiet in the Maker's House!

Flora wove her way impatiently around the excitable initiates as they wandered in clumps down the corridors. Fortunately, they tended to scatter before her; as a result of the Knight-Commander promising fifty extra hours of chores to any recruit who dared to waylay the Hero of Ferelden.

She made her way into the main wing of Revanloch, now knowing the route through the musty labyrinth by heart. Passing the imposing doors of the Chantry – not yet open for evening prayers – she ducked her way into the kitchen garden; through which lay a short cut to the main courtyard.

Chatter and sounds of general consumption drifted out from the windows of the mess hall overhead. Struck by a sudden compulsion, Flora was unable to stop herself from halting in the middle of the small allotment; plunging a hand into the dirt and pulling free a half-formed raw potato. Biting into the dirt-covered vegetable, she continued determinedly on her way.

The torches were being lit as Flora emerged into the main courtyard, slightly out of breath from her exertions. The braziers flared into life one after the other atop the ramparts; illuminating the enclosed space with soft ochre light. Reflected flames moved across the faces of those already gathered on the cobblestones; of which there were almost two dozen.

Flora stopped abruptly in the entranceway, brow creasing in sheer confusion. A collection of Ferelden's most powerful nobility were clustered expectantly at both sides of the gate; she could see Arl Bryland, both Guerrin brothers, her own brothers and a handful of other minor banns she vaguely recognised from the Landsmeet.

Scattered amongst the nobles were her companions – Wynne was clutching her staff, Oghren was grinning from ear to ear; even Sten stood to one side, sporting a faint scowl. Zevran was leaning against the crumbling gatepost, his features carefully arranged into a rather fixed-looking smile.

Flora's gaze was drawn next to a stocky, grey-bearded figure standing near Fergus, and her heart gave a palpable throb.
"Pa," she whispered, now utterly bewildered. "Papa. What are you doing here?"

Her foster-father issued a typical Herring grunt, jerking his chin wordlessly towards the centre of the courtyard. Hearing Leliana and her Templar guardians emerging from the doorway behind her, Flora followed her dad's gesture.

Alistair was standing at his horse's side, retrieving something wrapped in brown paper from the saddlebag. He was clad in the full rustic garb of a native Fereldan king – fur-trimmed leather, the spiked gold band firmly atop his ahead – and yet, despite these trappings of authority, Flora thought that she could see his hands shaking as he stepped back from the horse.

Her best friend turned towards her and she blinked, astonished at the strange, fervent mien cast across his features. His cheeks were flushed, his eyes fever bright and flashing like a storm at sea as they focused on her. A tangle of emotions fought each other across his face; a mixture of apprehension, determination and nausea all seeking dominance.

Flora eyed him dubiously, clutching the half-eaten potato in one hand and clapping his birthday gift to her chest. For some reason, she felt her own heart escalate to a giddy patter; thundering against her ribcage like an untamed horse on the gallop.

"I can't wait," Alistair threw desperately over his shoulder towards Eamon. "I can't. I just need to do it now, I'm going to just ask her – "

He strode across the cobbled stones, those in his way parting like hay yielding to a harvester's scythe.

Flora, now thoroughly bemused, watched Alistair come to an abrupt halt several yards before her. The brown paper package was clamped beneath his arm; and she could see beads of sweat breaking out on his forehead, despite the increasing coolness of the evening. Out of the corner, Flora could see Finian grinning like a madman, whispering excitedly to a smiling Fergus.

"Flora," Alistair croaked, his voice oddly raw and constricted. "I stand before you, not as a king, but as any other man."

He reached up as though in a dream, lifting the crown from his head and letting it drop to the cobbles with a dull, metallic clang. Flora blinked at him in sheer astonishment, half-wondering what to do with the potato in her hand.

"A man who loves you more than… than the fish love water," Alistair continued desperately, the pre-planned words coming out in a tangled rush. "More deeply than the Amaranthine Ocean."

Flora continued to gaze at him, suddenly grateful for her face's natural solemnity. Alistair pressed determinedly onwards, face blazing with a conviction far brighter than the braziers on the ramparts overhead.

"You're my best friend, my sister-warden, the kindest and bravest person I know. And each time I see you, it takes my breath away how beautiful you are."

Flora felt the little creature give an impatient kick, and she dropped a distracted hand to rub over her belly. Alistair followed the movement of her fingers, a distinct tremor running beneath his words.

"Lo, I fell in love with you the first night you slept in my arms," he said, odd and unsteady. "And I've… I've wanted to ask you this since we were at South Reach."

Flora swallowed, her heart crashing so hard against her ribs that she worried for their integrity. His face now set in grim purpose, Alistair retrieved the paper-wrapped object from beneath his arm,
pulling loose the twine with trembling, impatient fingers.

Once the wrapping had fallen loose, the king knelt on the cobbles before Flora; holding up a mid-sized salmon in his outstretched hands. He lifted his hazel eyes earnestly to hers, the green flecks standing out like shards of bottle-glass in the torchlight.

"Flora of Herring and Highever," he blurted, the words emerging raw, impassioned. "You're my best friend, my lover – the mother of my child. I…. I need you as my wife. Will you marry me?"

There was silence for a long moment, during which the only noise came from the open beaks of seagulls as they circled Revanloch's crumbling towers. Flora peered down at her former brother-warden as he knelt before her, head bowed and the fish held up like an offering.

Carefully – with more finesse than Alistair had let loose the crown – she placed his gift on the ground; then reached out and took the fish from his trembling hands. This soon joined the socks and cheese in a strange little pile on the cobbles.

This being done, Flora reached out and touched the top of Alistair's head, feeling the outline of his skull through the rumpled golden hair. He looked up at her, face suffused with anxiety and hope. She smiled down at him, wondering why he appeared so nervous - for in what possible circumstances would she have said no?

Our bond was forged in the breath of an Archdemon and hardened in the wake of Ostagar. We are bound brother- and sister-warden forever; tainted blood or no.

"Alistair," she replied kindly, speaking for the first time since she had stepped outside. "Of course."

Before Flora had finished her sentence, Alistair was on his feet, lifting her up bodily. Flora put her arms around his neck, smiling at the sheer joy and relief in his grip. She was vaguely aware of cheering in the background, knew that her friends, brothers and companions were shouting and stamping their approval, could hear Leliana sniffing wetly from somewhere behind her; yet all she cared about at that moment was her best friend and his glowing, ecstatic face.

"That's a yes?" Alistair sought to confirm desperately. "It's a yes, Flora?"

She nodded, and a little choked sound of relief escaped his throat; letting her down gently onto the cobbles but keeping his arms clamped around her waist.

"You… you know it's a throne I'm offering, as well as a ring," Alistair mumbled, eyes flickering sideways to the crown discarded on the cobbles. "I'm sorry that marrying me means becoming queen, Lo. I know you never wanted it."

Flora shrugged; the embodiment of Herring stoicism.

"A leader with a fancy hat. Lots of people looking at you. It's just like being Warden-Commander, really," she replied, with a northerner's practicality. "I did that well enough; I can do this too."

Alistair had not released Flora from the circle of his arms, but now he drew her closer still, letting his mouth collide with relief and desire against her own. She put her arms about his neck, parting her lips to accept the ardour of his untainted kiss; tasting the relief sharp on his tongue.

When they parted, Eamon was standing incongruously close; smiling and purposeful.

"Maker's Blessings on you both," he said, just about remembering to offer congratulations before getting down to business. "So, Florence, we want you married ideally as soon as possible."
Flora nodded, trying not to get distracted by Finian grinning and waving in the background.

"Alright," she replied, placidly. "When?"

Alistair swallowed, shooting his uncle a slightly anxious glance. Eamon pressed forwards, taking a deep breath.

"At the coronation in three days time," he proposed, determinedly. "Combine the ceremony with a wedding."

"But if that's too soon, Lo, it doesn't matter," the king added, hastily. "Whenever you feel ready."

"Three days is fine," she said, delighted at the prospect of becoming her brother-warden's wife so soon. "Just tell me where to stand and what to say."

Alistair embraced her once more, gripping Flora about the waist and pressing his face to the top of her head. She could feel dampness against her hair, and realised that tears of joy and relief were leaking from his eyes. Around them, there was excited chatter and relieved grins – nobody had expected Flora to turn Alistair down, but it was still reassuring to hear her enunciate her acceptance out loud.

"This is what I'd hoped for, since South Reach," the king whispered once again, the words emerging constricted. "And ever since the Blight ended, it's all I've thought of. I need you with me, Flo. As my wife, my queen – as my best friend in all Thedas."

Flora smiled against his leather tunic, her gaze falling on the socks and cheese lying abandoned on the cobblesones.

"Happy birthday," she said, squirming from Alistair's restraining arms to gaze up at him. "I've got a present for you."

"Oh!" Alistair said, remembering that the proposal was not yet complete. "I've got something for you, too."

"But it's not my birthday yet," protested Flora, watching Finian stride forward with something clenched in his palm.

Her brother passed the object to Alistair, who turned to Flora with a face now bright as sunrise.

"Give me your hand, Lo."

Flora held out her hand, palm upright; expecting to receive something to hold. Instead, Alistair reached out and turned her fingers so that her knuckles were facing upwards. With a thumb, he traced the slender line of her fourth finger; voice thickening with emotion.

"Do you remember what I told you about this finger in South Reach?"

"The Tevinter legend," she replied, dutifully. "About the vein going straight to the heart."

Alistair nodded, taking a deep and steadying breath. His own hand visibly trembled as he slid something cool and heavy onto her fourth finger. Flora looked down in surprise, her brow furrowing.

What once had been merely her own unprepossessing digit – short and bitten-nailed – now sported a slender band of gold beneath the lowest knuckle. Delicate filigree held a single ivory pearl in place; catching the torchlight like a small lantern.
"It's from the Royal treasury," Alistair explained throatily, not yet willing to release her hand. "It's got some fancy name-"

"Mairyn's Star," offered an eavesdropping Finian, desperate to worm his way into the proposal so that he could gleefully recant his involvement in the taverns later.

"– but it's from the ocean," the king continued, earnestly. "Some fisherman must have brought it up in his net. I thought it would remind you of Herring."

"I suggested the Kal-Ashok emerald at first," Eamon murmured to Leonas, who gave a small snort. "Or the diamond privateered from the Orlesians. The lad wouldn't have any of it. He knows his own mind."

Flora stood on her toes - feeling her bound knee give a twitch of effort – and pressed her lips to Alistair's own in gratitude.

"Thank you," she said, feeling her cheeks flush. "I got you a gift, too. It's not exactly jewellery. I'm… not very good at birthdays."

Bending down with a grunt, Flora scooped up the assorted items; presenting them to Alistair with her chin raised.

"Happy twenty-one birthday."

Alistair's eyes gleamed with a sudden dampness as he looked down at the Fereldan cheddar and Mabari-patterned knitted socks. He took them as though in a dream, reaching out with his free hand to stroke Flora's cheek with his thumb.

"My beautiful betrothed," he said, thickly. "My queen."

Flora beamed up at him, the solemn Cousland mask dissolving as her lips curved upwards; eyes bright with equally matched ardour. Alistair wrapped his arm about her shoulders, keeping a tight grip on her as they turned to face their friends and companions.

"'Bout time you made an honest woman out of her!" Oghren guffawed through his ginger moustache, eyes sparkling merrily. "Congratulations."

Wynne was doing her best to wipe her damp eyes in her sleeve, swallowing briskly.

"I refuse to do what is expected of a sentimental old woman and bawl," she said sternly, though there was a distinct tremor in her voice. "I'm sure there'll be weeping enough at the wedding."

Flora smiled at the senior enchanter, pale gaze drifting towards where Zevran was standing a short distance to the side. His mouth was open as though he were laughing at a humorous comment made by Finian to the assembled company; yet there was quite clearly no sound emerging from his lips. Instead, there was a rictus stiffness to the elf's face, and a dull opacity clouded the usually dancing pupils.

She stared at him anxiously for a moment; then Eamon was speaking to her, drawing her attention away.

"Do you want a carriage to return to Denerim? Or will you ride with Alistair?"

Flora blinked, turning back to where the Arl of Redcliffe was standing. The stars were emerging one at a time overhead, like small, glinting shells catching the sunlight from the bottom of some murky
rock-pool. Night was drawing in without pause; the moon hung overhead, vast and impossibly low.

"Return to Denerim?" she asked, confused. "What do you mean?"

Fergus stepped forwards, smiling down at his younger sister with affection creasing his prematurely aged forehead.

"Floss, your month at Revanloch is over. We're taking you back to the palace."

Chapter End Notes

Alistair wasn't originally intending to blurt his proposal out in public, but he saw Flora and couldn't help himself, haha. He definitely rehearsed the bit about loving her like a fish loves the water, deep as the Amaranthine Ocean, though! He needn't have stressed out about the proposal – Flora just accepts it, lol – as she does becoming queen. This has been such a year of elevations for her - Warden, Cousland, Warden-Commander – that she takes the throne in her stride. The reason why Alistair didn't arrive until evening was because it took him literally six hours to catch a fish - in the end, Royal Guard had to scoop them up in massive nets and throw them at the king's fishing rod until one hooked on, hahaha.

Incidentally, Flora already sees them as good as married :P In Herring, people often just lived in common law relationships, so that's what she viewed herself and Alistair as being in! This is just making it official ;)
Flora's mouth fell open, and she turned first to Alistair, and then to her two Templar guards; a silent question in her eyes.

"Aye," Knight-Captain Gannorn confirmed, gruffly. "It's been thirty days. You're free to leave Revanloch."

Alistair beamed reflexively, utterly delighted that his soon-to-be wife could at last return to Denerim at his side.

Flora - who had never had a very solid grasp on the Theodesian calendar compared with the fishing seasons – blinked, her brow furrowing.

"I didn't realise," she breathed, astonished. "Oh, but my things are all over the place. I need some time to pack."

"I'll go and gather up your possessions," Leliana interrupted, blowing her nose damply. "I know where everything is. But I'll need some help with the duc's giant golden fish. Hideous thing that it is!"

Finian gallantly volunteered to assist her, disappearing within the damp bowels of Revanloch in the bard's wake.

There followed a flurry of movement; shapes and silhouettes shifting in the torchlight as the gathered group prepared to depart. Stable boys came scampering excitedly forward, leading their equine charges across the cobbles; the Templar Knight-Commander conversed in low tones with Eamon about the Grand Cleric's presidency over the wedding. Flora's companions – save for one – conversed amongst themselves on the manner of Alistair's proposal. According to Wynne, it had taken the king six stressful hours to finally catch a fish at the end of his rod – in the end, Royal Guard had to hurl baskets of live, pre-caught fish into the water around Alistair's bobbing line.

An evening breeze had sprung up, whistling through the gaps in Revanloch's tiled roof and tugging at the faded Chantry banners hanging from the ramparts. Alistair – who had been tacking up his own horse – immediately went in search of a blanket for his new betrothed; aware that even the slightest breath of air was amplified on the cliff-top path.

Flora, meanwhile, had been surrounded by a crowd talking excitedly about the upcoming coronation and wedding – but to each other, rather than to her. She did not mind this in the slightest, standing at her silent Herring-father's elbow as he shifted on the cobbles. True to form, Pel had said little more than three words to Flora since passing beneath Revanloch's crumbling archway. She could tell that he was deeply uncomfortable in the company of the nobles; lined brow furrowed and mouth drawn taut behind the tangled grey beard.

For a moment, Flora wondered if there was anything she could do to ease his discomfort. She was skilled at persuasion, if the occasion demanded it – but even she could not see a way to reconcile her Herring father with her Highever status. Instead of speaking, she reached out – still getting used to the new weight of her be-ringed hand – and squeezed his elbow, tight and wordless.

Pel let out a grunt of disapproval at such tacit emotion, yet his eyes flickered over his adopted
daughter with a fleeting glint of affection. Flora smiled up at him, and then her attention was caught once more by the Antivan elf; standing just beyond the reach of the torchlight.

Taking advantage of everyone’s distraction, she sidled barefoot across the cobblestones and came to a halt besides Zevran. He was gazing through an iron grill set into the wall, which framed a view of the still, deep green Amaranthine Ocean. The wave-less surface reflected the effervescent miasma of the heavens as well as any mirror; the stars swathed in gaseous cloud and the moon a swollen counterpart of the pearl resting on Flora’s finger.

With the extraordinary perception of one trained in subterfuge; Zevran had identified Flora by the sound of her approach alone, able to pick out the subtle differences in timbre between her strong and weak footfalls.

"Your Majesty," he murmured and made a lacklustre effort to smile; an unseeing stare fixed on the rusting iron grate.

Flora eyed the elf for a moment, considering the peculiar tone of his response. She had a vague notion as to the cause of his distress, and felt a twist of unhappiness in her gut due to her inability to rectify it.

Zevran angled himself to face her, forcing a shred of humour into his voice as he drew his fingers together above her head in an emulation of a crown.

"You know, carina," he said, meditative. "That circle of gold will trap you just as effectively as any mage tower."

"Yes," she replied, with a shrug. "I know."

His dark eyes flared, fixing themselves onto hers like limpets.

"Is that really what you want, my Rialto lily? To be a… prisoner of the throne? You have never desired status, amor. And this will be the end of freedom for you. The end of choice."

"Arl Eamon is right," Flora replied, quietly. "For some reason – I don't understand why – the people look at me and see… hope. And since I'm not a Warden anymore, and my spirits are… are gone, it's the only way I can serve Ferelden."

Zevran fell quiet and pensive, his eyes moving from the pearl of betrothal on her finger to its lunar counterpart overhead. The breeze ruffled his hair, catching the fine platinum strands and tugging them upwards.

"I made Alistair king at the Landsmeet," she continued, in little more than a whisper. "When I showed them my army – giving them no choice but to support me - I as good as put the crown on his head myself. It's only right I should serve this sentence at his side."

The elf took a deep inhalation of cool Fereldan air, forcing a strand of lightness back into his response.

"Ah, but you'll be breaking your promise to me then, carina! You won't be able to visit Antiva now. Or, if you do, you'll be visiting merchant princes and aristocrats; sipping anís on the loftiest of sea-view terraces. Not visiting an elf who dwells in the back-alleys behind the leatherworkers. You will only see the sunny side of the city."

Flora snorted, shooting him a little pointed glance.
"I'll go where I want," she retorted, with a flash of northern defiance. "I'll go to the… shadows and the back alleys."

"Sí, as long as it is with a troop of Royal Guard, _eh, mi florita?_ The most _interesting_ denizens of Antiva will scatter like autumn leaves when they hear the sound of plated boots."

"Then I'll disguise myself as _Federico_ to visit you! Or," she said, recalling their subterfuge to allow her undetected access to Denerim. "I'll become a whore again. A worker of the Pearl."

The elf smiled at Flora, appreciating her efforts to cheer him up.

"You're too sweet to pass yourself off as an Antivan whore, _carina._"

"Well, I don't know," she replied, dropping her voice solemnly and putting a finger to her once-curative lips. "I've put my mouth on a _lot_ of men over the years."

Zevran let out a sudden, genuine chortle at Flora's very mild bawdiness. He was proud of her attempt to make a joke about her own peculiar manner of healing; the absence of which was still a raw wound. He put his arm about her shoulders and kissed her on the cheek, affectionate and _mostly_ familial.

When it came time for Flora to officially leave Revanloch's custody, she found herself oddly emotional. The cloisters, although claustrophobic, had also shielded her from the initial post-Blight chaos; from the trauma of seeing injured and dying that she could no longer heal and from the smoke of the pyres that had burned for a week. She had left the monastery on only two occasions – for her feast, and to purchase Alistair's present – and had found herself content to dwell within its walls for the remainder of the time. Beneath Revanloch's leaking rooftiles, she had also found time to become more attuned to the _little creature_ whose existence she had mostly ignored during the latter days of the Blight; and she had also been granted space, silence and privacy to grieve for her departed spirits.

Now Flora was aware that she was leaving privacy behind and immersing herself in Fereldan politics - a tangled web that she would most likely only be free of at her own death. It was an intimidating prospect, but Flora had faced intimidating prospects before; and she was a _northerner_, who knew that hard grit lay at the centre of every pearl.

With the others all mounted and ready to depart – save for Alistair, who waited patiently on the cobbles with the horse's reins in his hand – Flora went to thank her two Templar guardians in turn.

Knight-Captain Gannorn had grunted in response to her gratitude, the faintest flush appearing behind the neatly cropped silver hair on his cheeks.

"It was no chore, my lady," he muttered, eyes firmly fixed on the crumbling brickwork of the archway. "More interesting than escorting pilgrims across the Rivaini deserts."

Flora smiled at him, then turned to Chanter Devotia, summoning the words that Leliana had taught her earlier in the day. They emerged in an untrained rush, without proper elocution and eloquence; but with a genuine sincerity.

"'The host of Shartan, the clans of Alamarri, a thousand freemen. Held aloft blade and spear and to the Maker gave thanks.' THANKS," she repeated, with especial emphasis on the final word in the hope that her meaning was conveyed clearly.
For the first time in a month, the corner of the Chanter's mouth turned upwards; the steely violet stare flickering as she gazed down at the earnest young Cousland; who herself was a descendent of Ferelden's ancient Alamarri.

"As I stumble forth in shadow, I am not alone. And nothing that He has wrought shall be truly lost. Nothing."

Just as Flora had done, Chanter Devotia hardened her voice meaningfully on the last word; catching Flora's eye and nodding slightly.

*Nothing shall be truly lost. Not even spirits blasted apart by a demon's soul.*

Flora felt the all too familiar sensation of dampness prickling on her lashes, and took a quick inhalation of cold night air to suppress the surge of emotion. Turning to the Knight-Commander of the Fereldan Order, she bowed her head in gratitude; shivering slightly as a chilly breeze cut through the thin linen dress.

"Thank you for allowing me to stay here," she said, politely. "It wasn't half as horrible as I thought it was going to be."

Atop his horse, Finian snorted quietly; while Fergus let out a grunt of despair.

"The Maker's House is always open to those seeking solitude and sanctuary," replied the Knight-Commander, coughing slightly. "Although with you gone, our recruits might finally be able to concentrate on their lessons again."

Flora, not sure how to respond to this, smiled vaguely. Far above their heads, a bat swooped out of Revanloch's bell tower, making a leisurely circuit about the courtyard before dropping out of sight.

The stiff breeze was soon accompanied by a fine, misting drizzle; the salt-tang of the sea strong in the air.

This was the final straw for Alistair, who decided that the goodbyes and gratitude had gone on long enough. With the blanket slung over his shoulder like a Tevinter-style cape, he strode across the cobbles and draped an arm protectively across Flora's bare shoulders.

"Darling, it's freezing and you're practically naked. Come on, let's go home. Where in the Fade are your boots?!"

Footwear was retrieved, the king's horse led over, and Alistair lifted his mistress onto the saddle as though she was made of Orlesian glass. Moments later, he had clambered up to sit behind Flora; clamping one arm protectively around her waist while calling impatiently for the blanket. She clutched the rough woollen fabric to her chin; leaning back against Alistair's chest as he gripped the reins in a single, experienced hand.

The procession began with the retainers and Royal Guard on foot, their torches cutting a brilliant swathe through the darkness. They were followed by the nobles and Flora's companions, conversation dwindling as the tenth-hour bell rung faint in Revanloch's dwindling tower.

Flora twisted her head to catch one final glimpse of the monastery as the horses made their way along the clifftop path; plodding stoically through the drizzle. Despite the coolness of the night, a combination of the blanket and Alistair's proximity kept out the chill.

"Alistair," she whispered, hoping that her words weren't being immediately snatched away by the wind.
"Yes, my love?" he replied, through a mouthful of birthday-gift cheese.

"You said: 'let's go home'. Do you think of the palace as home, then?"

Alistair was quiet a moment, his eyes drawn to the city of Denerim sprawled across the mouth of the estuary. It blazed away in defiance of the shadows; lit by a thousand braziers smouldering away on ramparts and bridges. The castle was perched on the highest point of the city, rising above the other districts like a watchful captain of the guard.

"I'm… starting to," he replied, eventually. "I know it sounds odd. But it already feels more familiar than the Templar monastery I was raised in, and I spent a decade there."

Flora twisted around in the saddle, and Alistair reflexively tightened his grip as he felt her shift against him. The purpose of such movement was revealed soon after; her lips landed slightly off-centre of his mouth. He pressed a returning kiss to the back of Flora's head as she settled back into her normal position.

"My queen," he said quietly and this time Flora did not chide or correct him, but laid her palm gently across his riding glove. The pearl on her fourth finger glinted in the moonlight, undulled by rain or veneer of night.

"I used to think that I could never feel at home anywhere other than Herring," she replied after a moment, tucking several loose strands of hair back into the silken bow. "I thought of nothing else when I was in the Circle. I was so homesick, I felt sometimes I would go mad if I didn't see the sea. That's why I climbed up on the tower roof so often."

Alistair waited with baited breath, keeping a firm hand on the reins as they began the gradual slope down into the city. Several scouts had ridden ahead to alert the guards; the portcullis was being slowly winched upwards over the western gate. It had been Eamon's idea to bring Flora back to Denerim under cover of night, when they could be guaranteed some measure of privacy.

"But recently I've been so confused, because I've stopped missing Herring quite so much," Flora continued thoughtfully, grateful for the reassuring firmness of Alistair's chest against her head. "I didn't understand why for a long time, and then… I did."

She fell quiet for several minutes, letting Alistair steer the horse down the sloping gravelled path towards the gate. To her relief, the Alamarri plains were lost in a mass of shadow to one side; looking upon them brought back too many raw memories for Flora's liking. Alistair did not press her to continue, exchanging a few murmured comments with Eamon as he drew up alongside them.

Once the arl had spurred his horse forward, Flora resumed her chain of thought; voice soft and contemplative. The drizzle had plastered her hair to her cheeks, an oddly comforting sensation for the native northerner.

"It's because I'm happiest and safest when I'm with you," she said at last, abandoning any attempt at effusive explanation. "So my home is wherever you are."

Alistair gripped her even more tightly on the saddle, inhaling unsteadily against her hair in place of a coherent response. Lost for words, he pressed his lips fiercely to the back of her head.

"I'll never be parted from you again," he said at last, voice emerging thickly from his throat. "The only good thing about the Blight was that, during it, I could always stretch out my hand and touch you. Now I'm going to keep you within arms' reach, forever."

Flora smiled to herself and then yawned, deeply. She let her head loll back against her soon-to-be
husband's shoulder, trusting in the anchor of his arm to keep her astride the saddle. Within minutes, she had fallen asleep; lulled by the horse's gentle gait and the rhythm of Alistair's breathing.

Chapter End Notes

OOC Author Note: Of course Flora has no desire to be queen for the sake of a crown and a title! She did her duty as Warden-Commander during the Blight, but now that she can't do that – or heal – she views being queen as a way she can continue to serve the people of Ferelden. She's vaguely aware (mostly through Eamon's hints) that the people see her and her swollen belly as a figure of hope; and although she's not quite sure what that means, she's willing to try her best at it – just like Alistair is already doing.

Poor Zevran, though! I liked his comment about the circle of gold on her head trapping her just like a mage circle, lol.

I trawled through so many pages of the Chant on the DA wikia to find those quotes for Chanter Devotia ... seriously, I'd rather go through entries of the Domesday Book lol

In the last chapter, Alistair was effusive about how much he loved Flora – in his typical open, raw and impassioned way. As a northerner, Flora doesn't tend to spill over with verbal affection – especially not in public! (no true Herring-ite would) – so I wanted to show in this chapter how much Alistair means to her. Throughout the story, it's been emphasised how much Flora adores, values and misses Herring – so the fact that she now sees Alistair as her new home (even if that means the Royal palace) is a huge deal!

Wow I sound so uneloquent in these OOC author notes, lol. I actually sound like a proper moron – interspersing every sentence with lol and haha… I think my brain just switches off whenever I get to the end of editing a chapter (lol).
It felt as though Flora had only let her eyes close for a moment; yet when she blinked and roused herself, they were on the final approach up to the Royal Palace. The night-time drizzle had finally abated, the veil of cloud drawing back to create a star-studded backdrop for the sprawling, fortress-like Theirin seat. The castle ramparts and towers sat squatly silhouetted against the heavens, no less intimidating for being half-cloaked in shadow. Many of the trees from the Royal hunting grounds had been unceremoniously chopped down to fortify the camp on the Alamarri plains; great swathes of woodland lay studded with forlorn tree-stumps.

The hooves of the horses crunched softly against the gravel as they came to a halt on the palace forecourt. Flora yawned, peering around at their diminished company. Several of her companions had clearly gone their separate ways in the city below – Leonas too must have retired to the Bryland manor in the noble district. She noticed with a twinge of sadness that her Herring-father had also taken himself off, without word or ceremony.

*I'm surprised he's even stayed in the city this long. He must be returning to Herring soon, it's almost bream season.*

Flora found herself irrationally terrified by the idea of her adoptive father leaving for the northern coast. Her heartbeat surged like a startled horse, and she found herself instinctively shifting closer to Alistair on the saddle, her fingers anchoring themselves to his sleeve.

"Darling," he said quietly, realising that she had woken. "We're here."

Swallowing the bitter taste of anxiety, Flora peered up at the imposing eastern face of the palace. The basalt rock was bathed in firelight from a dozen standing braziers, and she could see the silhouettes of guards posted at intervals along the ramparts overhead. Stable boys and the Royal Steward were already there to meet them, standing in formal array outside the main doors.

Those still remaining in the party dismounted onto the gravel, their horses swiftly led away by dutiful retainers. Alistair reached up for a yawning Flora, reluctant to release her even when she was safely on the ground.

"Your Majesty, Lady Cousland," Guillaume murmured, stepping forward and sweeping into a smooth, practised bow. "Congratulations on your betrothal. And welcome back to the palace, my lady; on behalf of the household. We are glad to have you here with us."

Flora gave a sleepy smile in response as Alistair beamed from beside her.

"Is the fire lit in our chamber?" the king asked as they made their way into the entrance hall. "And extra furs on the bed? It's a cold night, I won't have my wife - my *almost-wife* catching a chill."

"Aye, your majesty. It is all as you requested."

Flora roused herself, gazing at the hall that she had not seen for a month even as one hand extended reflexively to touch the stone Mabari's paw. The fireplaces that lined each wall were lit; smouldering softly into the shadow and emitting scented cedar-smoke. The thick teal velvet carpeting – designed to impress those first making entrance into the palace – had been freshly cleaned, dust and dog-hair swept away, worn patches re-threaded.
Yet her eye was drawn to the long banners overhead, hanging from each rafter in an endless parade of brightly embroidered silk. Interspersed with the usual Theirin and Ferelden pennants hung several new designs – the olive Highever wreath stood stark and proud against its navy backdrop. At the forefront hung the pattern that Flora had noticed when venturing to the Denerim markets – the Theirin lion, with the Cousland laurel wrapped intimately around its paw and flank.

"Oh!" she breathed, in sudden realisation. "Alistair, are they for us? For the wedding?"

Alistair, who had paused to exchange a few words with Eamon, gave a little – slightly self-conscious – nod. More than one pair of eyes swung towards Flora to see how she would react to this blatant sign that preparations for her marriage had been going on for some time – long before Alistair's actual proposal.

As it transpired, Flora was entirely unbothered by this revelation – becoming Alistair's wife was just a Chantry-acknowledged formalisation of their existing bond; and she was used to pomp and ceremony from her brief tenure as Warden-Commander.

"Well, I like it," she said amiably, stifling another yawn. "It's a clever design."

Though better with a fish incorporated in it somewhere, she thought privately to herself. Or some seaweed. Alistair, vastly relieved, strode back to Flora's side; noticing that his lover was unsteady on her feet with tiredness.

"Come on, sweetheart. I know we aren't officially married yet, but I'm going to carry you over the threshold regardless."

Flora allowed herself to be hoisted up into the familiar berth of the king's arms, anchoring herself around his neck and yawning once again.

"Not officially," she murmured, sliding her finger along the fur collar of his tunic. "But it feels like we've been married forever."

I slept in your arms for months before we ever did anything more explicit. We lay tangled together on the bedroll like a decades-wed couple before we'd even shared a kiss. It was a defiance of sorts, against both our grief over Ostagar and the terrible knowledge that we were fighting the Fifth Blight alone.

Alistair pressed affectionate lips to the top of Flora's head, tasting the salty residue from the sea-mist on her hair.

"My wife," he repeated, and it was clear that he placed far greater significance on the Chantry's blessing of their relationship. "Maker, I wasn't particularly looking forward to the coronation, but now I wish it were tomorrow."

Flora yawned once more in response, letting her head droop against his shoulder.

The journey up to the Royal passageway – which housed the king's quarters, as well as those of the Couslands – passed in a series of intermittent images as Flora dozed on and off in Alistair's arms. From half-closed eyes, she caught a glimpse of certain familiar features; the distinct landmarks she had once used to navigate her way about the palace.

The first was the stained glass depiction of the great king Calenhad, progenitor of the Theirin line. Alistair's oldest ancestor had united the diverse tribes of the Alamarri and thus won himself a place in
Ferelden legend. In the past Flora had spent countless minutes standing open-mouthed before the cunningly designed window, wondering how they made glass gleam in such a vivid spectrum of shades.

Then it was along a wide corridor lined with suits of armour, up a curling stone staircase; then across a minstrel's gallery that ran above a great hall. It was crammed full of extra tables and chairs, in readiness to house three hundred additional mouths in two days' time.

At the top of another wide, shallow flight of steps, a vast and moth-eaten tapestry showed an unfortunate halla being set upon by a pack of delighted, bloody-jawed Mabari. This marked the beginning of the Royal corridor, a wide passage lined with busts of previous kings and queens. Guardsmen were placed at intervals between these carved visages; stiff as suits of armour and clutching pikes in their hands.

Flora awoke just as Alistair came to a halt outside the vast, ornately carved wooden doors that led into the Royal bedchamber. Alistair had stopped to receive a wry reminder from Eamon; one of the few who had accompanied them up from the entrance hall.

"Now, son," the arl said quietly, keeping his voice lowered out of courtesy for the Cousland brothers. "The lady Florence is not going anywhere. Do try and be on time for the council tomorrow morning."

"In other words, there'll be all the nights in the world to spend together," murmured Zevran under his breath; the elf loitering in the shadows near Finian.

Alistair gave a vague and oblivious nod, only half-listening. His fingers were working through the rope-like, dark red strands of Flora's hair; exploring its rain-dampened texture.

"What time does it start?" mumbled Flora, who had punctuality drilled into her during her tenure at the Circle.

"Nine bells," replied Eamon, pale green Guerrin eyes fixing themselves on her. "Will you do your utmost to see that he's there, child?"

Flora nodded, stifling another yawn against Alistair's tunic.

"Mm."

Fergus stepped forward to say goodnight; sporting a face vividly stricken with conflict. On the one hand, his little sister was soon going to become Queen of Ferelden. Never before had Ferelden's two most prominent families been so closely allied – it was a great political coup. In some tangential way, it also fulfilled Bryce Cousland's desire to betroth his pretty daughter to a son of Maric – albeit not the one the old teyrn had intended.

However, a more immediate and pressing concern for the new teyrn was Flora's resumed residency in the adjacent bedchamber. His younger sister tended to be somewhat vocal – to put it mildly – during her nightly exertions with Alistair, and Fergus had no intention of being traumatised. Stonemasons had already started the process of reinforcing the party wall between the Theirin and Cousland quarters; until then, the teyrn of Highever was well-stocked with earplugs.

Both Cousland brothers bid their sister goodnight, Zevran blowing a subtle kiss in the background. To Fergus' relief, Flora appeared far too tired for any nocturnal activities; arms wound around Alistair's neck and her eyes half closing.

The Royal Guard dutifully opened the double doors for their king, stepping back with a smart left-
right shift of their pikes as he carried his yawning mistress into the bedchamber.

As the sounds from the corridor were muted by the closure of the doors, Alistair pressed a kiss to Flora's ear; the words emerging soft and shyly hopeful.

"This is my birthday gift to you, sweet girl," he murmured, unable to stop a proud beam from spreading across his face.

Flora opened her eyes, perplexed.

"I thought this was your birthday gift to me," she mumbled, letting her sleepy fingers droop back to reveal the filigree-clad pearl known as Mairyn's Star.

"Well, then. This is my second gift," Alistair replied, lowering Flora gently to the ground so that she could take in the surroundings. "Look about you."

The king's bedchamber was lit by the great hearth on the far wall; wider than most fireplaces and thus able to bathe the majority of the room in soft, ochre light. It had always been surprisingly austere for a royal bedchamber – no Theirin had particularly valued fussy ornamentation, and Alistair was no exception. Instead of gilt or lavish embellishment, the walls were clad in thick plaster and coated in murals of native beasts; dark exposed beams running the length of the ceiling. Skillfully-hewn statues of Ferelden heroes stood instead of paintings; and a large, somewhat faded tapestry depicting Calenhad's loyal pack of Mabari hung on the south wall. Animal furs were strewn both over the flagstones and atop the master bed, tangled amidst blankets embroidered in Alamari clan patterns.

All this was familiar to Flora, who had resided with Alistair in the Royal bedchamber for nearly two months prior to the final battle. Yet the more she gazed around, the more she noticed the subtle differences in décor that Alistair had made.

Murals of loll-tongued Mabari and proud Ferelden Forder horses already decorated various walls, but Flora noticed a new design daubed above the great hearth. A line of dancing fish, their bodies curled in artistically pleasing symmetry, had been picked out in fresh paint on the plaster. Several blankets strewn across the over-large bed had been embroidered with patterns native to the northern coast – some from Highever and others from the rural localities – but each one known to her. Scattered across the dark oak top of the dresser were a number of sea-shells, washed and varnished to a sheen.

Flora's attention was drawn finally to the window, besides which she had spent many hours sitting and gazing at the city spread over the estuary below. The stonemasons reinforcing the joining wall between Cousland and Theirin quarters had also paid a visit here. The window had been widened and deepened, so that it was possible to lie in the great fur-strewn bed and gaze directly out at a swathe of the pea-green Amaranthine Ocean.

"You told me once that you liked to watch the storms over the sea at night," Alistair murmured softly in Flora's ear. "Now we can do that together."

Flora stared wordlessly at him, for she had mentioned that only fleetingly, wistfully, over six months prior. Alistair flashed her a little grin, trying to disguise how proud he was of this second gift.

"See, you're not the only one with a good memory! I remember things too. Well, sometimes."

Flora gazed once more around the bedchamber, her wide and astonished eyes taking in the painted fish murals, the familiar stitching on the blankets, the shells and the sea-view window.

"I – I know this life isn't what you ever wanted," Alistair murmured, soft and rueful. "Maker's Breath, I wish I were a man who could take you back to Herring and live a simple life in a two-room
cottage. But... but I hope this at least will help a little. Make you feel more comfortable, at least."

Unable to retrieve any coherent words, Flora reached up her arms towards her former brother-warden. He went to embrace her; drawing her against his chest with mingled protectiveness and affection. With Flora's face buried in the leather of his tunic, it wasn't until Alistair saw the shaking of her shoulders that he realised she was crying.

"My love," he said, leaning back just far enough to see her water-stained cheeks. "Those are happy tears, right?"

Flora nodded, staring up at him with eyes like winter skies over the Waking Sea; grey, damp and clouded. She reached up to touch the side of Alistair's face, tracing the line of his jaw, feeling the residue of the evening's rain in the short beard covering his chin. Alistair said nothing more, his face bright with affection but his eyes trained on her with the still, unblinking focus of a Mabari spotting a lone halla.

Anchoring his fingers wordlessly in her own, Flora shuffled backwards across the flagstones, leading her best friend to the fur-strewn royal bed. He followed her as though in a dream, docile as a child but with an intensity in his expression that belied the gentleness.

Loosing his hand, Flora lowered herself down amidst the blankets, letting her fingers curl into the familiar patterns of the fabric.

"Alistair."

Shaking her head back so that the thick, dark red ropes of hair fell away from her shoulders, she let him see how the white linen of the dress had become translucent in the rain; the pink of her nipple showing through the wet fabric as it clung to the curve of her breast.

"Make me your wife," Flora whispered, peering up at him through damp eyelashes as she gestured to the bed. "Now, here. Before the Chantry does."

"Yes," the king breathed, stepping forwards and reaching to unbutton his breeches.

Chapter End Notes

OOC Author Note: I think that Alistair – with his Templar/monastery background – is a lot more concerned with the Chantry formalising their union. Whereas Flora, from a small-village, is less concerned with the official side of it. Which is actually pretty accurate – in Medieval times, a canon law marriage was just where a couple stated that they were man and wife (i.e. with no witness but God) – there was no need for a priest to confirm it! Obviously, in the cases of nobility (with property and money) they would have a proper formal ceremony; but peasants didn't tend to be fussed about weddings, lol.

I thought that Alistair adding some Herring-themed décor to the royal bedchamber would be a cute idea! As well as widening the window so she can see the sea from in
bed.
The light from the great hearth emanated in soft waves across the Royal bedchamber, illuminating the fish painted above the hearth and the embroidered blankets spread across the bed. Sprawled amidst their familiar northern patterns, Flora smiled up at the king of Ferelden from beneath her eyelashes; a naked invitation in her pale grey stare.

Without hesitation Alistair bore her backwards amidst the furs, careful to keep his bulk propped up on strong arms. His mouth went straight to Flora's throat, a desirous tongue tracing the line of her neck, from her ear down to her collarbone. She arched herself reflexively into him, shoulder-blades pressing into the mattress as she hooked a bare leg around his waist.

Alistair let out a helpless groan against her skin, lips closing around her earlobe. His fingers wandered over the thin, rain-dampened fabric covering her breast; one calloused thumb coaxing the nipple to stiffness with measured little circles.

"How much do you like this dress, baby?" he murmured thickly into Flora's ear, the words coagulated with lust.

"I hate it," she whispered back honestly, watching the corner of her best friend's mouth twist upwards in a crude, purposeful grin.

Alistair reached out, clutching a handful of the flimsy bodice in a strong fist. With a single yank downwards, the fabric tore like cheap parchment; opening the dress from neck to nape. The king let the torn material fall apart, leaning back to survey his mistress as she rested languid on the furs before him, entirely unbothered by her own nakedness.

"No smallclothes, Lo?" he asked her throatily, unfastening the final fiddly button on his breeches.

"Why would I wear smalls on your birthday?" Flora asked sweetly, the innocence of her query belied by the intimacy in her gaze.

"Ha! That's my girl."

Alistair let out an unsteady laugh, eyes moving over her exposed body as he pulled unashamedly at himself for several long moments. Flora smiled up at him, curling a strand of hair absent-mindedly about her finger as she let her leather-bound knee drop to the side.

Soon after she felt a calloused palm settle on her other knee, parting her thighs with gentle insistence. Flora opened her eyes just in time to see Alistair taking up a kneeling position on the fur-covered flagstones; spitting crudely on his fingers and wetting his lips in preparation.

"Alistair," she breathed in a small voice, reaching down to brush her fingers across his golden hair as he lowered his head almost reverently between her legs.

For the next half-candle female gasps and whimpers would drift out from beneath the king's door. These were interspersed with pleas, growing more desperate and incoherent as time passed. In the adjacent Cousland chambers, a traumatised and bug-eyed Fergus was busy melting candle wax to stuff into his ears.
As the bell rang for the change in watch, the king of Ferelden brought his mistress to a shuddering, whimpering climax for the fifth time in a row. By now Flora had lost her ability to speak lucidly, sprawled back in the blankets with her arms flung above her head and a thoroughly dazed expression. She was so disorientated, brain dulled and body overstimulated, that she barely registered the additional pressure between her legs. Moments later, she realised that he had sheathed himself fully; sinking down to the root.

Her body responded faster than her lust-addled brain, arching upwards as Alistair rutted slow and deep into her; gripping her thighs with each controlled thrust. As he rapidly neared his own climax, restraint slipped away and he took his best friend like a Mabari in heat; taut hips snapping rhythmically back and forth. The king let out a helpless shout as he spent himself, sinking to the root. Moments later, Alistair collapsed onto the bed beside her, wide-eyed and temporarily stunned.

Flora, who always recovered more quickly, reached out and touched his cheek gently. She could feel the heat radiating from his flushed face, like a cooking pot taken fresh from the fire.

"Alistair," she whispered, and he let out a strangled, half-grunt in response; stupefied as a fish left to gasp on the sand.

Flora eyed the king appreciatively for a moment, peering beneath her eyelashes at the sweat-slick, solidly hewn muscle of his body; the usual olive tones made richer by the summer heat.

"I'll get you something to drink," she offered eventually, ignoring his feeble moan of protest as he flailed an arm towards her. "No, no- it's fine. Stay there."

With a slight degree of unsteadiness, she clambered to her feet and wrapped one of the furs about her like an Alamarri tribal princess; shuffling towards the door with it trailing across the floorboards. Nudging the door open – naturally, the king's chamber was never locked – Flora stuck her head out into the corridor.

The Royal Guard standing at either side of the entrance appeared slightly bemused – they were used to passing their pike sharply from hand to hand when an important personage entered an area; but what was the protocol for when only part of them entered?

Before they knew it, Flora had stepped out into the corridor, clutching the fur closed with a single hand to her chest. Taken off-guard, the soldiers performed a rather ragged version of their salute; while the night steward scuttled at rapid speed down the corridor towards her.

"My lady! How can I assist you?"

"Please could we have something to drink?"

The night steward gave a quick nod and bow, setting off in the opposite direction at a pace that was not quite a run – but was not far from it.

Flora was about to retreat back inside the Royal bedchamber when the Cousland retainers posted outside the adjacent door made to open it, alerted by some movement from within.

Two shadowed figures made their exit, conversing quietly in the corridor. The moonlight cut a swathe of illumination through the gloom; casting Zevran's hair in a silvery hue as he leaned his head towards Finian.

Finian made to respond, and then saw Flora standing in the passageway nearby, clutching the fur up to her chest.
"Floss!" the newly invested arl of Amaranthine exclaimed, then lowered his voice hastily. "Are you alright? What do you need?"

"I'm fine," replied Flora, smiling at her brother and the elf in turn as they came towards her. "I'm getting Alistair a drink. He's gasping like a fish on the sand."

"Things sounded more than fine, from what I could hear," purred Zevran, flashing Flora a quick wink. "You little minx. Te veo mañana."

The artificial lightness of the elf’s tone did not fool Finian. Both Couslands watched Zevran saunter off down the corridor, melding into the shadows with the subtleness that heralded his part-Dalish ancestry.

"Thanks to this, you and I don't look that alike any more," murmured Finian wryly, making a gesture towards the black leather patch over his eye and the scar carved through the flesh of his cheek. "And the elf's eyesight is better than a game-hawk. There's no excuse for mixing we Cousland siblings up."

Flora blinked at her brother, shifting from foot to foot on the cold flagstones. Finian flashed her a rueful smile, reaching out to flatten the errant strands of hair atop her head.

"Zevran has several nicknames for me – none that I'm willing to share with my baby sister," he added sternly, seeing her mouth begin to form a question. "But the endearment he uttered at the ultimate moment – 'mi florita' – is definitely not one of them."

Flora looked down at her bare toes, shoulders slumping. Suddenly and incongruously, she felt tears gathering on her eyelashes; threatening to spill over.

"I don't know what to do," she whispered, a distinct wobble to her voice. "Zevran is my friend; one of my most dear friends. I want nothing but for him to be happy, and yet I'm the reason why he's sad. I don't know what to do!"

There came a loud snore drifting out from the chamber behind her: Alistair had fallen asleep.

Finian took one look at his younger sister, whose lip was now trembling dangerously; then reached out to take her hand.

"Come on, tadpole."

Flora let him steer her into the Cousland quarters; which for three centuries had stood alongside those of the Theirins as a mark of prestige and regard. They had been neglected during Loghain’s brief tenure as regent – mildew had spread on the walls and plaster had crumbled and cracked – but the renovations were now almost complete. Like the king’s own chamber, the décor was rustic and yet finely made, the furniture carved by expert hand and the furnishings woven from the softest lambswool. The heraldry of Highever was fresh-painted above the hearth, and accents of navy and olive were subtle but pervasive.

Fergus’ snores rang out from the adjacent bedchamber as Finian led the sniffing Flora across to one of the armchairs before the fire. She was so preoccupied with blinking back her own tears that she barely paid attention to the wooden panelling part-installed on the wall between Cousland quarters and Royal bedchamber.

"Keep a tight grip on that fur, Floss," Finian instructed sternly as he went in search for a more reliable covering. "I don't fancy the double trauma of seeing a naked woman, who also happens to be my little sister."
"Sorry," Flora mumbled, hoisting the fur up around her bare shoulders.

Finian found a crimson velvet dressing robe, bringing it to Flora and averting his remaining eye with a little huff as she shrugged her arms into it.

"Decent?"

"Mm."

"Good. Otherwise, that'd definitely lose me the sight in my sole working eye."

Finian grinned at her, the Orlesian-instilled charm in no way diminished by the leather patch or the scar distorting one side of his handsome Cousland face. Flora smiled wanly back at him, leaning back into the cushiony depths of the armchair.

He leaned forward to follow her motion, retrieving a lace-edged handkerchief from his sleeve and dabbing it beneath her eyes.

"Come on now, Floss," Finian chided, fixing her with a beady grey stare. "Don't you know it's illegal to cry on your birthday in Denerim?"

Flora gazed at him with such alarm that the young arl laughed and went to reassure her, patting her thigh gently through the crimson velvet.

"I'm only jesting. Ah, but what are we going to do about our elven friend, hm? You know he'd be aghast if he knew that you were shedding tears over him."

Flora nodded, pleading the expensive fabric in folds over her strapped-up knee.

"I know," she replied, the words emerging quiet and sad. "But I feel so bad about it. I don't want him to be sad when he sees me and Alistair together."

Or, hears us, Flora then thought guiltily, eyeing the half-finished soundproofing as she twisted Mairyn's Star around her finger.

"He's so important to me," she continued, miserable. "He's always been kind to me. He's saved my life more times than I can count. His sense of humour got me and Alistair through the Blight!"

Finian nodded quietly, letting his sister ramble on freely as he poured himself a glass of Antivan wine from a nearby decanter.

"You know that Zevran is in love with you?" he asked eventually, and then cursed as the stopper dropped from his hand and rolled beneath the armchair. "Despite all his instincts screaming at him to suppress such feeling."

Flora leaned down, anchoring herself in place with a hand, and managed to scoop up the cork. Handing it back to him, she gave a glum little nod.

"I know," she mumbled. "Even though I've told him that he would get bored of me quickly. I'm not exciting or witty enough."

"Hm," replied Finian, unconvinced. "Well, Alistair doesn't seem too bothered by it. I suppose he's well-used to men falling at your feet."

Flora had never heard this particular saying before, and shot him a slightly appalled look.
"I'd never trip men over," she insisted, indignant. "That's a mean thing to do. Especially now I can't heal them!"

Finian suppressed his laughter in the face of his sister's outrage, reaching out an elegant-fingered hand to pat her knee.

"Alistair trusts him," Flora corrected, solemnly. "He's just as grateful to Zevran as I am."

There was a long silence, during which the sudden crack of a log in the hearth made them both jump.

"Sweeting, take the advice of your elder and wiser brother," Finian said eventually, with the airy sagesness of one a full five years her senior. "Zevran is a grown man. He's older than me, and – in both years and life experience – far older than you. Let him handle his own feelings. He's strong as steel, and twice as hardened. And he certainly doesn't want you to shed tears for him, petal."

Flora nodded earnestly, wanting desperately to believe in the wisdom of her brother's words. Her pale grey gaze fixed itself on his single remaining eye, which housed a near-mirror of her own limpid iris – save for the golden fleck left by the Archdemon's soul. Finian seemed sincere enough, and she relaxed a fraction; wiping her nose on the sleeve of the expensive dressing-robe.

She spent another hour in her brother's company, huddled up before the hearth while eating stale bread rolls left over from dinner. They played a game of Wicked Grace – Finian challenged himself to play as incompetently as possible, and still managed to defeat his sister by a wide margin.

During the game he dropped several gleeful hints as to the nature of the birthday gift he had procured for her, until Flora was both intrigued and confused. Her requests for clarification went unsatisfied, even when she threatened him with a cushion.

When the bell rang for the change in night watch, Flora took her leave from the Cousland chamber. She gathered the fur into her arms, yawning widely as Finian accompanied her to the door.

"Please," he murmured, escorting Flora the few metres down the corridor to the Royal quarters. "Give me a good head start before you resume activities with Alistair. Enough time to return to my bedchamber and barricade my ears with three dozen cushions."

Flora laughed, muffling the sound with her sleeve. Her lanky brother – almost as tall as Alistair, though half the width - grinned back down at her, then pressed a kiss to Flora's forehead.

"Night, Flossie. Happy birthday."

The Royal bedchamber was now cloaked in shadow, the candles making little headway against the rich obscurity of a moonless Fereldan night. The bed though was still bathed in light from the dying hearth; a burnt autumnal glow illuminating Flora's soon-to-be husband as he sprawled naked across the blankets. His muscled limbs stretched nearly the full length of the bed, his head tilted back and the crease of authority across his brow smoothed over in sleep.

Noticing a tray with a full pitcher placed unobtrusively nearby, Flora let the fur drop onto the flagstones. After pouring out a tankard, she crept across to the bed and lowered herself carefully beside him; placing a hand on his shoulder.

"Alistair," she whispered, tapping her fingers against the hard muscle and sinew.

Alistair grunted, turning his head in Flora's direction and reaching for her even before his eyes had fully opened.
"Darling."

She offered him the tankard as he yawned, rubbing a palm across his stubbled cheek.

"Here's your drink."

The king pushed himself upright, still slightly bleary-eyed. With a little grunt of thanks, he took the tankard and drained the lukewarm ale in several long gulps. Flora watched him, fascinated by the languid flex of his neck as he swallowed.

Abandoning the tankard, Alistair's attention returned to Flora. As his vision grew accustomed to the darkness, his gaze dropped to the plump, milk-white pearl sitting on her ring finger. The king blinked, hard, several times; and now it was his turn to fall victim to a sudden surge of emotion.

"Lo, this is real, and not the Fade?" he sought to confirm, searching her face in the shadow.

"It's real," replied Flora, who now would only pass through the Veil on the event of her death. "I can't go to the Fade anymore. Why?"

"Because this feels so unreal," Alistair replied throatily, a thread of unsteadiness running through the words. "I've dreamed of making you my wife for so long. I- I never dared to hope that it might become reality."

Flora smiled down at him, then grimaced as the little creature dug an elbow into her kidney, dropping a hand to her belly. Alistair leaned over, moving aside the thick fabric of the dressing robe to bare the full mound of her stomach. He pressed his lips tenderly against the skin, kissing a lopsided arc over the ripe flesh.

"Lie with me, baby," he ordered huskily, and then proceeded to do exactly that, drawing Flora back against his chest and curling his own larger torso around her own. Burying his face in her cloud of dark red hair, one hand wandered over Flora's swollen breasts and belly; in a way that was far too gentle and reverent to be lecherous.

"My sweet wife," he mumbled, then went quiet; a muffled snore emerging moments later. Flora drew his dozing limbs tighter around herself, like some bulky and organic harness, and prepared to pass these last few hours before dawn in the usual dreamless void.

Chapter End Notes

Awwwwwwwwww the babes
Flora awoke on the morning of her twentieth birthday with heated breath against her skin and a
dozen kisses being plastered across her cheeks, nose, forehead and mouth. She opened her eyes in
slight alarm, only to see Alistair’s face hovering inches above her own. His hair was transformed to
spun gold by the morning sunlight streaming through the parted curtains; coppery stubble
emphasising the hard angle of his jaw.

"Happy birthday," he breathed, beaming down at her with naked adoration. "My beautiful girl."

"Twenteenth? Twentorth?"

Alistair did not correct her, but instead ducked his head down to kiss her mouth once more; lifting
their fingers still entwined from sleep. Flora smiled up at him, stretching stiff limbs out as far as they
would reach.

"What hour is it?" she asked, yawning.

"They rang the eighth bell some time ago," replied Alistair, then yelped as Flora disentangled herself
from the blankets and launched herself to her feet with surprising agility considering her condition.

The king began to root through the blankets and furs in consternation, looking for the cause of
Flora's rapid exit from his arms.

"No," Flora replied, pulling the dressing robe tight across her chest and scuttling across to the door.
"It's your council meeting soon, remember? It begins at nine bells!"

Four years spent within a Circle – where meal-times and classroom hours were strictly adhered to for
fear of a Templar's discipline – had hardened Flora's natural desire to be in good time - if not early!-
for everything.

Alistair watched, half-amused and half-bemused, as she begged a steward for some bathwater to be
brought up to their chamber.

"My love," he said, clambering naked from the bed at a far more leisurely pace. "I'm the king. I can't
be late, because they can't start without me."

Flora shot him a stern look over her shoulder, trying - and failing - not to get distracted by his finely-
hewn body.

"They asked me to make sure that you were there on time," she told him sternly; forcing her eyes to
stay fixed above his neck.

Alistair grinned, advancing towards her with lusty purpose bright on his face.

"Well, I might relocate the meeting," he murmured, knowing full-well that she was trying not to look
at him. "To the bed. And restrict it to only myself and my… closest adviser."
"Arl Eamon?"

Alistair's eyes bulged at Flora's innocent query, and an incredulous bark of laughter escaped his throat.

"No, darling. You! Obviously."

Despite all of Alistair's protestations; the king and his betrothed were washed, dressed and waiting outside the council chamber doorway before the bell had even struck the ninth hour. The two Royal Guardsmen at the door were frozen in perpetual salute as the couple hovered indecisively at the entrance.

"We're early," Alistair said, suppressing a wry snort. "Everybody else is probably still breaking their fast."

Flora shifted from foot to foot, opening her mouth to explain how important it was to be punctual, and then she heard the sound of footsteps and muted conversation; the tangling together of high-born accents from north, east and south-west Ferelden.

"Floss!" exclaimed a familiar voice, excited and aristocratic. "Come here, you little old lady."

Flora turned to receive Finian's enthusiastic embrace, smiling up at him as he reached down to ruffle her hair.

"Though still not yet quite old enough to vote in the Landsmeet," her oldest brother added wryly as he came to join them, a proud beam writ across his face.

The other members of Alistair's council gathered about them, each one offering their congratulations. Eamon, resplendent in a Redcliffe-scarlet tunic that looked new, smiled down at Flora with quiet relief that she had not kept Alistair preoccupied for all hours in the bedchamber. Leonas grunted gruffly in place of a greeting, pressing an object wrapped in brown paper into Flora's palm. Teagan leaned forward and kissed her rather abruptly on the cheek.

"Happy birthday, petal."

Flora received their congratulations with mild disbelief. She was used to receiving attention, but not for something as unremarkable as *ageing* – which she had played no part in accomplishing, and thus deserved no congratulations *for*. Still, she smiled at each one in turn, bowing her head gratefully as her fingers clamped themselves around the hard object that Leonas had given her.

"Let's get this underway," Eamon said at last, canting his head towards the council chamber. "Florence doesn't want to spend her whole birthday trapped in meetings, I imagine."

Flora blinked, her pale grey gaze moving from Alistair to Eamon, and then to the room beyond the open doors.

Sunlight streamed down from several high windows, illuminating the polished surface of a vast wooden table, two dozen chairs placed around its perimeter. Statues of great Fereldan legends were stationed like sentries at the boundaries of the room. A lofty Calenhad sporting a kilt and broadsword stood watch over the southern face of the room. An armoured woman - Alistair's grandmother, Moira – had a Mabari asleep at her feet as she glowered unseeingly forward.
Yet the statue which drew Flora's eye was the tall figure guarding the elevated pair of seats at the head of the table. The stone was brighter and less weathered by age; looking at the man's handsome, bearded features, Flora felt a spark of recollection ignite in the deepest depths of her recently-uncovered memory.

A man's voice, deep and amused, rang in the small girl's ear as he sat her on his knee, one hand smoothing down her childish curls.

She'll be a rare beauty when she's older, Bryce.

So you think she'll do for Cailan, in a few years' time?

Aye, she'll do very well. Comely little creature.

In addition to her memories of Maric from his visit to Highever, Flora could see the startling similarities in feature between the old king and his younger son. Alistair had the classic Theirin build – tall and broad, more at ease in armour than finery – and the strong Marician jawline, obvious even beneath the close-cropped beard.

"You'll sit with me, Lo," Alistair murmured in her ear as they entered, his palm spread over the small of her back. "I'll do my best to make it brief. Sorry, love."

There were twin notes of anxiety and apology in his tone, and Flora darted a quick look at him. She realised that Alistair was nervous – that this was her first proper foray into the life that he had grudgingly accepted. I'm sorry, Flo, he had said last night in the Royal bedchamber, an involuntary grimace distorting his handsome features. I know this isn't what you'd have chosen for yourself.

It was not what Flora would have chosen for herself; but she had as good as placed the crown on Alistair's head by bringing her army to the Landsmeet vote and forcing their hand.

It's only sitting on a chair and listening, she thought, determinedly. I can sit on a chair all day if needs be; I learnt patience at the Circle.

Flora lifted her chin, letting Alistair guide her to the slightly raised step at the far end of the table, where a pair of ornately carved chairs stood side by side. The elevation was less than a foot in height, yet he still gripped Flora's elbow as a precaution as she stepped up.

The rest of the council took their places at the various seats, waiting to sit until their king had taken the initiative. Alistair glanced sideways at Flora, standing patiently at his side. Despite the fact that this was her first official appearance at the king's council; a formal introduction into what would become a recurring feature of her life as queen; she did not appear apprehensive in the slightest.

Instead, she bore the usual solemn expression, her pale eyes thoughtful as they meandered across the faces of those assembled at the table. There was a natural imperiousness to her features – the full, curving mouth and high-angled cheekbones were reminiscent of her Alamarri heritage; and this proved immeasurably useful in the circumstances. The king felt a sudden surge of pride in his former sister-warden, who – like himself – had been raised in such humility, and had now been elevated to such prominence.

"I convene this meeting of the King's Council on the prime day of Solace, 9:31 Dragon," began Eamon, for the benefit of the scribes. "First item of business – we have an addition to our number. Florence – daughter of the late Teyrn Bryce Cousland, Hero of Ferelden, Ender of the Fifth Blight, betrothed of the king..."
notepad and ink-pen in order to make his own record of proceedings.

"Welcome, Florence."

The other members of the council gave a hail of greeting, Fergus' face suffused with gratification as he gazed up at his sister. Alistair reached for Flora's hand beneath the table, giving it a surreptitious squeeze.

The next item on the agenda was the conversion of pasture land to tillage, in preparation for a winter that would surely tax the long-suffering people of Ferelden. With such large swathes of land destroyed by the Blight, much arable soil was now unsuitable for growing crops. The harvest was sure to be poor, and unless precautionary measures were taken, there would be a severe subsistence crisis in the autumn.

For the following few hours, various problems and solutions were offered and discussed extensively. Fergus raised the issue that some land was not suitable for the plough. Leonas added that the cloth trade was a vital source of income between Ferelden and the Marches; and that the sabotage of their own animal stock would do irreparable damage to the economy.

Alistair paused in his scribbling to glance sideways at his betrothed. Flora was listening avidly to the discussion, her brow furrowed slightly and her mouth part-open. He had been apprehensive that she would find the proceedings tedious; clearly, he needn't have worried.

Although Flora was not able to contribute to the discussion, she understood well enough what they were about. There had been winters in Herring when there been nothing to eat for weeks but a thin broth made from seaweed; when the loose skin hung from her dad's cheeks with nothing to fill it, and her own childish ribs protruded against the flesh. The thought of the people of Ferelden starving in their thousands – when they had suffered so horrifically over the past year – was such an appalling notion that she leaned forward to listen, ignoring the growling of her stomach.

Alistair, however, had heard the rumbling from his lover's belly and narrowed his eyes. All at once, he realised that Flora was sitting on a deeply uncomfortable wooden seat, and that she had had nothing to eat or drink since awakening. Despite the opened windows, the room was rapidly beginning to overheat, beams of sunlight glancing off the gleaming wooden surface of the table.

"Let's take a recess," the king said abruptly, cutting across the Bann of Calon. "We'll resume the meeting at the change of watch."

There came a general murmur of relief; members of the council rapidly dispersing to refresh themselves or meet with their retainers. Alistair rose to his feet, bending down to press a kiss to Flora's cheek.

"Darling, I'm going to sort out some food for you," he murmured, affectionate fingers cupping the back of her head. "I could hear your stomach grumbling louder than a Mabari."

Flora nodded, leaning back against the wooden chair in an effort to find a position that relieved her aching back. There came a soft rustle of paper from her lap and she looked down, seeing the small, wrapped item that Leonas had handed her earlier. Shooting the Arl of South Reach a curious glance – he was still seated, ignoring a hovering steward while busily scribing a letter – Flora unfolded the parchment, feeling something hard and metallic underneath.

The paper fell away to reveal a small silver token, shaped like a wolf's head. The features were worn away in places, but the snarl of the beast's jaw was still clearly visible in the worked metal. Flora ran her finger over the etched row of teeth, brow furrowing. For the second time that morning, a faint
flicker of memory resonated at the back of her mind – unlike the first, she was unable to retrieve it.

"It's the emblem of the Sea Wolf."

Flora looked up at the general's familiar, gruff tones. Leonas had put the letter down and was gazing at her, dark eyes oddly reminiscent.

"Thirty five years ago, your mother – Eleanor Mac Eanraig – won this title after sinking her eighth Orlesian warship. Hundreds of these silver emblems were made and handed out as tokens of her victory."

Flora stared at him, fascination writ naked on her features. Leonas, who had known both Bryce and Eleanor for decades, let out a little cough, letting his gaze drop to the table.

"Anyway. I found this one in a desk; thought you might like it. You know, they used to call your mother, the Queen of the Waking Sea?"

Flora had not known this, and this thin skein connecting her to a mother whom she barely remembered was just as precious a gift as the silver emblem itself. Sliding the token into her tunic pocket, she clambered to her feet and stepped down from the elevated platform, following the border of the table to reach Leonas' seat.

Leonas half-rose from the chair, letting out a small grunt as she embraced him, curling her slender arms about his neck. Despite his abrasive exterior, the arl had raised single-handedly a daughter close to Flora's age, and was at ease with such a display of affection. He passed a quick, paternal hand over the top of her head; suddenly wishing very much that his old friend was alive to see how his youngest child had turned out.

Shortly afterwards, Alistair returned with two tray-bearing servants in tow, one bearing flagons and the other weighed down with buttered bread and hunks of salty cheese. King and mistress sat back down on their elevated seats, sharing the contents of the tray and whispering to each other.

"You're not bored, are you?" he asked her, anxiously. "I'm sorry that we're doing this on your birthday."

Flora swallowed an impressively girthy chunk of cheese, shooting him a look of affront in response.

"I'm not at all bored," she replied, sternly. "This is important. I don't want anyone to starve in the autumn!"

Alistair smiled at her, the weight of the golden band atop his head no longer quite so cumbersome.

Once the session had resumed, a general consensus was reached – additional grain needed to be imported from the Marches to form an emergency reserve.

"We can't afford to match the price paid by Orlais," Fergus pointed out, bluntly. "The Marcher merchants already overcharge our ships with this blasted Blight-tax."

"There's a trade guild meeting in several days' time," Teagan interjected, after a murmured whisper from a hovering Rainesfere secretary. "The Marcher merchants are sure to be there."

"Uncle, would you try and talk some sense into them?" Alistair asked, leaning back in his chair and rubbing his thumb into his temples. "At least, get them to abandon the quarantine of Fereldan ships in their ports. As if Darkspawn could smuggle themselves away in the hold – Maker's Breath, it's ridiculous."
Teagan nodded, making a brief note on the parchment.

"I'll do my best, Alistair. They'll be sick of seeing my face, though - I've been at three of their meetings already this month."

"Florence could accompany you," spoke up the elder Guerrin, suddenly. "Her word on the Darkspawn might prove to be more reassuring, considering her history as a Warden."

*And she's the Hero of Ferelden,* the arl's argument continued, unspoken. *Her presence alone will sway them.*

"Plus, who could say *no* to a face like that?" Finian added cheerfully; gesturing towards where Flora was sitting, solemn and listening closely.

"Exactly," murmured Eamon, and there was no jest in his own response. "I doubt they'll refuse her anything. Florence, would you be amenable to this?"

Flora nodded, grateful to be able to help even in a minor way.

Alistair had been listening to the exchange in silence; a crease of anxiety folding its way across his Marician brow.

"And she'll be with you the whole time, Teagan?" the king sought to clarify, painfully aware that his new commitments meant that he would not be able to accompany his new queen *every* time that she left the safety of the palace.

"Aye, lad," the bann replied, quietly. "No harm will come to her when she's with me, you can be sure of it."

Flora frowned at the reminder that she was now reliant on others for protection; thinking wistfully back to a time when she had been responsible for shielding everyone else.

The next hour was spent discussing various minor issues – the repair of the southern city wall, the Chantry's efforts to rehouse the refugees still remaining in Denerim's ports, recruitment into the Royal Army. Alistair's upcoming progress was mentioned briefly, but any further discussion would be postponed until after the coronation.

Alistair stayed alert throughout proceedings, alternating between scribbling his notes and asking questions. Flora said nothing during the wall and progress discussion, piping up only to ask if the refugees were being well-treated by the Chantry. Leonas replied that many of them were forming what they themselves dubbed as 'restoration committees'; their eventual purpose to return to their shattered communities and attempt to rebuild them. He, as Arl of South Reach, was participating in discussions for the revival of his own seat, as well as the rebuilding of Lothering. Each noble present would be responsible for ensuring that the townsfolk in their own *demesne* would not starve through winter.

The bell had just rung for the mid-afternoon change in watch, when Eamon finally brought forward the final item on the agenda. Everybody in the council chamber was beginning to look distinctly overheated – tunic sleeves had been rolled up, copious amounts of watered-down ale drunk, and the great oak doors had been propped open to encourage the circulation of air.

Flora – who was used to sitting in stuffy Circle classrooms for hours on end – was coping reasonably well. Alistair had exchanged seats with his expectant mistress, so that the long shadow of Maric's statue shielded her from the sun's glare. In contrast to their velvet and leather tunics, Flora was clad in a short navy kirtle that ended at the knee; and had surreptitiously pulled off her woollen leggings.
during a discussion of stonemason fees.

"Finally," Eamon said, aware that most of those present were wilting. "The coronation will take place in two days' time. All arrangements are in place, and the remainder of guests are due to arrive tomorrow."

"Who's here already?" asked Alistair, tilting his face gratefully towards Flora as she fanned him with a sheet of parchment. "Thank you, sweetheart."

"Grand-Duc Gaspard de Chalons, obviously," began Fergus, whose spies had kept a close eye on the movements of the Orlesian nobleman over the past week. "In addition, Celene has sent her Court Enchanter and adviser; she's staying at the Circle's Denerim quarters. The Viscount of Kirkwall and his son arrived yesterday. There's also a magister from Minrathous."

"Lot of mages," commented the Bann of Calon, with a little twitch of apprehension. "Lot of foreigners, actually. I don't remember this many attending Cailan's coronation – most didn't even bother replying to their invitations."

Fergus paused, glancing down the table to his younger sister.

"They're under close watch. And – from what my sources are suggesting - it sounds as though many of them are curious about you. Prepare yourself for a lot of stares, pup."

Flora felt the gaze of the council settle on her, curious as to her reaction. She let her eyes roll in a single, languid motion, a dismissive Herring grunt escaping from her threat.

Teagan laughed, shooting her a quick glance of approval.

"Perfect response," Eamon murmured, shuffling through the sheaf of parchment on the desk before him. "Who else is still to come?"

"There's a Pentaghast general arriving tomorrow," Fergus finished, checking his notes. "The Vael's vessel from Starkhaven should be coming into dock soon."

A steward entered unobtrusively, moving around the table and topping up flagons of ale. The cawing of seagulls echoed down from the high windows; tinny and distant.

"Alistair, Florence," the Arl of Redcliffe continued, wiping a bead of sweat from his forehead. "The rehearsal will take place tomorrow in the Grand Chantry. The ceremony itself should last about two hours – I know you wanted to keep it brief, Alistair – and there'll follow a feast here, at the palace."

Alistair nodded, his fingers reaching out to grasp Flora's excitedly underneath the table. Despite the unwanted accompanying fuss and ritual, the king was still unable to hide his delight at finally being able to make his best friend his wife.

Flora smiled back at him, but had detected a slightly odd prickling of the atmosphere in the council chamber. She looked up, only to see Finian darting his gaze away quick as a snake; Fergus equally uncomfortable. Leonas also avoided her questioning stare, lifting his dark Bryland eyes to the ceiling.

"What?" she asked, perplexed as to why an entire chamber of mostly middle-aged men had suddenly begun to squirm. "What?"

Nobody spoke for a moment, and now Alistair too detected the strange tension in the room. He narrowed his eyes, infusing a vein of Theirin authority into his own query.
"Uncle, answer her."

Eamon cleared his throat, tapping his ink-pen methodically against the surface of the table.

"I expect that neither you nor Florence will be aware of the wedding night proceedings for a royal marriage," he said, eyes fixed firmly on the stone Maric's face.

Alistair blinked, glancing sideways at an equally bemused Flora.

"What, like – wearing a special pair of pajamas?" he asked with forced humour, lifting his flagon to his lips. "Bringing out the fanciest bedsheets?"

"Not exactly," continued Eamon, measuredly. "Alistair, you know how important it is that the marriage between a king and queen is undisputed? If anybody did query the legitimacy of a royal union, it could affect the succession and future stability of the nation."

Alistair took several long gulps of lukewarm ale, nodding slowly.

"So – in order to absolutely guarantee that a full and valid marriage has taken place – the consummation needs to be witnessed. By a high-ranking sister of the Chantry, and a peer of the realm."

The king nearly spat his drink across the table, eyes bulging.

"Maker's Breath!"

Fergus and Finian both looked as though they wanted to sink a mile underground into the Deep Roads; a fate preferable to remaining in the council chamber. Leonas grunted, a scowl deepening the careworn lines across his face.

Meanwhile Flora sat there, utterly confused. She had no idea what consummation meant; it was not a word found in the Herring lexicon. Alistair, his features contorted in sheer incredulity, leaned over and whispered in her ear. A moment later, her eyes widened and she beamed in delight.

"A show? We're going to be in a show? I've never been in a show before."

"Not exactly a show, my darling- well, sort of a show," amended Alistair, a single bead of sweat trickling down the back of his neck.

"I never got picked to be in any of the Circle plays! And now I'm going to be the star!"

"Maric and my sister were witnessed – not by myself, obviously," Eamon added hastily, seeing the king's dubious expression. "As were Cailan and Anora. It's important, Alistair – it means that no one can doubt the legality of your marriage… and the status of your heirs."

Alistair glanced down at the swell of Flora's stomach, and thought of their child, which – until they were married – was currently a bastard. Having grown up with this stigma draped like a mantle of shame across his shoulders, Alistair knew full well the importance of legitimacy.

"They'll put a screen before the bed," Finian offered; the ritual being relatively common practice in Orlaisian marriages. "Though it's completely see-through."

"Maker's Breath," the king repeated sarcastically, taking another gulp of ale. "No pressure, then!"

Flora leaned across and whispered in his ear, with the ease of someone who had rarely experienced privacy.
"It'll be just like doing it in the tent," she breathed, patting his knee. "And we used to do that all the time. Don't worry about it."

Alistair swallowed, acquiescing with a grim nod.

"Fine," he said, shortly. "So, some old crone from the Chantry – who'll probably tut disapprovingly throughout – and, I'm assuming, one of you lot? Great."

"Not Ferg or I," Finian hastened to reply, as his elder brother grimaced. "Obviously."

"It'll be someone here," Eamon confirmed, the ink-pen twirling between his fingers. "If you prefer, they can stay anonymous."

The king nodded firmly, teeth gritted. Flora, seated beside him, appeared remarkably placid, considering the circumstances.

"Flo, how can you look so calm?" Alistair demanded, turning incredulous eyes on her. "Don't you feel any pressure?"

"Well," Finian called out, malevolently. "She's not the one who needs to rise to the occasion, is she?"

As several in the audience chamber let out barks of appreciative laughter, and many more hid smiles; Alistair gritted his teeth. Flora took pity on him, putting her arm about his neck and planting a kiss on his cheek.

"You've never given me any cause for complaint in that area," she breathed, stroking his ear with her fingertips as she directed her words into his ear. "You don't need to worry. My beautiful king."

Such affectionate language was so uncharacteristic emerging from Flora's Herring-crafted throat that Alistair allowed himself to be temporarily distracted from the looming spectre of the wedding night.

He smiled back at Flora, tapping her nose gently with his thumb.

"My handsome queen. Are we finished for today?"

This last part was directed to Eamon; at which the arl gave a soft nod of confirmation.

"Aye, son."

There followed a general murmuring of relief, accompanied by the scraping of chairs across flagstones as the council members rose to their feet and headed en masse to the exit.

Alistair reached out for his betrothed's hand, only to find her fingers already stretching for his.

"Darling," he said, circling his thumb gently around each knuckle in turn. "Ready for lunch? A late lunch. Just me and you."

Flora nodded, smiling up at him.
OOC Author Note: The inexperienced Elizabeth I kept copious notes during her council meetings so that nobody could alter them or leave anything out, so I thought it would be good for Alistair to do the same thing!

Lol I can't believe I just wrote 4000 words about administration? Can you tell I have spent many, many hours trawling through records of 16th century council meetings, lol.

A few definitions – a progress is a royal tour around the country, and demesne is the land owned by a noble.

Also of course the witnessing of a royal marriage consummation is an actual thing! Very important to prove that the marriage is valid, ahahaha.
Both former Wardens retired to the Royal bedchamber, where a table and two chairs had been placed in preparation for lunch. Flora stared at the array of food on offer – platters of meats, cheeses and pickled vegetables, roasted chicken in a wine sauce, strips of smoked haddock, a rich fruit-filled pie served with cream – and then turned her incredulous gaze on Alistair.

"Is all this for us?"

"I believe so, sweetheart," the king replied, plate already in hand as he headed towards the cheeseboard. "Does it meet with your approval?"

"Mm," said Flora, wide-eyed. "How much do they think we're going to eat?"

"I'm not sure, my love. You're eating for two, after all."

"More like two hundred."

Flora picked up her plate, with words like subsistence crisis and harvest failure echoing around her mind from the council meeting earlier. As Alistair piled his own plate high with hunks of fresh-baked bread, crab claws and roasted asparagus; she picked up a boiled egg and stared at it gloomily.

"Did you know, in Orlais, they let their cheese go mouldy?" Alistair said, through a mouthful of sharp Fereldan cheddar. "Big, thick veins of rotted green running though! Absolutely disg-Lo, what's wrong?"

Discarding his plate without a second thought, the king strode towards his forlorn mistress, who was still incongruously clutching the boiled egg as tears ran down her face.

"Darling," Alistair breathed in dismay as he went to embrace her. "Is it the baby unbalancing you? Or something else?"

"All this food," Flora whispered, her voice trembling. "There's enough for a dozen mouths here. And there are refugees hungry on the docks. And what if the crops all fail this autumn? Everyone will starve! It's not fair, people have survived the Blight and now they won't have enough to eat -"

Alistair's eyebrows shot into his hairline, and he drew his best friend close to his chest; thinking on how best to comfort her.

"Well, then," he said, at last. "Anything that we don't eat, I'll have it sent down to the refugees on the docks. Don't worry about the harvest, yet – we'll set up this grain deal with the Marches, and most destroyed towns have got their rebuilding committees already set up. Leonas is leading the South Reach efforts – Lothering is in his arling too."

A wet-eyed Flora nodded, her anxieties somewhat assuaged. Alistair peered at her for a moment, then ducked his head and kissed the dampness tenderly from each of her cheeks in turn. He had done the same many, many months prior, on a balcony of Redcliffe Castle overlooking Lake Calenhad; when she had seen the Archdemon in her dreams and woken up stricken by fear.

"My sweet-hearted girl," he cajoled, brushing his thumb over her full, turned-down mouth. "You
must put aside some of your concern for *yourself*, love. You're so busy worrying about what people are going to eat in four months' time, that you haven't even touched your *own* food."

Seeing Flora's shoulders slump, Alistair tried a different tack; dropping to his knees on the flagstones and pressing his ear to the swell of her belly.

"Our child is talking," the king murmured, turning wide hazel eyes up to her. "It's saying: *feed me, mother. I have inherited your appetite, and I demand eighty bread rolls and four hundred crab claws for lunch*"

Flora started to laugh, then froze as she felt the baby shifting position in her stomach.

"Oh, it woke up," she said, oddly enchanted. "It must have heard you."

Alistair blinked mutely, and suddenly it was *his* turn to brush away a sudden dampness from his eyelashes.

They took a plate each and sat on the deep, velvet-cushioned bench before the widened window, the Amaranthine Ocean stretching out like an emerald tapestry in the background. Seagulls swooped and called out to one another; in the distance, a ship flying the crimson and black mantle of Starkhaven made its way west into the estuary.

Flora tore a large hunk of rye bread into strips, dipping each one absentmindedly into a honey and mustard sauce as she listened to Alistair talk. Mouth full, the king meandered from topic to topic; from a hideous nine hour long council meeting he'd suffered through the previous week, to the new Marcher horse that Teagan had purchased him for his birthday. Flora made the occasional comment or question, content to listen while satisfying the demands of her stomach.

Once both had finished, they talked about Oghren wanting to join the Wardens, then about the wedding night consummation. The pair spent nearly half a candle trying to speculate on what the gender of the baby might be. Alistair thought that it would be a boy – based on an old wives' tale about the volume of Flora's snores. Flora, on the other hand, had no idea – she was still trying to think of the being in her stomach as an actual *baby*, rather than the ambiguous 'little creature'. Privately, she didn't care what gender the baby was – as long as it was a *human*. In her more paranoid moments, Flora thought that all the Blighted essence she had submerged herself in over the months might have had some terrible effect on the baby's development.

*Please don't actually be a Hurlock, little creature.*

Every so often, Alistair would put down his knife and pause his conversation; reaching out to touch Flora's face as though wanting to confirm that she was *really* sitting at his side, her bare feet in his lap; and not miles away in a draughty cliff-top monastery. The third time this happened, Flora set her plate on the cushions and crawled into Alistair's lap, wrapping her arms around his neck and resting her chin on his shoulder.

"I love you," she whispered, tilting her face towards his ear. "I promise this is real. It's not a dream; I *can't* dream."

Alistair embraced her in return, careful not to hug too tightly. His hand rose to stroke Flora's narrow back, feeling the ridge of her spine through the thin navy lambs-wool of her tunic.

"I wish I were marrying you tonight," he murmured, with a wry smile at his own impatience. "I want you as my *wife*."

Flora kissed the curve of his ear, the lobe thick and fleshy. She resisted the urge to nip at it with her
teeth – an act which invariably led to them tangled together on the floor – and instead pressed her face against his neck.

"I've been your wife in all but name for months," she said instead into his warm, olive-toned skin.
"Haven't I, though?"

"Of course you have, baby." A secretly delighted Alistair brushed away thick ropes of dark red hair to kiss the back of her neck in return. "You've always been mine."

Just then, there came a tentative knock at the door. Finian advanced into the Royal bedchamber with one hand dramatically placed over his sole remaining eye.

"Is it safe to look?" he enquired, a touch melodramatically. "One never knows, when one is coming into a room where you two have been left to your own devices. Is my sister dressed?"

With exaggerated caution, the young arl peered between his fingers, exhaling in relief when he saw Flora fully clothed – albeit perched in Alistair's lap.

"The midwife is waiting in the corridor, and she doesn't have a surfeit of patience," Finian informed them, taking a chicken leg from the leftover food. "Shall I invite her in?"

At Alistair's nod, Finian returned to the door and nudged it open; calling through to those waiting outside.

"It's safe to enter; they're both fully clothed!"

To Flora's surprise, what seemed like half of Ferelden proceeded into the chamber. Wynne entered with Leliana, the two old friends conversing in earnest tones. Teagan came next, the bann shooting Alistair a quick glance of warning.

Alistair blinked, bemused, and then a familiar Orlesian-accented voice came drifting across the room. He sat bolt upright; Flora, in slight shock, almost fell off his knees.

"Alistaaair!" announced Isolde, a brazen smile writ brightly across her features as she entered on Eamon's elbow. "It has been far too long, dear boy."

Alistair shot Flora a look of fleeting alarm, then helped her carefully off his lap; crossing the chamber to cordially greet the woman who had made his childhood years a misery.

"Lady Isolde," he said, careful and polite as she kissed him on both cheeks. "I didn't realise that you were in the city. You've come for the coronation?"

"Oui," replied the arlessa, her autumn-coloured eyes surreptitiously sweeping the Royal bedchamber. "Though, I admit – I've not received as many social invitations as I would have expected since I've been back."

"Isolde, you did try and hide the existence of Connor," Eamon murmured, a slight edge to his tone that suggested that he had not yet fully forgiven his wife. "It would have been a far greater scandal if Ferelden had not been in the midst of a Blight. You ought to be grateful."

Isolde glanced downwards, her painted mouth turning south at the corners. Flora, who felt oddly sorry for her, crossed the room to stand at Alistair's side.

"My parents were so ashamed of me being a mage that they sent me away in secret," she offered, softly. "At least Connor will never know what that feels like. You wanted to keep him."
Isolde met Flora's eyes, embarrassed; the older woman recalling the many times that she had slighted the girl for her common accent and unpolished manners.

Fortunately, the tension in the room was broken by the arrival of Fergus, who was chatting easily to an old woman who possessed a dwarf-like squat, broad-shouldered frame. Her steel-grey hair had been cropped above her shoulders, and she carried a large leather bag beneath her arm. The brusque demeanour of the stranger suggested that she was a woman who never allowed anyone to carry her baggage for her.

"This is Mab," announced Fergus, as the old woman swept beady eyes about the chamber. "Highever's longest-serving midwife. Every babe born in Castle Cousland for the past thirty five years was delivered by this good lady. Myself, Finn and Floss included!"

And Oren, the teyrn thought, with a brief twinge of sadness. My poor boy.

Finian gave the woman a little wave, clearly intimidated by her presence.

"Hullo, ma'am."

Mab muttered a half-grunted greeting, the words emerging in a timbre that immediately drew Flora's attention.

"You're from Skingle," the youngest Cousland said, pale eyes igniting with recognition as she named the village just to the east of Herring.

Mab's small, dark eyes immediately settled on Flora, taking in the oxblood hair and distinctive full, sulky Cousland mouth.

"Florence Cousland," she said, her words shaped by the northern coast in a slightly different manner to Flora's. "Lost an' found again. You've grown since I last saw yeh."

Flora nodded, searching her mind for any memory of this barrel-chested woman. Mab started across the room, stopping abruptly when she spotted Alistair. She eyed the crown on his head for a moment, and then shot him a belligerent look.

"'Scuse me for not bowin'," the midwife said, with typical bluntness. "I got a bad back."

"That's quite alright," replied Alistair, fascinated by the brusque northerner. "Thank you for travelling this far east."

"Mab is the best midwife in the teyrnir," added Fergus, proudly. "She hasn't lost a mother or babe in five years."

Alistair, who had lost his own mother during childbirth, blanched a fraction. Swallowing the acidic bile that had surged upwards in his throat, he distracted himself by promptly asking another question.

"You delivered Flora, then?"

The woman grunted, dumping the leather case unceremoniously on the bed and unfastening its buttons.

"Aye. Big brute of an infant she was. Tore poor Lady Eleanor to shreds on her way out. Full two days and nights of labour."

Flora's jaw dropped in horror, her fingers instinctively groping for Alistair's hand.
"But you were worth it," he murmured reassuringly, squeezing them tight against his palm. "I bet you were an adorable baby."

Mab continued in business-like tones, taking out a cloth measuring tape.

"Ugly pink shrimp. I'll never forget all that wild ginger hair atop that oversized head. Evil reptilian eyes."

"She's right, Floss," Finian called from beside the dinner table, mouth full of smoked salmon. "You were a hideous baby. I called you Ratface for a year."

'Ratface' herself looked slightly perturbed, her brows drawing together as Alistair was unable to stop himself from spluttering out a snort.

"Well," interjected Teagan, feeling rather sorry for her. "Florence has grown into a beautiful young woman. And I'm sure that she and Alistair are going to produce a comely child."

Flora smiled at Teagan, appreciating his gentlemanly attempt to come to her defence. The bann hastily averted his eyes, taking a swig from his hipflask.

Mab took out a leather pouch, uncorked it with her teeth, and proceeded to pour the watery contents over her hands; letting the runoff trickle onto the flagstones.

"Come on, lassie," she instructed, with a blunt gesture towards the bed. "Up you get."

"Is that seawater?" Flora asked, nostrils twitching in recognition as she clambered up onto the furs, settling back against the cushions.

Mab nodded, unceremoniously whipping the cushions from behind Flora's head so that she was lying flat on the mattress.

"I ain't used to having an audience," the midwife said after a moment, shooting a glance towards the other occupants of the room. "Not even the teyrna had a half-dozen people in with her. Loosen your dress."

"We do the same thing in Herring," Flora said from the mattress, expertly loosing the fisherman's knot securing her bodice. "The seawater. Our midwife – Bess – swears by it."

Mab let out a little sneer, lip curling as she opened up the folds of the dress to reveal ripe breasts contained by a strip of cloth, and a substantial swollen stomach.

"I know Bess," she said after a moment, nose wrinkling. "Got in a fight wi' her once over a bucket o' crabs."

Flora nodded solemnly, as the nobles in the room exchanged incredulous glances.

"Right."

Mab fell silent, a professional demeanour setting over her florid, wind-blasted features as she reached out to run her hands over the swell of Flora's stomach. She pressed her fingers into the ripe flesh, measuring the mound with the span of her hands.

Alistair – who, naturally, had not been present during the first midwife inspection twelve weeks prior – watched in fascination and a small, irrational air of protectiveness. He had to bite his tongue from asking the midwife to handle Flora's stomach with a little more gentility; grimacing every time Mab
issued a business-like prod.

"It's fine, Alistair," murmured Wynne, noticing the king's anxiety. "It won't hurt the baby."

"It's a large babe," Mab observed, a moment later. "Feels good and strong – moving well, responds to bein' poked."

Alistair beamed while Flora blanched, recalling the midwife's comment about her own delivery tearing the teyrna to shreds.

"How large is it going to be?" she asked, tentatively. "Considering it's got to… come out. Is it going to hurt at all? I'm not very good at pain – I'm not really used to it."

*I used to be able to anaesthetise myself within seconds of an injury being inflicted; then heal the wound minutes later.*

Mab let out an incredulous bark of laughter, eyeing the girl pityingly as she moved downwards.

"Of course it's goin' to hurt," she replied bluntly from between Flora's thighs. "It's alright. We'll tie up some rope for you to hold onto. Give you a bit o' driftwood to bite through."

Flora went even paler, her eyes going immediately to Alistair's face to seek some reassurance. He came to her side without pause, perching on the mattress and winding her fingers tightly within his own.

"Is there any way of making it – hurt less?" he asked, as inexperienced as she in such matters.

Mab snorted, shaking her head from side to side as she rinsed her fingers once again in the saltwater.

"No. Most you can do is hope that it's quick."

Flora brought her fingers to her mouth and began to bite at the nails anxiously, *Mairyn's Star* twinkling in the mellow late-afternoon sunlight.

"Floss, you'll be fine," Fergus sought to reassure his younger sister after a moment, seeing the fear naked on her face. "Oriana was terrified too, but Mother told me she was fine, eventually. I was down the end of the corridor, and I couldn't even hear her screaming after a while."

"Aye," Eamon offered, recanting the story of Connor's birth. The common theme between both men appeared to be that they had not been present during the actual labour; appearing only once baby had been delivered, cleaned and presented in a lacy gown.

"You'll stay with me?" Flora whispered frantically to Alistair as Mab ducked beneath the hem of her tunic. "You won't leave me?"

The king kissed her forehead, then raised their entwined hands to his mouth and kissed each of her knuckles in turn.

"Of course I won't leave, sweetheart."

"It won't be a pretty sight," warned Mab, doing something with her fingers that made Flora's eyes bulge. "Stop tensing up, girl!"

"Aah, your hands are freezing. Alistair, you promise you won't leave me? Even if it's not pretty?"

Alistair gazed down at his former sister-warden's face; lost in a sudden rush of memories.
I remember – at Ostagar - when you were sick with fear after our first expedition against the Darkspawn, he recalled, suddenly. You were so frightened that you were sick over yourself in your sleep after a nightmare. I took you to the wash-tent and found you some spare clothing, and exhausted my supply of jokes in an attempt to cheer you up.

How many times did we fall asleep curled together, stinking and covered in Darkspawn effulgence? You've seen me bloodied and cursing; I've seen you splattered by the froth coughed from the mouths of the dying. I remember when neither of us washed for a week because we couldn't find a spring large enough to bathe in; and we both smelt so bad that an entire tavern recoiled when we walked in.

"Maker's Breath, Lo," he murmured, softly. "Wild Marcher stallions couldn't tear me from your side."

"Promise?" she repeated, grimacing and peering down between her legs. "Ow."

"I swear on Ferelden itself, my love."

Finally, Mab withdrew her hands with a business-like cough, returning upright.

"All looks as it ought. Baby's resting nice and high. You've got some good muscle in that tummy, eh?"

"We walked from one end of the nation to the other," replied Flora, relieved that the inspection was over.

Eamon gave a small gesture to a nearby servant, who came forwards dutifully with a pouch of coin for the midwife. "So, the babe will be here by Harvestmere, you'd say?"

The midwife cast a final, appraising glance over Flora's stomach; before giving a nod of confirmation.

"Aye, my lord. Though since it's her first bairn, it's like to be late. And you can put your legs together now, lass – you look like a street-wench advertisin' the wares."

Flora obediently drew her knees closed, pulling the hem of her tunic down over her thighs.

Mab of Skingle accepted the heavy purse with a little grunt. With a northerner's wariness, she took out a coin and bit it to check the quality of the metal, eyeing Eamon with suspicion. Only once the coin's worth was proven did she tuck the purse away, delivering a laundry list of dos and don'ts to a bemused Flora.

"Stay away from Orlesian cheese and shellfish, keep in the shade, lie down if you feel dizzy. Chew on some wormwood bark if you feel nauseous. Once the first Kingsway frost falls, get your husband to salt the fancy tiles."

Flora nodded, having already forgotten what came after Orlesian cheeses. Fortunately, Alistair had whipped out the small pad of parchment he used to minute the Council meetings; and was frantically scribbling each piece of advice.

"Oh, and don't think of ugly people," the midwife delivered as a parting shot over her shoulder, shuffling her squat frame towards the exit. "Or the babe will be born with foul features."

"Like our little Ratface herself," Finian murmured evilly, receiving an elbow to the ribs from his elder brother in response.
"As *though* those two could ever produce an aesthetically unappealing child," Leliana replied, withering scorn in her voice. "*Look* at them!"

The bard gestured an elegant hand towards where Alistair was leaning forwards on the mattress, face inches from Flora's own as she gazed up at him from the depths of the cushions. Alistair beamed back down at her, and moments later, the grin softened into a wondering smile. He tilted her face upwards with a finger beneath her chin; leaning forward to kiss her on the mouth. The room was still filled with a half-dozen people, yet they had eyes only for each other, barely noticing even as the others filed quietly out.

Chapter End Notes

OOC Author Note: To clarify: Baby is not a Hurlock, lol, that's just Flora being unnecessarily paranoid! She's definitely not going to enjoy the process of giving birth though, she doesn't really cope well with pain considering that she's never really had to experience a great degree of it before.

Also, it makes me laugh to think of Flo as being an exceptionally hideous baby, lol. A massive, oversized creature who brutalised poor Eleanor Cousland on the way out, hahaha. Except since I'm pregnant, I can feel sympathy for her D: D:
Leaving For Antiva?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Later that evening, the former Wardens and their companions – save for Morrigan, who was winging her way south towards the Wilds, and Sten, who had his own business – congregated on the top of the palace’s loftiest tower. One of the great southern constellations drifted idly above them, half-cloaked in miasma and atmospheric effulgence. The moon hung low and full, a swollen version of Mairyn’s Star.

They had gathered about a makeshift campfire, an incongruous construct of kindling that seemed rather meagre when compared to the vast, pit-bellied braziers elevated on the ramparts above. Yet with the host of familiar faces gathered about the flames, blankets spread out and ale-flasks lying askance; it was almost as though the companions were on their travels once again, camped out in some isolated corner of the Fereldan wilderness. Only the pair of Royal Guard, tucked discreetly away near the rampart steps, disputed the illusion.

It was an unusually balmy evening, mild enough for Leliana to bare her tanned, muscled calves in short leathers. Zevran needed little excuse to unbutton the entire front of his shirt, reclining against a blanket and winking at a young steward who arrived clutching a tray of tankards. Oghren, who was laying off the bottle in preparation for the Joining, devoured his way through six and a half roasted sausages; wondering enthusiastically how many ladies he would be able to beguile with tales of Grey Warden heroics. This was met with stern chiding from Wynne, who reminded the dwarf of the Order’s solemn duty and purpose - which did not include sleeping one's way around Ferelden.

Leliana produced a lute from the fold of the blankets, singing an old Frostbacks folk song in her distinctive, sweet-toned voice. The bard then sang an Orlesian love ballad, and despite Flora's patriotic distrust of anything from over the western border, she could not stop herself from listening, captivated, to the strange-tongued tune. Alistair preferred drinking songs to serenades, but there was something about the simple beauty of Leliana’s verse that appealed to his sentimental side. Instead of interrupting with a request for The Round-Bellied Redcliffe Brewer, the king found himself following the melody of the music; barely daring to breathe as Leliana’s dulcet tones drifted to the heavens. Once the bard had finished, she lowered her head modestly and set the lute down in her lap.

"The Maker has truly blessed us with a voice like yours," Wynne murmured, smiling gently through the fire-lit shadows. "I hope you're going to sing during the coronation."

"It has been requested, yes," Leliana confirmed, unable to stop a glow of pride creeping into her reply. "It'll be a little like the olden days, when I used to serenade wealthy patrons at Halamshiral. You've never seen such a rainbow spectrum of colour as when the elites of Celene's court are gathered together in their finery! It's breathtaking."

"Great idea," offered Oghren, a slight edge of malevolence to his tone. "And if the guests are out-stayin' their welcome, we could just get the bride to do a solo. That'd send the poor buggers runnin' for the hills!"

Flora shot him an un-amused look from where she was sitting cross-legged on a fur besides Alistair.

"I think a Herring wedding song would add a certain specialness to the occasion," she insistently, defiantly. "Nobody can resist dancing when they hear the opening of Bones In The Sand or – my dad’s favourite - The Dead Sailor Returns To Drive His Lover Into Madness."
"Intriguing names," purred Zevran, gulping down another swallow of ale. "Though I can't imagine the natives of Herring dancing, somehow, nena."

"Oh, we know all the northern dances," retorted Flora, immediately. "We also have some local dances unique to Herring."

"Like what?"

"Like… the octopus."

Flora waved her arms vigorously about her head; Alistair ducked to avoid a flailing hand. The others gaped wordlessly, struck into momentary silence.

"I can't do the lobster because of my stomach," Flora confessed, slightly out of breath. "I'll have to show you at Satinalia."

Alistair reached out to anchor her fingers in his; bringing their conjoined hands to his mouth so that he could kiss her knuckles. She smiled at him, shy and pleased at his affection.

"I can't wait to see it," he murmured, an involuntary beam spreading over his face. "I can't wait for the day after tomorrow, actually."

Oghren let out a snort, leaning forward to prod at the fire with the tip of his short-sword.

"You've been complainin' about the coronation every time I seen you for the past month! 'I hate formal occasions, I'm king already, see this crown on my head, why do we need all these formalities?'

Alistair made no immediate reply, his thumb brushing gently over Mairyn's Star as he clasped Flora's fingers in his. Lifting his arm, he drew her against his side, suddenly anxious about the increasingly chilly breeze. The warm envelope of his arms was too inviting to resist; within minutes; she was snoring quietly into his armpit.

"But I've been desperate to make Flo my wife for months," he said softly at last, his thumb stroking a circle into her arm. "I can't wait a moment longer."

"You may have to write to me about the details of the ceremony itself, amor."

Alistair's brow furrowed as he turned his head towards the elf. The former Crow was silhouetted behind the temperamental flames, the drifting sparks reflected in his watchful, coal-dark pupils.

"What do you mean, Zev?"

"There is a possibility that I may not be here."

When Alistair gaped, the elf hastened to explain.

"You have several Antivan trade princes attending the ceremony. With such powerful influencers removed from the country, it would be the perfect opportunity for me to return and begin the process of dismantling the Crows."

It was a flimsy excuse, the words emerging as brittle and unconvincing as the rationalisation itself. Alistair's brows drew together, his mouth already dropping open to protest.

"Zev, why- "
"Bedtime," Leliana chirped quickly, taking a steely grip on Oghren's collar and hauling the dwarf upwards with surprising strength. "Come on, let's go."

Wynne propelled herself to her feet with the aid of her staff – the senior enchanter was far too proud to accept a hand. Within minutes, the rooftop was deserted save for elf, king and snoring future queen; the three of them gathered about the campfire with only the stars left to eavesdrop. Even the Royal Guard had been dismissed – which, in their vernacular, meant that they now stood several steps down as opposed to atop the tower itself.

Flora yawned against Alistair's shoulder, slumping gracelessly forwards until she was face-down in his lap. The king stroked his hand absentmindedly down her back, his brow creasing further into pre-existing indentations as he gazed at Zevran.

"You're leaving? You can't leave."

The elf inclined his chin silently, avoiding Alistair's stare as he would a poisoned dagger-thrust. Alistair paused to gather his thoughts, shaking his head slowly from side to side.

"But – I thought that-"

"You thought that I would stay at your side forever?" Zevran retorted, giving a smile laced with a flash of Antivan defiance. "An exotic elven ornament to augment the court? I have my own plans for the future, you know. There is only so much of this damp Fereldan climate that I can take."

"I know," repeated Alistair, quietly. "But – I thought that you would stay for the coronation. Maybe join us on the progress around the country. I thought you'd want to stay until the baby is born - it's only twelve weeks away."

The elf glanced towards Alistair, eyes dropping to where Flora lay snoring inelegantly in the king's lap. Loose wisps of hair curled about her face, erratic as fraying strands of fishing net. There followed a flicker of something unreadable across his tattooed face, and he quickly looked away once again.

"I want you to come with us on the progress," Alistair cajoled, deciding to lay the guilt on heavily. "There could be bandits. Pockets of Darkspawn remaining. Without Flo's shield, she's vulnerable. Besides myself, there's no-one I trust more than you to keep her safe."

Zevran grimaced, aware that he was being coerced but unable to ignore the truth embedded in his friend's words.

"I'll break Flo's heart if you go," Alistair said softly, changing tactic. "She adores you. She loves you, Zev. You can't leave now, she'll be devastated."

The elf nodded with a small sigh, knowing that the king spoke the truth. With feline agility, he clambered around the perimeter of the campfire, coming to rest beside the two former Wardens. Reaching out, he let his richly tanned hand rest on the nape of Flora's neck; the elegant, tattooed fingers in stark contrast to her pale skin. She let out a little grunt in response to the contact, fingers curling absentmindedly into her palm.

"Ah, but I'm a selfish creature," the elf said, half-laughing without a shred of humour. "To be loved by mi sirena is a great thing; even if it is… as a friend."

Sensing that the elf's resolve was wavering, Alistair determinedly pressed home the advantage.

"Please, stay," he implored, hazel eyes boring into Zevran's coal-dark pupils. "At least until the baby
is born."

There was a silence, during which Alistair held his breath; not daring to look away from their former Crow’s face. Finally, a rueful smile tugged at the corner of Zevran’s mouth and the king breathed an inward sigh of relief.

"Eh, I cannot say no to such a handsome face," the elf murmured, raising slender fingers to pat Alistair’s bearded cheek. "Especially since you are the king now, mi amor. Who knows, you might decide to lock me in the dungeons! Although, if chains are involved, I may not be too averse to that prospect."

Zevran laughed at the flush that rose to Alistair’s face, and the throaty Antivan cackle was enough to rouse Flora from her impromptu doze.

"Ooh," she yawned, pushing herself out of Alistair’s lap on sleepy elbows. "Was I snoring?"

"Like a drunken soldier, my love," Alistair confirmed, reaching out to smooth a hand over her rumpled, dark red head. "Anyway, here’s some good news – Zevran is going to stay until after the baby is born."

Flora, who had not even considered the possibility that the elf might be departing any sooner than that, immediately turned a distraught face towards him.

"You were thinking about leaving?" she breathed, alarm writ across her features. Her pale grey irises flickered with reflected firelight, the gold fleck left by the Archdemon’s soul glinting like pyrite. "Leaving?"

Zevran reached out and put his fingers on her sleeve, fingering the skin beneath the navy lambswool. "No, no, no- " he hastened to reassure her, not wanting to be the cause of any undue distress. "No, I am afraid you are stuck with my lechery and witty remarks for the immediate future, mi reina."

"Good!"

Flora leaned towards the elf and put her arms around his neck, still anxious despite his assurances. Zevran embraced her in return, patting between her shoulder-blades in an effort to put her mind to rest. Looking up, his gaze met Alistair’s, and the king gave a slight nod of gratitude. Flora, feeling her heart slowly settle back into a normal rhythm, exhaled in relief. She pressed her lips impulsively against the faded markings on the elf’s cheek, moving her mouth to his ear.

"Guess what."

"Eh, carina?"

"Alistair and I have to do it in front of a priestess and someone from the Landsmeet," she said gleefully, as Alistair let out a groan. "Isn't that strange? Nobles are peculiar."

Zevran cackled, cheering up immensely as he shot the scowling king a malefic grin.

"Ah, the traditional witnessing of the consummation! I admit, it is a ritual long since died out in Antiva."

Typical Ferelden, two Ages behind the rest of Thedas, the elf thought with a snort, a grin curling the corner of his mouth.
Flora, who had never known and, in her new capacity as queen would now never know – privacy, seemed far less anxious about the prospect than Alistair. Despite the coolness of the evening, several beads of sweat had risen to the king's forehead.

"It's a lot of pressure," the Theirin insisted, stubbornly. "I mean, who would get... in the mood with some wizened old bat from the Chantry muttering away within arm's reach? And – Maker forbid – Eamon on the other side of the screen."

This was a sobering thought for both Flora and Alistair, their eyes meeting in alarm.

"I don't think it'd be Arl Eamon," she said at last, uncertainly. "Maybe it'll be some minor bann we don't know."

Zevran let out a cackle, leaning elegantly to the side as the wind bent a thin tendril of smoke from the campfire towards him.

"Well, if you need another witness, let me know," the elf offered, gleefully. "I have heard stories of these old wedding rituals. The bride is stripped naked by her women and put into bed; the husband brought along by the menfolk shortly later, often accompanied with lewd jokes and provocative verses."

"Stripped naked by which women?" Flora asked, bewildered. "I don't understand. Noblewomen?"

The only two noble women she knew were Anora Mac Tir and Isolde Guerrin. This prospect was so utterly horrific that her mouth fell open in dismay; eyes widening.

"Oh, no!" she croaked, plaintively. "I'd rather let the Archdemon undress me. Can't I just take off my own clothes? Or ask Leliana?"

Meanwhile, Alistair was still quietly obsessing over the daunting prospect of performing on demand.

"What if I can't... get in the mood?" he demanded in a low, urgent hiss. "I'll be a laughing stock. They'll lampoon me in the market square. The taverns will have a field day. The man who couldn't take his wife on the wedding night."

Flora, suppressing her own nerves in the face of her best friend's anxiety, reached out to put her hand on his arm.

"I'll help you," she assured him, earnestly. "Don't worry."

The three of them watched the makeshift campfire burn out; there was no more fuel for it to consume and the disconsolate flames sunk ever lower. Sparks drifted towards the heavens, the flecks of red and white standing out stark against the gloom, illuminating the faces of those still in attendance.

Zevran's expression was pensive, Alistair still grimacing at the prospect of the wedding night. Flora's head was nodding forwards with tiredness; the baby had leached her energy especially vigorously that evening.

Eventually, they were driven inside by a faint, misting drizzle. Flora, who would have barely noticed the fine shower if she had been awake, was too busy snoring against Alistair's chest to protest. King, unconscious mistress and elf made to part ways outside the Royal bedchamber; when Alistair realised that Zevran intended to spend the remainder of the evening alone, he invited him in to play a round of Wicked Grace.

The round soon turned into three, and then five; Flora slumbered in contented, dreamless oblivion on the bed as the king proceeded to lose thirteen gold coins to the sleight-handed elf. Zevran pocketed
his winnings with a grin, promising to spend at least part of it on a gift for the baby. Once the midnight bell had rung and the watch changed, Alistair made his way over to the bed, not even bothering to take off his boots before slumping facedown beside his snoring lover. For a moment, the elf pondered departure – there were always a few doors guaranteed to open for him, no matter how late the hour – but ultimately lingered on in the stuffed arm chair beside the fire, thoughts meandering idly as the dark tide of sleep crept ever closer.

Chapter End Notes

OOC Author Note: I love writing campfire scenes! Haven't had one so far this story. I like the thought of Alistair still wanting to do the things they used to do when they were travelling, even though he's now king and living in a palace, hehe.
By the time that Flora awoke to the pallid grey light of pre-dawn spilling across the flagstones, the armchair was empty. She yawned deeply, un-entangling herself from the furs on the bed and propping herself up on an elbow. As though sensing that it's mother was awake, there came a little exploratory nudge from within her stomach; Flora rested a hand on top of the swollen curve and thought good morning.

A moment later, she realised that the baby would be formed enough to hear, and repeated the greeting out loud. This felt stranger in many ways than saying it inwardly – a practise she was used to from years of conversing with her spirits.

A snore from behind drew her attention, and Flora looked over her shoulder to see Alistair sprawled naked across the blankets, one hand flung in her direction. She leaned over to press her lips against the back of the king's head; feeling a sudden surge of affection as she saw him clutching a blanket embroidered with herringbone – a traditional pattern of the northern coast. He let out a blurred rumble in his sleep and she pressed a second kiss to his ear, fierce and tender.

Unable to fall back asleep once she had risen, the yawning queen-to-be wandered over to the window bench and settled herself on the velvet cushions, leaning back against the stone wall and watching the crimson sun inch leisurely above the eastern horizon. Molten light spilled across the glasslike surface of the Amaranthine Ocean; a feat impossible to replicate on the perpetually restless waters of her native Waking Sea.

The night steward, hearing activity from within, peered around the door and inquired if there was anything he could bring her. Out of habit Flora began to politely decline, and then arrested herself abruptly mid-sentence. The strange urge to gnaw on something organic had returned; if a wooden spoon was not brought to her within minutes, Flora was relatively sure that she was going to start chewing on the furniture. These sudden, irresistible cravings struck without warning – often at inconvenient moments - and she was utterly helpless in the face of her body's peculiar desires.

When Alistair awoke an hour later, Flora was still sprawled in the window seat; gazing down at the waking movements of the city below while fervently licking a wooden spoon.

"Morning, baby," he murmured, dragging a hand over his rumpled head and yawning. "Having fun?"

Flora extracted the spoon from her mouth and eyed the chewed wooden length, bemused at her own odd compulsions.

"Yes," she said at last, sinking her teeth once more into the mangled handle as she returned her gaze to the estuary. A ship bearing a yellow and black standard in the shape of a skull was just making a leisurely final approach towards the harbour. It was a vast and flat-bellied galleon, dominating the smaller trade vessels to either side.

Alistair pushed back the heavy furs and clambered upright, ambling across the dawn-lit floorboards without a stitch of clothing. Her best friend's well-sculpted form was the one thing guaranteed to distract Flora from the sea; she eyed his nakedness surreptitiously as he came to stand beside her.
"My little beaver," Alistair said fondly, fingers sliding through her hair to cup the back of her head gently. "I wonder whose standard that is? Looks rather sinister, if you ask me."

Flora reluctantly averted her eyes from the taut muscle of Alistair's abdomen, gazing down at the stately vessel as it glided across the pond-like stillness of the estuary. A flicker of memory ignited in the back of her mind, and she reached out to flutter her fingers against her companion's elbow.

"Oh! I know," she exclaimed, recalling Leliana's cards of Theodesian leaders. "It's the P-Pantleghosts. Pentagoons. Pentaghasts."

Alistair intercepted her hand at the wrist, raising it to brush his lips lightly over her fingers; lingering against the cool, weighty sphere of Mairyn's Star.

"Ah, of course. The ruling family of Nevarra. They're meant to be dragon hunters, so they're probably a bit mad. Plus – this'll make a shiver go down your spine, baby – they sponsor death cults. Explains that flag."

The wooden spoon dropped from Flora's mouth as she turned startled eyes on him, eyebrows rising into her hairline.

"Death cults? What's a death cult?"

Alistair lowered himself to the window seat beside her, one foot propped against the wall as he leaned back on the stone.

"They take out the organs from their dead and pickle them in vinegar," he said, with enthusiasm but not a great deal of accuracy. "Then they stack them up in rows in great stone standing tombs. And every year, they bring them out and parade them about the city!"

Flora gaped at him, her startled eyes now as round as silver coins.

"No! Really?"

"Something like that," he replied blithely, then laughed at her expression. "Is that the face you're going to make when we're formally introduced tomorrow?"

Flora scowled, turning disapproving eyes on the Pentaghast ship as it dropped anchor in the still, green waters below. She suspected that her Herring stoicism and Cousland composure might be extensively tested over the next few days; as they were introduced to a string of Thedas' most eccentric foreign notables.

A grinning Alistair reached out to turn Flora's face towards him, thumb caressing the high angle of her cheek.

"This coronation rehearsal is going to take hours," he murmured, leaning purposefully forwards on the bench. "Give me a kiss to keep me going."

Flora was more than happy to oblige, wrapping her arms around the king's neck and parting her lips readily against his own. One kiss quickly turned into several, each becoming more heated until she was in his lap, his lips roaming down the hollow of her throat and her hand working between his muscled thighs.

Unfortunately, the morning's commitments would not wait, and a firm, staccato knock sounded at the door.
Alistair, flushed-faced and teeth gritted, muttered a curse under his breath.

"Don't stop, sweetheart," he instructed in an unsteady voice, pushing into her soft, small fingers. "Almost, almost -"

Another knock came, soft yet insistent.

"Your Majesty? The Chancellor is in the entrance hall."

The king groaned at the news of Eamon's arrival. He reached ill-temperedly for a cushion to cover himself as Flora withdrew her hand with an apologetic grimace.

A moment later, Guillaume entered with a pair of servants in tow, struggling with a full bathtub. Water splashed over the flagstones, and the Nevarran shot the servants a beady-eyed glower.

"Your Majesty, Lady Cousland," the steward murmured, bowing expertly as he turned towards the window seat. Well-aware of what he had interrupted, not a flicker passed across the silver-bearded man's face. "I hope you both slept well."

"Morning," said Flora placidly, leaning back against the glass and pulling the striped Theirin-crested nightshirt down over her thighs.

The king was less inclined to be amiable. Discarding the cushion, he stalked naked across the room to pour himself an ale; muscled, golden and leonine.

"Eamon's early," he complained, emptying the flagon ill-temperedly into the tankard. "The eighth bell hasn't even rung yet. How long is this rehearsal going to take?"

"From Canticles through to Threnodies, I'd wager," came Fergus' voice wryly from the doorway. "Floss, I'm not making any assumptions about your state of dress – are you decent?"

Once Flora had confirmed that she was indeed decent, the teyrn removed his hand from his eyes and stepped fully inside the room, Finian close behind him.

"It's been years since Grand Cleric Elemena has had an opportunity like this," Fergus continued, keeping his eyes fixed firmly on Alistair's face. Meanwhile, Finian was ogling the king unashamedly; giving his sister a little gleeful thumbs-up behind Fergus' back.

"She's definitely going to take advantage. Prepare yourselves for a monologue of epic proportion!"

"How much of the Chant can she fit into the span of a day, do you think?" Alistair replied with a little snort, unable to stop himself from smiling at the prospect of tomorrow's ceremony. Despite his complaints and grumbling, he was inwardly chafing at the bit with impatience; unconcerned about the crowning, but desperate to have his bond with his mistress formalised.

"At least six hundred verses," replied Fergus, inspecting the fresh-painted fish pattern above the hearth. "Eight hundred, if she's feeling ambitious. And she's deaf, so she won't be able to hear your pleas for her to stop."

"Maker's Breath!"

Eamon was not kept waiting long in the entrance hall – Flora prided herself on her punctuality and grew unduly anxious if she believed herself to be late. Seeing his mistress shifting fretfully from foot to foot, her fresh-washed hair hanging in thick, wet ropes down her back, Alistair duly picked up his own pace.
Less than half a candle length later, they were riding through the noble district, flanked by the usual escort of guards. It was the type of summer day more suited to Orlais or Antiva than Ferelden – a cornflower-blue sky unblemished by cloud, the sun an unblinking tormaline lion’s eye. The heat radiated from the cobbles and surrounding buildings; the smoke and animal-scent of the city mixing with the salt-edged sea breeze.

Alistair rode with the reins in a single, confident hand, keeping one arm curled around Flora's belly to anchor her in place before him. She was sitting in her usual position on the saddle, trying not to look too rapidly from side to side in case her damp ponytail whipped him in the face. 

*Not looking* proved to be an increasingly difficult endeavour, especially once they entered the city proper. Every canal-bridge and lamp-post bore the conjoined Theirin-Cousland legend, depicting the intertwined lion and laurel. The banners hung down, long and weighty; their colours fresh-embroidered. Flowers and garlands had been planted in hastily-constructed planters and barrels alongside the main thoroughfares of the city.

To Flora's astonishment, crimson ribbons had also been tied onto tavern signs and balcony-railings; woven through the wheel-spokes of carts and wrapped about the staves of the city guard. With a sudden, sharp poignancy, she recalled the raised pikes and staves of her gathered army, the crimson ribbon tied defiantly to each one. She was suddenly glad that she had not been awake to see the immediate aftermath of the final battle; to see the broken remains of these weapons trodden into the bloodied mud. There had not been excessive casualties against the Darkspawn horde, but their forces had not escaped without losses.

Most people had not yet realised that Flora was back in the city, and so the first part of their journey passed relatively unimpeded. Yet news travelled faster in Denerim than through the dormitories of the Circle; by the time that they neared the Square of the Bride, the crowds had come out in full vigour to see their handsome Theirin and his betrothed.

Although Flora had received substantial attention when she was riding to the docks with Teagan for her feast, the prospect of seeing both king and mistress together proved a great lure for the crowds. The people of Denerim flocked to the streets as the procession approached, streaming out of taverns and leaning out of upper windows. Their cries melded together into a general roar of approval; the occasional distinct call standing out amongst the rest.

"Welcome back, Lady Cousland!"

"Congratulations!"

"Show us your belly!"

Although the city folk knew better than to come too close to the king’s horse – besides which, the closed-face ranks of the Royal Guard were too intimidating to broach – Flora still felt herself pressing reflexively back against Alistair. The noise, the heat, the crowd of excited faces and open mouths - all melded together into a swell of overwhelming stimulation. Grateful for her haughty, impassive Cousland features; Flora relied on the natural coolness of her expression to disguise the anxiety that lay beneath.

Even the famous Cousland ambiguity was not potent enough to fool Alistair. He tightened his grip about Flora's waist, ducking forward to nuzzle his face against the back of her head.
"Not much longer, darling," he murmured, kissing the pale curve of her ear. "They've closed the entire Square of the Bride to the public. We're almost there, see?"

Sure enough, the vast staggered spire of Ferelden's largest Chantry towered above the rooftops ahead, raised high like a cleric's chiding finger. Alistair let the reins rest and used his strong thighs to keep himself astride in the saddle as he raised a hand to acknowledge the crowds. There was a swell of sound in response; bright faces with their mouths open calling out to their king.

"Theirin! Theirin!"

Suddenly proud of her best friend for embracing a role that he had once so vehemently rejected; Flora sat up a little straighter on the saddle, feeling Alistair's arm tighten around her waist in response to her movement.

*If he can do it, I can do it.*

As they turned into the wide promenade that led into the Square of the Bride, Flora twisted her head back towards the crowd. Forcing the natural coolness from her face, she smiled at them; hoping that it wasn't coming across as a maniacal leer.

From the immediate calls and delight that followed; it was clear that her smile had not offended. Alistair snorted, pressing his lips swiftly against the back of her head.

"Either you stopped glowering, or you just flashed them," he whispered, grinning slyly into her ear. "Which was it, baby?"

"Oh, definitely just flashed them," she replied, solemnly. "And they all think you're a lucky man."

Alistair laughed out loud, lifting the reins once again as they passed into the Square of the Bride.

"You can say that again, sweetheart."

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**Chapter End Notes**

Alistair definitely has some pretty inaccurate information about the Nevarran death cults and their practices – but I thought that would be pretty realistic, considering the unreliability of information and difficulty of communication at the time.

When Flora was Warden-Commander, she had other things to worry about – such as the rapidly approaching Darkspawn army and ARCHDEMON! – so riding within large crowds didn't faze her at all. Now that she can fully focus on the huge mass of people all staring at her, it's a little disconcerting.
The sounds of the crowds died away as the high stone buildings reared up to either side; the Square of the Bride was home to some of the tallest structures in the city. The Chantry administrative offices ran along one side, decorated with a series of relief panels depicting the life, death and redemption of Andraste. Opposite, the Templar headquarters rose, stern and without décor, save for the flecked-sword banner hanging from a dozen iron fixings along the face of the building.

On the far side of the Square, Ferelden's largest Chantry was built atop a raised stone terrace; accessible by flights of parallel steps. It was built in sympathetic manner to other Chantries within the region, but on a far vaster scale. Three towers loomed overhead, their shadows long enough to cloak the entire Square in gloom when the sun was high. The embroidered Chantry sunburst hung down from various metal fixings, each lofty standard the height of a merchant's warehouse. A great circular stained glass window faced east, the shards of dyed crystal gleaming with a prismatic sheen in the morning sunlight.

It had been months since Flora had last been here – even when she and Alistair had been residing in the palace; she had preferred to use the smaller chapel within the castle itself. Now, gazing up at the vast, imposing edifice of Ferelden's oldest and grandest Chantry, she realised quite how large and imposing it was. Recalling how she had been alarmed by the size of the crowds gathering on the streets, Flora felt as though she was seeing the city with fresh eyes.

_I suppose, before, the final battle loomed so large that everything else faded into insignificance. Now that the Blight is over, I see the world for what it is._

_This city is large. Everything is so tall._

They dismounted on the cobbles before the great twin flights of stairs leading upwards to the Chantry entrance. As the party began to climb the fifty four basalt steps, retainers led their horses away to some discreet stabling. The sun continued to beam in radiant approval from overhead, and by the thirtieth step, Alistair felt beads of sweat breaking out on his forehead.

"Teagan thinks it's going to be a hot summer, my love," he called upwards to Flora, who was plodding determinedly several steps ahead of him. "Feels like it."

"Threety-two, threety-three – oh, that means a good harvest? Lots of crops?"

"Sweetheart, are you still fretting about people starving in the autumn?"

Flora shot him a gloomy look of confirmation over her shoulder. Alistair took several steps at once, catching up to his companion easily. Sliding an arm around her waist, he kissed her tenderly on the cheek and climbed the remainder of the steps at her side.

A familiar trio of figures stood beside the carved oak panels of the entrance doors. Flora beamed, delighted to see Wynne, Leliana and Zevran conversing quietly as they waited.

"Leliana," Eamon murmured in place of greeting, as the bard also discarded the usual pleasantries and advanced towards them. "Have the arrangements been made?"

Leliana nodded, fluttering an elegant hand towards the doors.
"All is as you requested, Arl Eamon. I'll perform the role of the Grand Cleric for today. Will you stay for your part?"

The arl shook his head, gesturing to where Teagan was just ascending the last of the steps.

"My brother will take my role for today," Eamon replied, wryly. "I remember the last coronation all too well; I need not a practice."

"Good morning, amors," purred Zevran meanwhile, advancing towards Flora with the merry eyes of a rogue. "A kiss from the blushing bride?"

"I'm not blushing," replied Flora, pressing her lips obligingly to the elf's tattooed cheek. "I'm burning. It's so hot on the east coast. Oh, you have a – here."

She reached up, touching her finger to the edge of Zevran's ear; intercepting the progress of a small, wispy-legged spider as it descended from some dusty overhead eaves. Letting it drop gently onto the stone terrace, Flora smiled at the elf; then shuffled towards Leliana's imperious beckon. The bard, who was scandalised by the prospect of tomorrow's ceremony being marred by unsightly sunburn, was eager for the pallid young Cousland to get inside the gloom of the Chantry.

As Leliana followed in Flora's wake, she leaned forward to whisper in the elf's ear.

"And breathe, mon cher."

Zevran exhaled in a rush, shaking his head with a small growl of frustration. Leliana darted a quick glance over her shoulder, shooting him a look as though to say: even now? A sunset before she marries another man?

Even now, the Antivan thought, defiantly. Permit me my foolish fancy.

Meanwhile, Flora had stopped still within the entrance to the Chantry, one booted foot over the threshold. The elongated space inside was even higher and deeper than she had remembered; twin lines of granite columns thicker than the oldest tree trunks running from door to transept. Andraste's eternal flame blazed at the far end, set into a sunken copper trough so that the writhing tongues of fire appeared to rise miraculously from the tiles themselves. High above, patterned glass windows high in the vaulted ceiling cast imperious patterns on the flagstones.

Yet all this Flora remembered, for it had been such when she had last visited the Grand Chantry. Instead – just as when she had stepped into the Royal bedchamber after Alistair's redecoration – her eye was drawn to that which was different.

Just as in the entrance hall of the castle, a multitude of familiar banners now dangled from the great columns. The colours of Highever hung adjacent to the ancient arms of Denerim, and every other banner was the conjoined lion and laurel; commemorating the union between Theirin and Cousland. Long vines of laurel had been woven through the back of every pew, their elongated oval leaves pale and soft as fresh mint. Tall braziers had been placed at intervals, crimson ribbons wrapped around their bronze supports. More scarlet drapery hung from the alter; cut into slender skeins to emulate the token once carried by Flora's armies. Each tallow candle had been replaced with a luxuriant equivalent moulded from beeswax, radiating warm, honeyed puddles of light across the basalt tiles.

Voices called out to one another, echoing up to the lofty murals painted on the walls. A pair of Chantry brothers scuttled between hanging incense gourds; the first polishing and the second refilling. More servants wound the final skeins of crimson ribbon into place, chattering in excited undertones. High above, affixed by some ingenious means, long strands of laurel had been draped
across the vaulted parapets. Interspersed with crimson roses, they formed an organic curtain overhead, turning the light filtering in from overhead into a pale, milky green.

Flora stood as though she had been paralysed; her eyes wide with sheer disbelief. Alistair came to a halt just beside her, an astonished grunt escaping his throat.

"By Andraste's holy bosom," he breathed, receiving a swift elbow from Leliana for the profanity. "You mentioned some decoration, uncle, but I wasn't expecting this."

Teagan laughed, letting the door swing shut with a low, muffled thud in his wake.

"Does it meet with your approval?" he asked, mildly. "I know neither of you are inclined to fuss and ornamentation, but we've got representatives from all over Thedas attending tomorrow. Each one ready to gauge Ferelden's post-Blight capacity."

Flora, who in the latter weeks of the Blight had worn her hair constantly in a symbolic – immediately recognisable – crimson ponytail, understood full-well the importance of putting on a show. She shot a quick glance across at Teagan, still awed by the Grand Chantry's transformation.

"Surely all this isn't for me and Alistair? It's too much!"

"For the union of Cousland and Theirin: the two most powerful dynasties in the nation?" Leliana interrupted, stepping forward to gesture widely; fingers curling towards minor details not obvious on first appraisal. "Heroes of the realm both? Non, it is not too much."

"Huh!"

Every pew contained a stiff parchment card depicting a different cost of arms – from the crossed spears of Vael to the silver lion's head of Valmont. These were to denote where the various dignitaries of Thedas would sit – ranked by order of allegiance to Ferelden, rather than by prestige alone. The Marcher representatives – with whom Eamon hoped to forge new trade routes – were placed front and centre.

Flora tilted her head back, inhaling the fragrant smell wafting from the roses and feeling Alistair's anxious eyes on her. The king knew well that Flora's Herring-instilled sensibilities would be incredulous at such expense and show for something so uncomplicated as a marriage; which could be performed simply by expressing and consummating such a bond before the Maker.

It is an expense. But remember – this is for show. It's to show everyone that Ferelden has got a future.

"It's lovely," Flora said softly, smiling at Teagan and bowing her head. "What an honour, to be married in such beautiful place. Thank you."

Alistair exhaled in slight relief, his fingers reaching out to twine affectionately into her own.

"Right," continued the bann, glancing at the position of the sun through the great stained glass windows. "The marriage ceremony will come before the coronation, so that you can be crowned king and queen together after being made man and wife."

There came a loud sniff from somewhere amongst the bann's small audience. Teagan broke off, gazing across at Alistair in surprise. The king went a minor shade of pink, slightly embarrassed at his own sentiment even as his eyes welled up.

"Sorry," he muttered, as Leliana cooed under her breath and advanced forwards with a silken
handkerchief. "I just – anyway. Keep explaining, don't mind me."

Flora squeezed her best friend's palm tightly against her own, feeling him immediately return the firm pressure.

_I adore you_, she thought, hoping that her sentiment could pass from her flesh to his. _I adore you more than anything._

" – after that's finished, you'll proceed down the aisle and emerge at the top of the steps; where the crowds will be gathered in the Square of the Bride. You'll return to the palace for the wedding feast and celebrations, and then – ah - "

The elf gave a little cackle, dark eyes lighting up.

"Then you'll be put into your marital bed together," he murmured, snickering like a schoolboy. "And perform for your audience."

Flora darted a quick glance up at her lover, just in time to see him swallow, hard. She gave his hand another reassuring little squeeze, feeling a corresponding pressure on her fingers.

Teagan coughed and continued, addressing his words to the great statue of Andraste at the far end of the aisle.

"I've put a stop to some of the bawdier traditions. Don't worry, Alistair, nobody will try and break into the bedchamber with a cup of _bride's broth_ to fortify you. Flora, they won't be pulling your clothes off in an attempt to steal your garter!"

"Damned right," muttered Alistair, bristling defensively even as Flora's jaw dropped. "I'll put up with the witnessing to make sure the baby can't ever be named _bastard_, but that's _it_. And if anyone tries to pull Flo's clothes off, they'll be _pulling_ their sword from out of their own- "

_"We are in the house of the Maker!"_ interjected Leliana, as a Chantry sister squeaked nearby.

Teagan nodded, with a little grimace of sympathy.

"Aye, lad. I don't blame you. Anyway, we should get underway with this practice – I'll stand where Eamon stands for now, and Leliana can be our Grand Cleric. Finian appears to be delayed – would somebody be Fergus until he arrives?"

Zevran raised his hand with a game grin, always desiring to be involved.

A short time later, the assorted Chantry sisters and brothers had withdrawn to the chapels and side-chambers, and a stillness fell over the great, hallowed hall. Alistair, Leliana and Teagan stood near the alter on a specially raised step at the front of the Chantry; the light from Andraste's flame flickering across their faces.

Alistair was caught between anticipation and frustration that this was only a simulacrum of marriage. If it had been up to him alone, he would have wedded his mistress the very day he brought her back from Revanloch. Teagan was busy running through the chronology of proceedings in his head, though the bann was reasonably sure that Leliana would not allow him to disorder events. The Orlesian bard seemed determined to prove her efficiency; perhaps desiring to garner some international attention.

Leliana did not quite dare to don the lofty helm of a senior church official, but she had draped a violet-tinted _surplice_ over her lay-sister robes and bore an additional air of haughty eminence.
"Florence!" she called, projecting her voice with bardic skill directly down the central aisle. "You have to wait until the drumming starts. Don't start walking just yet."

At the very back of the Chantry, beside the great wooden doors, Flora squinted down at Leliana's diminutive figure. She was waiting alongside Zevran, who was tapping his fingers somewhat agitatedly against a carved stone relief.

"What did she say?"

"'Wait until the drumming starts to start walking!," Zevran repeated, whose sharper ears had heard the bard's enunciation.

Flora blinked at him for a moment, nonplussed.

"Drumming? Whaa-"

The elf returned her confusion with a shrug, one eyebrow rising.

"I don't know, carina."

Flora fell silent, her brow furrowed. Teagan, Alistair and Leliana appeared to be deep in conversation at the far end of the Chantry; king listening with bemused attention as the lay-sister gesticulated enthusiastically.

Unable to hear their discussion, Flora turned her attention to Zevran. The elf was bouncing lightly on the balls of his feet, humming under his breath. She reached out a gentle finger to touch the fine, silver-blond tendrils of hair, which now reached partway down the elf's back.

"Your hair is getting long," she observed, twisting one lock around her finger and watching the pink nail go white. "You could wear it in a plait if you wanted. A nice fishtail braid."

The elf grinned at her, his amusement discoloured only by the faintest shadow.

"Will you braid it for me later, mi sirenita? I find my fingers awfully clumsy in recent times."

Flora crossed her eyes at him, knowing full well that this was an untruth. The elf had the quickest hands of all their companions; his gestures swift as a salmon darting through patches of dappled sunlight. Zevran let out a little cackle, lifting his eyes to the heavy vines of laurel suspended from the ceiling.

"Putting on quite a show, aren't they? I hope you're ready to be centre-stage, nena."

Flora shrugged a shoulder, her stomach letting loose a plaintive grumble. She dropped a hand to her belly, rubbing her palm soothingly over the plump mound.

"I feel like I've been centre-stage since we were at South Reach," the young Cousland replied, mildly. "I'll have to grow used to it."

The elf smiled back at her, a touch wistful. Flora, willing her stomach to stop grumbling, focused instead on the wide, basalt-tiled central aisle that she would soon be traversing.

"It's so long. Am I supposed to walk the whole way down? It's going to take ages. Can't I… jog?"

Zevran snickered, dark cat-eyes flickering reflexively towards a nearby movement in the shadows. A pair of drummers, their instruments suspended by straps around their necks, emerged with sticks held aloft; clearly waiting for some signal from the distant bard.
"Ah, as amusing a sight as that would be, mi amor, I fear that it would not be permitted."

Flora scowled, then jumped a little as a slow, measured drumbeat began; wooden stick striking taut leather in a formal, almost militaristic pulse. The sound echoed to the vaulted ceiling, amplified by the acoustics of the centuries-old building. From the raised altar, Leliana made an impatient, imperious gesture with her hand, a clear signal to proceed.

"Alright, my dear hermanita," murmured Zevran, as Flora continued to gawp with naked astonishment at the drummers. "Are you ready for a little role play?"

"Yes," she replied, only half-listening. "What is 'role-play'?"

"Excelente. I shall be the wicked sinner confessing my lusty escapades, and you can be the sweet young Chantry sister, who can't help but be fascinated by my sexual prowess."

Flora eyed him dubiously and the elf cackled, relenting and offering her his arm to take.

"I jest, mi florita. I shall, of course, be the Teyrn of Highever, ready to give away my lovely little sister."

She slid her arm through his offered elbow, curling her fingers into his leather-clad sleeve.

The drummers continued their stately rhythm as Flora and Zevran proceeded down the aisle, passing pews reserved for some of Thedas' most prominent figureheads. Zevran, who had the more musical ear, kept their tread in time to the slow beat of the drums.

"Don't charge off like a ship in full sail," he murmured from the corner of his mouth. "Patience; Alistair is not going to leave if you don't get there soon enough."

"I'm starving," Flora mumbled in reply. "The sooner we finish this, the sooner I can have some lunch. Wait, did I hide a snack in my tunic?"

At the front of the Chantry, Alistair shifted from foot to foot; his own stomach giving a rather ominous rumble.

"Is that hunger or nerves, Alistair?" Leliana asked, smiling even as she kept her eyes trained hawk-like on the two figures approaching down the central aisle. The sun was shifting slowly into its highest stance; rays of jewel-coloured light beaming down onto the dark basalt flagstones.

"A bit of both," the king replied honestly, forcing himself to take his eyes from his mistress and look at the bard. "I can't believe I'm going to marry Flo tomorrow. She's going to be my wife – my very own wife – and nobody will ever be able to part us. I've dreamed of this for… longer than I'd care to admit, uncle."

A soft laugh escaped Teagan's throat, the bann's mouth curling into a rueful smile.

"Only one-and-twenty years of age, and desperate to wed," he murmured, wryly. "When I was your age, marriage was the furthest thing from my mind. I was more concerned with horses and comely stable-lasses."

"I wager you'd have felt different if you'd known a girl like her," countered Alistair, confidently.

Teagan paused for a moment, then let out a soft bark of laughter.

"Aye, lad. You're probably not too far from the mark, there."
Meanwhile, Leliana had also become a little distracted thanks to a servant placing a bundle of linen-wrapped objects discreetly on the bench of the Royal pew. When she turned her gaze back to the central aisle, a squawk of disbelief flew from between her lips like an un-caged songbird.

"Flora! You cannot snack on your journey down the aisle!"

Those waiting beside Andraste’s eternal flame returned their eyes to the middle of the Chantry. Sure enough, Flora was sitting in a pew about halfway between doorway and transept, munching contentedly on a pear while Zevran tried to cajole her into continuing.

"The baby hungers," Flora called back earnestly through a mouthful of fruit. "I have a maternal obligation to feed it."

"Lel, the baby needs to eat," an anxious Alistair repeated, turning his gaze on Leliana as they stood near the altar. "Maybe we should pause for lunch."

The bard’s nostrils flared almost the width of the Chantry, her eyes like focused darts of disapproval.

"Ahem! This is the girl whom I personally witnessed eating six bread rolls, four apples and an entire cauldron of cooked eggs when breaking her fast this morning. The baby is plenty nourished; it’s your betrothed who is a slave to the unnatural demands of her stomach!"

A proud Alistair beamed at his mistress as she pushed herself upright from the bench, reaching out for Zevran’s arm so that they could continue their journey down the aisle.

"I appreciate a girl with a healthy appetite," the king murmured, fondly.

Finally, after much humming of disapproval from Leliana, Flora and Zevran arrived at the foot of the three shallow steps that led up to the central platform. The drumbeat escalated into a loud, crescendo roll and then abruptly ended; the lingering sound echoing about the vaulted eaves.

Alistair began instinctively to head down, and then froze as Leliana let out a hiss of instruction.

"Arrêtez! You cannot just go and embrace her. There are traditions that must be followed!"

Alistair let out a small huff of impatience, but allowed himself to be led back up beside Teagan. Leliana, resplendent in her borrowed mantle of authority, cleared her throat.

"Alright, ‘Fergus’ – are you listening?"

Zevran dragged his attention reluctantly from a pair of slender young Chantry sisters, smiling with brilliant white teeth up at the increasingly irate lay sister.


"You must first remove the fur from around Flora’s shoulders – no, it is an imaginary fur for today – and let it fall to the floor. Then you kiss your sister and pass her to ‘Eamon’. Not on the mouth, fiend!"

Flora, who was caught between amusement and bemusement, laughed as Zevran changed course at the last minute; planting his lips on her cheek. Turning, she saw Teagan extending a hand towards her, and went dutifully to take it. Leliana nodded, gesturing for Teagan to lead Flora up the three steps towards an impatient Alistair.

"Now, Alistair – stop, you can’t just grab your bride like the choice cut of meat from a roasted boar!"
'Eamon' will lead your bride to you, and you need to place your own 'fur' around her shoulders."

Alistair's brow furrowed, blinking down at the Chantry robe which had suddenly appeared in his hands courtesy of a hovering servant. He gazed down at Flora in perplexion, even as he did as he was told and draped the robe about her neck.

"I don't understand," he started, brow furrowed. "What's the point of this fur-swapping?"

Leliana opened her mouth to clarify; but to everybody's surprise, Flora piped up with her own explanation.

"It's from when Andraste gets married to Maf-Maferton," she said, mangling the latter's name. "She wore furs from her family home into the marital bedchamber; his Mabari didn't recognise the scent and almost attacked her. So she had to abandon all her old furs and wear the furs of Maferon's house. We used to tell the story in Herring."

Leliana nodded in slow astonishment, her finely plucked eyebrows lodged within her hairline.

"It seems that the old Alamarri traditions are kept alive in the smallest villages of Ferelden" she murmured, stepping forwards in preparation to emulate the Grand Cleric's role. "You are quite right, ma petite. Except, it's Maferath."

"I'm going to sweat like a pig," Flora added, with gloomy resignation. "Who wears FUR in the summer?"

Slowly but surely, the audience in the Chantry was beginning to swell. Curious sisters and minor brothers lurked in the shadows of the thick basalt columns; Cousland retainers perched themselves in the pews and Royal Guardsmen lined the far wall. All eyes were trained on the odd collection of figures gathered at the transept of the Cathedral; king, mistress, elf emulating teyrn, bann representing arl, and a lowly lay sister clad in the elegant mantle of a senior priestess.

"So after you both confirm your identity – and make sure you get your names in the correct order this time, Flora – you will exchange rings," Leliana continued, adjusting the angle of the lofty hat. "Flora, make sure that Mairyn's Star is on your other hand."

Flora, who had been mouthing Florence Chastity Popelyn Ragenhilda to herself, suddenly looked stricken.

"I haven't got you a ring," she breathed to Alistair, wide-eyed. "I didn't realise I was supposed to, I'll go to the market now- "

Leliana reached out, letting a reassuring hand settle on Flora's elbow as the latter quivered in distress.

"You didn't even know you were getting married until three days ago, ma crevette. Do not worry; Bann Teagan is taking responsibility for the rings."

Teagan nodded in gruff confirmation, and Flora relaxed a fraction. Alistair smiled at her, surreptitiously squeezing her fingers tightly within his own.

"Finally," Leliana continued, impatient to rehearse the more ritualistic coronation. "Arl Eamon will bind your hands together with a leather strap. A symbolic representation of your Maker-blessed bond."

"Mi sirenita should be used to that," purred Zevran, unable to resist. "It won't be the first time she's had her hands tied before Alistair."
"We are in the Maker's house!" Leliana hissed malevolently as the king went a deep shade of pink. "Keep your lechery to yourself."

"You're meant to be Fergus," Flora added solemnly, trying not to laugh. "Try and stay in character. He doesn't like it when we talk about bedchamber-activities."

Zevran assumed an equally sombre expression, then flashed her a little wink.

A lay brother came forward at the bard's gesture, clutching a long wooden case. Inside the case rested a number of assorted objects – a long silver-handled candlestick, an apple, a copy of the Chant; amongst various others. These were meant to represent the regalia of the kings of Ferelden; the authentic collection currently resting ceremoniously in the castle treasury.

Patiently, Teagan guided Alistair and Flora through the ritual-laden coronation itself. Alistair, as king regnant, would take the main role in proceedings – it would be he who would be presented with Calenhad's sword and Andraste's sceptre. Flora had merely to hold the Orb of Fionne – represented in this instance by a plump crimson apple – and a caged wren, which she was a little nervous about.

"Why does it matter that I hold out my right hand for the bloody sword?" complained Alistair, whose patience was wearing thin. "Will the Grand Cleric refuse to crown me if I get it the wrong way round?"

"Your brother and father both managed it well enough," countered Teagan, sympathetic to a degree but also aware of the importance of adhering to tradition. "Come on, lad. You can do it."

A guilty Flora, who had eaten half of the 'Orb of Fionne', sought to deflect attention from herself. "What's a sceptre?" she asked, eyeing the silver-handled taper meant to represent this particular piece of regalia.

"A stick to beat your enemies with," replied Zevran, with a yawn. "Used to fend off would-be usurpers."

Flora's brow furrowed in confusion, and she looked to Teagan for clarification. The bann let out a sigh under his breath, aware that the rehearsal was dragging on far longer than anyone had anticipated.

"Right. Let's run through it one more time. You alright with that, poppet?"

This latter query was directed to Flora, who was busy shifting her weight onto her stronger leg. Her bound knee was complaining bitterly after several hours spent standing on it; she could feel the leather strapping beginning to loosen around the weak joint.

"I'm fine," she replied stoically, avoiding Alistair's suspicious stare. "I'm afraid that somebody has eaten the Orb of Thing though."

Chapter End Notes
OOC Author Note: Lol poor Leliana, I feel sorry for her having to wrangle this lot into place! Between Alistair's impatience, Zevran's lechery and Flora stopping to snack every thirty seconds… hahaha. I think this coronation-wedding is going to be how Leliana really makes a name for herself within the Chantry.
An hour later and the rehearsal was finally finished, the sun just beginning on its leisurely afternoon descent. It had lost none of its brilliance during its tenure in the sky; baking the mud between the flagstones and prompting the people of Denerim to unbutton their shirts and roll up the arms of their tunics. Still, even this uncharacteristically warm Solace afternoon could not stop them working with especial keenness, eager to finish the day's labour and begin tomorrow's coronation day holiday early. The taverns had already thrown open their doors; the more reputable dwellings housing musicians that played excerpts from Leliana's bardic epic *The Lion and the Light*. The less reputable establishments echoed with the explicit version of *Warden Flora, we adore her*, and other bawdy songs that had sprung up based on the reputedly vigorous bedroom proclivities of their youthful king and his solemn-faced mistress.

The only citizens not partaking in these celebrations were the refugees that had formed the so-called restoration committees; the groups that were determined to return to their devastated homelands and see them rebuilt. These gatherings of men and women took place in tavern basements and vacant guild-halls, trying to get as much as possible accomplished before tomorrow's holiday. They were assisted in their efforts by the presence of their local liege lord, who would be responsible for coordinating the response and securing funding. Bann Teagan had gone straight from the Grand Chantry to the meeting of men and women from the arling of Redcliffe. Eamon's demesne had not suffered extensively from the Blight, but there were a handful of villages on the south-eastern border of his territory that had been destroyed.

Likewise, Arl Leonas, the Bann of Calon and Bann Reginalda had each gone to oversee proceedings in their own restoration committees. Leonas' familial seat of South Reach had been ransacked by the horde to build their siege weaponry, and the new general was quietly determined to see it restored.

The only restoration committee who had no noble patron to oversee its efforts, was the southern teyrnir of Gwaren. Loghain was now co-leading the Ferelden Wardens, and his daughter – having lost all noble claim after the attainting of the Mac Tir name – resided under heavy guard within Denerim's noble district.

Even if either Mac Tir had taken an interest in overseeing the rebuilding of Gwaren, the residents were determined to reject their efforts. Gwaren had been one of the earliest provinces swarmed by the Darkspawn, and its people could not forgive the utter inaction of both former queen and regent in the face of their plight. Therefore this committee laboured alone in its efforts to organise materials and funding, with no noble patron to oversee efforts or campaign on its behalf. The two main sources of income for the town were its dock and its fishing industry; both utterly devastated.

The mayor of Gwaren, a man so short and stocky it was rumoured he had dwarven ancestry, was currently listening to a litany of problems recited by the master of the fishermen's guild. Without a patron, the Gwaren committee had not managed to secure respectable premises to meet, and so they were gathered in an abandoned storeroom in the warehouse district. Fortunately, it was a sunny day and the gaps in the rafters did not matter overmuch; though the rats scuttling along the borders of the room did somewhat distract from proceedings.

"First problem is, we can't get nothin' back down south," piped up Tadric, the bearded fisherman who was the most outspoken of his peers. "It's too difficult to get materials over the hills, and 'alf our ships have sailed off to the Marches."
"With half of our people," chimed in a sad-faced merchant, fingerling his moustache.

"And they've took everything they could get their hands on," added a flush-cheeked fishwife, who had lost her husband during the Blight. "The jetties and piers have fallen into the sea. Our nets are gone. The lobster pots scattered to the corners of the Amaranthine Ocean."

The mayor banged a tankard on the table, irritably. They had agreed to try and retain a sense of positivity and optimism; so far, nobody had stuck to their own rule. The table, being uneven, wobbled in precarious manner.

"So, first priorities are to secure ships and wood," he repeated with a nod to his scrawny adolescent son; who was serving as scribe. "If we can get at least one or two piers back in operation before summer-end, we might have a chance of gettin' some autumn trade."

"Because ships are such an easy thing to come by," muttered the merchant, still pulling at the drooping ends of his moustache. "And the nobles own all the trees. It's poachin' if we just start choppin' em down."

Just then, there was a slight commotion from the entrance. Booted metallic footsteps echoed about the crumbling stone walls of the warehouse, and a troop of a half-dozen Royal Guard proceeded to make entrance. They formed two ranks at either side of the door; pikes held straight and aloft.

" – going to be late for your wedding dress fitting," hissed an irate Orlesian voice from the passageway. "You'll be wearing a baggy sack tomorrow, and have nobody to blame but yourself."

"When I was a child in Herring, I wore a sack for a year, actually," came an indignant, northern-tinged reply, the accent deceptively low-born considering the noble blood of its progenitor. "I can wear one at my wedding if needs be."

"I despair!"

The assembled citizens of Gwaren gaped at the door and then at each other, utterly confused. However, those that had been at the refugee's feast several weeks prior soon recognised that distinctive accent.

"Quick!" hissed the mayor, shoving his chair back and nearly falling over in his haste. "On your feet! It's the lady Cousland."

Moments later, the lady herself arrived; shooting a slightly bemused glance at the ranks of Royal Guard standing at either side of the entrance. She was accompanied by an irate redhead clad in lay-sister robes, and a grinning blond elf with fading tattoos scribed on his cheeks.

"Hello," said Flora, eyeing the eclectic mix of merchants, fishermen and peasants gathered before her; who were half-risen from their chairs, too stunned even to bow. "My name is-"

"The Hero of Ferelden!" breathed the fishwife, a flush of disbelief rising to her cheeks.

"Florence Cousland," corrected Flora, slightly nonplussed. "I'm sorry I didn't get here sooner. We were rehearsing the wedding, and someone ate the Orb of Fionne, and then – anyway. It doesn't matter. I hate being late."

The mayor ventured a question, his hand creeping upwards like a shy initiate in a Templar classroom.

"Late, my lady?"
Flora nodded, advancing further into the decrepit warehouse, paying no heed to the rotten floorboards or cobwebbed rafters. There had been rats in the Circle tower – the resident cats were lazy and didn't venture much above the fifth floor – and so the rodents scuttling about the warehouse walls did not bother her.

"For your meeting," she said patiently, as a bearded man clad in a much-patched tunic scuttled to provide a chair for her. "It took ages to find out where you were. We got lost."

Pleased, Flora sat down with a little exhalation of air, reaching to tighten the loose strapping about her weak knee. The fishermen and traders of Gwaren darted small glances at each other from the corners of their eyes, uncertain how to proceed. They sunk back into their seats, one at a time; excited whispers quickly falling to a hush as she spoke once again.

"I want to help, if you'll let me," Flora said, blunt and without preamble. "With Gwaren."

There followed a small, astonished silence, a tentative and uncertain flush of hope appearing on the face of the mayor.

"What – what do you mean, Lady Cousland?"

"I know you have no one to support you," she continued, patiently. "You've lost your teyrn."

"Aye, my lady," replied the mayor, the words emerging slow and tentative. "With the fall of the Mac Tir, we have no liege lord and no voice in the Landsmeet. Any assistance you could offer us would be much appreciated."

"Well, we fishing communities ought to stick together," replied Flora, immediately. "Even though Herring and Skingle are arch-rivals, whenever Skingle has a problem with wreckers – or Herring loses a boat to a storm – we help each other out. Did you say you needed wood and ships?"

The mayor nodded mutedly, his eyes wide. Flora smiled, absurdly pleased that she was able to offer some genuine assistance – perhaps make a difference to the lives of these unfortunate refugees.

I might not be able to heal this man's cough or mend that old lady's linen-bandaged arm. But I can still help them.

"My brothers have promised to assist me," she said, stifling a grimace of discomfort as the baby swung a gleefully malicious foot into her kidneys. "Highever wasn't Blighted, and they have wood to spare. There's a whole host of ships at Amaranthine, where my other brother holds tenure."

"And they would be willing to assist us?" asked the mayor warily, not quite daring to let the hope show in his tone. He was well aware of the old rivalry between Cousland and Mac Tir; a mutual mistrust reflected by the history of antagonism between their respective teyrnirs.

"Of course," murmured the Orlesian bard from her position leaning watchfully against the door frame. "Gwaren was once Ferelden's third largest economy, after Denerim and Highever. It must be restored, for the good of the nation."

"I believe that you will end up with more than a few offers of assistance," added the tattooed elf wryly from the opposite side of the entrance. "The Cousland menfolk will naturally assist their sister; and nobody in the Landsmeet will be able to resist that lovely, earnest face, especially when it belongs to a hero of the realm. She need only make a request on your behalf and a dozen promises of aid will be thrust upon her. Not least from the king himself, who can refuse her nothing."

The dawning hope on the mayor's face at last began to spread to those around him. The people of
Gwaren had suffered perhaps in even greater degree than most of Ferelden. Like many others, they had lost land, livelihoods and loved ones with the arrival of the Darkspawn horde; but they had also struggled on as refugees for almost a year with no assistance from either Mac Tir.

Changing the subject, Flora leaned forwards on the table and dropped her voice.

"Tell me," she whispered, conspiratorially. "What kind of fish do you get in the southern waters at this time of year?"

"Here we go on the fish tangent," Zevran murmured to Leliana quietly; the bard nodded and rolled her eyes.

"This time of year, we'd get a lot o’ copper bream," one man offered after a tentative moment of silence – who was going to respond to the Hero of Ferelden? "An' the lobster pots'd be full."

He was rewarded with such an uncharacteristic beam of delight that others began to pipe up, selfishly desiring a similar reaction from their future queen.

"Green-tailed pike, they'd be swarmin' round the legs of the southern pier."

"Only 'cause your Berne used to bait the waters there! Otherwise they'd be clumpin' in my traps at the riverhead."

"Them whelk-fish should think 'emselves lucky they aren't getting caught up in our nets this summer. They'll be runnin' rampant."

Flora listened in fascination, her chin propped in her hand. Eventually, Leliana – who had been experiencing traumatic visions of the bride advancing down the aisle clad in a literal sack – cleared her throat, pointedly.

"Alright," Flora said obediently, realising that the bard's nerves were wearing thin. "So, we need wood and ships. I'll speak to my brothers, after tomorrow."

The mayor nodded, aware of two dozen pointed stares prickling between his shoulder-blades. Flora had just risen from her chair, using a hand to propel her swollen stomach upwards.

"Ah – lady Cousland?"

She turned her pale, questioning eyes on him, searching as silvered lanterns.

"I think we're all in agreement, my lady... I know it's the king, by rights, who awards things like this, but... we all desire it."

Flora watched the nervous man shifting from foot to foot. The entire gathered company had fallen silent; their hopeful faces were turned on hers.

"Would... would you consider becoming our new teyrna? We ain't got anyone in charge, and – and you've shown that you care. Noone else has come lookin' for us."

Flora was astonished; she had – rather naively – not considered the possibility of such a request. Out of fairness, she forced herself to mull over it, grateful for her face's neutrality.

"You honour me with this request," she whispered, bowing her head in their general direction. "And... if I wasn't becoming queen tomorrow, I would agree gladly."

*Maybe*, she thought to herself, remembering how quickly she had spurned the arling of
"Amaranthine. Possibly."

The mayor nodded with a defeated slump; he had suspected as much. Flora gazed at them a moment, thoughtful.

"What about… Lady Anora?" she suggested, softly. "She was raised in Gwaren, wasn't she?"

"And did nothin' to save it during the Blight, she were so under the thumb of her father," replied a fishwife, indignantly. "She left us to be overrun by the Darkspawn. She ain't even been to see us."

Flora thought for a moment, biting on her lip anxiously. In her practical Herring mind, Anora was the most logical choice to be the new leader of Gwaren – it was the Mac Tir family seat, she had experience of governance and knowledge of Gwaren's unique trade patterns.

Yet from the creased brows and mutterings before her, it seemed that there was a long way to go before the people would countenance the return of their disgraced local dynasty.

"What if she came here – to one of these meetings – and made amends?" Flora suggested at last, one hand resting lightly on her stomach.

"It'd have to be a lot of amends," said the mayor, eventually. "The name Mac Tir is spoken as a blasphemy more often than not, nowadays."

"And the dynasty has been attainted," Leliana murmured softly from near the doorway. "Alistair would have to reverse the attainer to grant Anora any sort of authority."

Flora grunted; she was not overly worried that Alistair would refuse her.

"We'd rather have you as our teyrna," repeated a merchant, slightly sulkily. "Lass with a sensible head on her shoulders, and one who understands the workins' of a piscicultural economy."

Flora bowed her head apologetically, deciding to pay Anora a visit in the immediate future.

"I don't need a title to be concerned with Gwaren's welfare," she said softly, letting her pale gaze meander from one anxious face to the next. "Alistair and I will rebuild Gwaren, as we will all the villages and towns destroyed during the Blight."

The people looked at Flora with bright new hope on their faces, and this triggered the sudden emergence of a memory, rising like flotsam on the surface of her mind.

*It's like when I was the Warden-Commander. The soldiers used to look at me the same way.*

"Ma petite," murmured Leliana quietly, and Flora decided that the bard had been patient long enough. As she pushed herself to her feet, there was a great scraping of chair legs against wood as those present hurried to stand.

"When is your next meeting?" she asked hastily, seeing that the mayor was preparing to deliver an effusive - and unnecessary, in Flora's opinion- speech of gratitude.

"In a week," replied the mayor, wide-eyed.

Flora nodded, biting her lip as she thought on the timings.

"I'll speak to my brothers about the wood and the ships," she said, at last. "We want that sorted out before the progress."
"My lady-"

"It's fine," Flora said quickly, feeling a faint flush rise to her cheeks. "I hope the lobsters and whelk-fish enjoy their summer of reprieve, because the nets and crab-pots will be back with a vengeance by autumn."

There was a resounding murmur of agreement, and Flora was gratified to hear a distinct vein of optimism emerging in their muttered conversation.

As she, Zevran and Leliana – accompanied by the usual plethora of Royal Guard – made their way out into the sunlight; the elf turned around with a little, teasing smile on his face.

"I've had an idea, carina."

"Eh?" said Flora, who was trying to avoid the direct glare of the sun for fear of burning. "What?"

The horses were led forwards from the shade between two warehouses, their tails whisking briskly at the hovering flies.

"I think the sons and daughters of the nobility should all be sent off to be raised in little villages," Zevran continued, ascending onto his horse with a fluid grace as Leliana heaved Flora bodily up behind her. "If they develop such a care for the common person as you."

"Losing your home feels just as bad, whether you're a villager losing a little hut, or a lord losing a castle," replied Flora solemnly, her brow furrowed. "I'm glad that I can do something to help, even though I'm-"

Useless, she had been about to say, but now Flora was uncertain how true that actually was.

I can still help. I can still be useful. Even without my magic.

Chapter End Notes

OOC Author Note: Lol, I just wanted to use the word PISCICULTURAL! Which is like agricultural, but for fish. Yes I know that a peasant would not know that word in all likelihood, hehe.

I wanted to incorporate some mention of the rebuilding of Ferelden in this sequel, I feel like it's a subject that isn't often touched on – and it's the boring historian in me that wonders about HOW exactly you rebuild a country that's experienced something like the Blight? I think it'd be a little bit like the Black Death hitting Europe in the 14th century (with some warfare thrown in) – but, hey, we got the Renaissance as a direct consequence of that, so... there IS hope for Ferelden, maybe? Lol.

Anyway, I think it's good for Flo to have a project of her own – a role that isn't just Alistair's baby-making queen! I hope the changing pattern of her speech is coming across – whenever she's talking about Herring, the words are shorter and more abrupt; whenever she's talking about her Cousland brothers, or queenly role, she speaks more eloquently. And I haven't abandoned Anora - I think she's such a competent character, I'm not done with her yet! Since Loghain has been instituted as joint Warden-
Commander of Ferelden, I think his daughter deserves a bit of redemption - I reckon we can persuade the men and women of Gwaren to accept her as their new teyrna!
A half-candle later and they had arrived – better late than never – at the Guerrin manor, which was set in a prime location within the noble district. Eamon himself greeted them at the door, ushering them swiftly into the entrance hall. Flora wandered along in Leliana's brisk wake, recalling how she and Alistair had stayed here during the frenetic, uncertain days of the Landsmeet. She had realised the existence of her little creature within the dining chamber of this very manor – finally acknowledging that which she had denied since the first horrible suspicions crept into her mind at South Reach.

They passed before the family portrait at the peak of the staircase – Eamon, Isolde and Connor, their painted plaster faces staring out blindly into the void of the hallway. Eamon led them down another wide, flagstoned corridor until they reached a familiar door – the chamber that Alistair and Flora had been assigned during their stay here.

"The dressmaker is all ready for you," the arl murmured to Flora, with a small smile. "I know that gowns aren't your usual choice of garb – I hope that you can tolerate one for tomorrow."

Flora let out a little grunt of assent, following Leliana into the chamber. It was just as she remembered – wide and airy, with the row of dancing Mabari painted above the hearth and a large, leaded-glass window that looked out onto the mouth of the estuary.

A slender woman with the narrow, clever features of a fox was waiting beside the bed, reams of material piled atop the blankets.

"At last!" she murmured, with a thick Redcliffe accent. "My lady, we have much to do. If you wouldn't mind leaving your tunic on the stool!"

"I'll leave you to it, Greta," said Eamon hastily, knowing that Flora had a habit of premature disrobing. "Let me know the cost of the materials."

"For the Hero of Ferelden?" the dressmaker retorted, incredulous. "No charge!"

Soon afterwards, Flora was standing in her smallclothes before the hearth; counting each painted Mabari beneath her breath as Leliana and the dressmaker exchanged swift, abbreviated conversation.

"Not the patterned wool," the bard declared, eyeing the crimson chequered fabric. "It'll be too warm with all the fur and leather. Remember, she'll be on her feet for several hours."

"Traditionally, the Avvar wore the tartan at their wedding ceremonies," Greta retorted, stretching a swathe of leather around a silent, compliant Flora's waist.

"Avvar brides also got their husbands to unpick knots to determine the length of their marriage," retorted Leliana, comparing the weight of two furs. "We're emulating the Alamarri in general, not just the Avvar."

Flora let the women move about her, raising her arms as required, her gaze drifting across to where Zevran lay sprawled in an armchair. A swathe of scarlet and tan tartan was draped across his thighs; as he sensed her stare, the elf lifted his leg atop the chair's arm.
"Does this pattern make me look more 'Ferelden'?" he enquired with a wicked smile, knowing that – with his warm-hued skin, golden earring and pronounced accent – he could not look more foreign if he tried.

Flora smiled at him, and then squawked as Leliana yanked the strings of a bodice tightly around her breasts.

"I think you're already a little bit 'Ferelden'," she replied, slightly breathless. "I haven't heard you complain about the blandness of the food for at least a day."

The elf snorted, sitting upright and eyeing her from top to toe. Although the dress was not yet completed, it was easy to see the general aesthetic that the Redcliffe dressmaker intended: traditional Alamarri, unsullied by the Orlesian influence that had crept into Ferelden fashion over the past decade. There would be no silk or velvet found in either king or queen's wedding outfits on the morrow, no lace sleeves or satin trim. Instead, their garb would be hewn from leather and fur in a clear statement: we both are descended from the oldest humans in Thedas; from the great warriors who shaped the south in our image. Andraste Herself was one of our kind, as was the dragon-slayer Calenhad.

This political subtext was lost on Flora, who was merely bemused at the decision to wear such weighty materials in the middle of summer.

"I'm going to sweat like a pig," she said plaintively as Leliana draped a bearskin around her shoulders. "Especially with my hair down."

"No, you won't," the bard replied briskly, removing the bearskin and replacing it with a dark sable fur. "The Grand Chantry is always cool."

"Save your sweating for later," Zevran chimed in, with a slightly malicious edge to his voice. "For when you and Alistair must perform for your audience. Ha! Is the witnessing of a consummation an Alamarri tradition too?"

The question was directed at Leliana, who snorted and gave a little shake of the head.

Flora grimaced slightly, having been so preoccupied with remembering the order of the coronation ritual – was it take orb, then pass sceptre to Alistair, or the other way around? – that the spectre of the wedding night had been temporarily banished from her mind.

"I forgot about that," she said, gloomily. "Leliana, can't you be the Chantry sister who watches us?"

The bard laughed, removing fur and bodice before setting them down on the bed.

"I'm nowhere near senior enough to verify the legitimacy of a royal marriage, ma cherie."

Zevran eyed Flora's swollen breasts appreciatively for a moment, elegant tattooed fingers moving in idle patterns across the worn velvet chair arm.

"I have it on good authority that more than a dozen nobles have volunteered to witness the consummation," he purred, Finian having told him in bed that morning. "It seems that there are many keen to hear the sounds that the lovely lady Cousland makes in the bedchamber."

"Snoring?" offered Flora helpfully, as Leliana resisted the urge to throw a pin at the lecherous Antivan.

"Come now," retorted Zevran, crooking a wicked golden eyebrow towards her.
"Not just snoring, nena."

Flora thought for a moment, and then flashed him an innocent smile; her pale Mabari eyes wide and guileless.

"Not just snoring," she confirmed, then cackled as he grinned, shooting her a knowing look.

The edge of the sun brushed the western horizon, the pale peach hue of sunset shining through the leaded glass and filling the chamber with mellow light.

The baby shifted in Flora's stomach, woken by the echo of her laughter. The leather strapping around it's mother's knee had come loose; she was about to attempt to tighten it when a foot swung into her bladder. A second kick followed shortly afterwards as the baby tested the confines of Flora's belly, and she gave a reflexive grimace.

"Ow. Stop kicking me, you little toad. We're making you a not-bastard tomorrow, be grateful."

"Sturdy creature," murmured Leliana, going to fetch Flora's navy tunic from where it had been abandoned on the bed. "At least it's not making you sick in the mornings anymore."

"Oh, it still does sometimes," replied Flora immediately, pulling the tunic on over her head. "It did the other day. Thank you."

This was in response to the sharp-eyed Zevran, who had had spotted the trailing leather strap at her knee and was now on his own knees before her; deft fingers skilfully pulling the thin band taut.

"De nada, carina."

Leliana retrieved Flora's boots from where she had kicked them off near the entrance. A steward ducked their head around the ajar door, voicing a soft question; bard and servant began to converse in low tones about arrangements for the morrow.

Zevran glanced over to check that the dressmaker was preoccupied with gathering her materials, rising to his feet with the feline grace of a leopard. He caught Flora's eye and she leaned towards him; knowing from long familiarity that the elf had something to say.

"Nena," he breathed, with a last thin vein of hope infused through the words. "I can offer you one more chance to escape the gilded handcuffs that will be placed on you tomorrow. We can bring Alistair with us as well, if he is willing. After the coronation, such liberation will be impossible."

Flora gazed at the elf, whose dark eyes were gleaming like ignited coals. There was an air of resignation infusing his request; as though he already knew what her response was going to be.

"We can't leave," she whispered, tying the laces of her tunic in a swift fisherman's knot. "You know we can't. This is what Alistair and I have to do, now that the Blight is over."

"But you do not want it, nena," replied Zevran, a pleading edge now creeping into his tone. "I know the sweet-hearted girl from Herring never wished to be queen. I remember her fleeing Redcliffe Castle because she did not even wish to be Lady Cousland."

"It's duty, not desire," continued Flora, quietly. "Even though I'm not a Warden anymore, I can still serve this country."

The elf half-laughed, and there was no humour in the sound.
"Forgive me, mi florita, but did you not assemble an army, slay the Archdemon and end the Fifth Blight? Have you not served Ferelden enough?"

Flora reached out to touch the slender braid hanging beside Zevran's ear, thoughtful.

"But I don't want to stop trying to help," she said softly, fingerling the woven strands of platinum. "Even though Compassion's left me. I'm not ready to retire. And I can do more as queen than I could as just a… girl from Herring."

Zevran stared at her with a myriad of conflicting emotions tangled together on his face; Flora pulled gently at the slender braid.

"Will you help me put some of these in my hair tomorrow? I'm not as good as you at doing them."

"Of… of course," the elf replied at last, plastering a smile atop his clouded features. "It would be my pleasure, nena."

Pleased, Flora smiled at him, and then ducked neatly around his body to retrieve her boots.

By the time that they arrived back at the palace, the sun had half-lowered itself into the sky. It promised to be a fine day tomorrow – the sky was a blended mix of ochre and violet, with no ominous cloud brewing on the horizon.

The grounds of the palace seemed far busier than usual – many of the more esteemed wedding guests were staying within the castle itself. Wagons, horses and retainers clad in a spectrum of different liveries were clustered on the palace forecourt; a babble of excited foreign tongues rising up above them like some exotic effluence.

A dozen different banners were propped against the wall – thanks to Leliana's tutelage at Revanloch, Flora found that she recognised many of them. She spotted the silver and blue of Orles, far more refined in pattern compared to the Marcher standards nearby; the grand duc's guards clad in the formal attire of Celene's court. The banner of the Pentagahsts – a black skull on a mustard field – was at the opposite side of the courtyard from the Vaels of Nevarre; the two noble dynasties had fallen out over a trade disagreement earlier that year.

There was also a heavy Templar presence – Flora recognised several familiar faces from Revanloch – due to the number of mages in attendance. The Empress Celene had sent her Court Enchanter; a woman with unmatchable poise who travelled in the style befitting a lady of her stature. In addition, there were a gaggle of Tevinter magisters who had come out of sheer curiosity; hoping to catch a glimpse of the reputed markings left by the Archdemon's soul on the body of Ferelden's future queen.

There was so much bustle and conversation within the courtyard that Leliana managed to secrete Flora inside a side-entrance unnoticed, aided by Zevran's loud and purposefully distracting flirtation with a pair of un-amused Templar several yards away.

Once they were inside the palace, Leliana led the way skilfully through the labyrinth of servant tunnels that circled the public areas of the palace, Flora's hand gripped tightly in hers. Servants were rushing back and forth, clutching sacks of raw ingredients, bolts of fabric, and garlands of flowers. Pairs of dwarves carried great barrels of ale between them, sweat dripping down their necks. With the coronation and wedding on the morrow, it was set to be the most significant occasion since the liberation of Ferelden; and there was a corresponding urgency in these last minute preparations.
"Why are we back here?" the young Cousland asked, following in Leliana's wake as they navigated through a busy set of corridors. "Ooh, is that the kitchens? It smells good. I wish the baby would let me eat meat, I miss chicken."

"Arl Eamon wants to keep you under wraps until tomorrow," replied Leliana, knowing the maze-like network of torch-lit passages like the back of her own lute. "All of your guests will be dining in the great hall later, but you and Alistair will be eating in your quarters."

Flora beamed; infinitely preferring this latter option.

They crossed the elevated passage that overlooked the Landsmeet chamber. Flora was unable to resist peering down through the window-slits at the darkened chamber, the rows of tiered wooden seating bathed in shadow as the unlit hearths sat like gaping mouths. The shutters across the Alamarri balcony had been left part-open to air the chamber; revealing a glimpse of star-studded sky.

Before they could step through the doorway leading to the Royal passage, Zevran took his leave.

"I'll see you tomorrow, señoritas," he murmured, winking at Leliana. "I'm going to see if any of our Antivan guests remember me."

Although the playful tone of his voice implied some provocative intent, Leliana was well aware of the elf's true purpose: to drift amongst the foreign factions and blend into the background in the way that only an elf could, his aim to divine any ill intentions. Zevran had already secured access to the grand duc's quarters after beguiling Gaspard's Orlesian groom.

Flora opened her mouth anxiously, and the elf hastened to reassure her, lifting a hand to brush his thumb along her jaw.

"Don't fret, hermosa novia. I will be at your quarters in the morning to put some braids into your hair."

She smiled at Zevran, and he leaned forward to kiss her just to the east of her mouth.

One unobtrusive side door later and Leliana led them triumphantly into the Royal passage; the torches on the walls struggling to illuminate such a broad and lengthy corridor. The Royal Guard stood still as statues between the actual suits of armour; their pikes throwing long shadows across the flagstones.

The chief steward, Guillaume, was standing just outside the king's quarters, talking in muted tones to a servant. As Leliana and Flora approached, the Nevarran interrupted his conversation and turned to face them; sweeping into a bow.

"Lady Cousland," he murmured, clever eyes glinting in the torchlight. "Lay-Sister. I trust all went well with the dressmaker today?"

"Very well," replied Leliana, inclining her own head. "Florence, I imagine that Alistair is waiting for you. I'll see you after dinner, ma chérie."

"The king is indeed waiting," confirmed the steward, canting his chin towards the double doors leading into the Theirin chamber. "He's getting a tad anxious."

"Alistair gets anxious when she goes to the wash-chamber in the mornings," muttered Leliana, nudging Flora forwards. "Go on, put him out of his misery."

The guardsmen hurried to open the doors, revealing the Royal bedchamber in all its stark, rough-
hewn native glory. The hearth had been piled high with fresh cedar-wood, and the spiked iron wheel hanging overhead gleamed with fat beeswax candles.

Alistair, still clad in the leathers he had worn during the rehearsal earlier that day, was pacing the length of the flagstones between the hearth and the bed. Turning swiftly as the doors opened, relief suffused the king’s handsome features as his eyes focused on his fat-bellied mistress.

"Maker's Breath, Lo! I was about to head out with a search party."

Her former brother-warden strode towards her, pulling the crown impatiently from his head and setting it down on the dresser. Flora, beaming reflexively, went happily into his outstretched arms. Alistair embraced her close to his chest, one hand coming up to cradle the back of her head. He planted a half-dozen kisses into her hair, one brand of adoration following another.

"I thought you'd be back hours ago," he murmured, aware that he was being overly protective but unable to stop himself. "You were just meant to be going to the dressmaker, not wandering all over Denerim!"

"I did go to the dressmaker," Flora repeated indignantly into the muscle of Alistair's leather-clad chest. "Eventually. Anyway, I was with Zevran and Leliana. And six guards."

"Saela can't birth those pups soon enough," Alistair replied, thinking on Fergus' favourite Mabari. "Your brother has promised to train the fiercest pair to guard you and the baby. We need more dogs around the place, anyway."

Flora smiled vaguely at her overly concerned best friend, extricating herself from his arms and wandering over to the bed to pull off her boots. This proved to be easier said than done: her feet had swollen enough to test the confines of the leather.

There followed a rap at the door and a small procession of servants entered, carrying trays and tankards between them. Seeing a slender elven female buckling under the weight of a heavy platter, Alistair went to assist, taking the tray with a murmur of gratitude. Plates of meat, cheese and onion tartlets were placed on the table among bowls of stuffed eggs and sugared almonds. A platter of raw vegetables – with as much earth as the cook could bear to leave on them – was also included; catering for Flora's hormonal urges.

"Sweetheart," Alistair said, turning away from the freshly laid table and seeing Flora red-faced and contorted trying to remove her boots. "Let me help you."

Striding over to the bed, he sat beside Flora amidst the furs; pulling her legs up into his lap and reaching for her boots.

"Ouch, ouch-"

"I know, I know, baby. Sorry."

Once the offending boots were on the floor, Flora eyed her aching and swollen feet, belligerently.

"I don't understand why something growing in the stomach would make my feet hurt," she said in perplexion, letting her fingers drift idly over Alistair's head as he bent to rub her sore toes. "How is it connected?"

I could have found out, when I still had my magic, Flora thought ruefully to herself; Alistair's strong fingers working away the tension from her feet just as they had done for her sore knee. I could see the body in my mind, easy as opening up a book. Easier, actually – I didn't need to learn how to
read the crevices and fissures of flesh and bone; I just knew them.

Why didn't I spend more time working out how it all fit together? How one part connected to another? I wasted so much of my gift, and now it's gone.

"Darling. Is that better?"

Alistair's voice punctuated Flora's reverie and she shook off her melancholy, smiling down at his handsome face as he gazed hopefully up at her.

"Much better. Thank you."

She reached out to put her arms about his neck, planting a grateful kiss on his cheek.

They ate together on the rug before the hearth; Flora ignoring the meat and gobbling down all the vegetables, Alistair readily consuming the chicken and beef cuts that she spurned.

Mouths full, they tried to recall the order of the coronation ritual that they would soon be enacting before the leading figures of Thedas.

"I pass you the sce- scorp- fancy stick," Flora said without any degree of certainty, handing him a fork intended to emulate a sceptre. "And then you do… something with it. Twirl it?"

Alistair looked down at the fork, his brow creasing in an effort to remember.

"Is that before or after I raise the sword?"

Flora took his meat-knife, giving it an experimental thrust upwards.

"I'd rather have the sword. I have to carry a bird. Why do I need to carry a bird? What if I drop the cage?"

For a moment, the two former Wardens gazed at one another in mutual bemusement before the fire. Finally, Alistair laughed and put down the fork, reaching out to stroke her cheek with the calloused ball of his thumb.

"It doesn't matter, darling. The most important bit of the whole thing is getting married to you. Everything else comes second to that."

Alistair lifted Flora's fingers to his mouth, as though he were not king but a grown stable boy declaring his love to the local fisherman's daughter. Still clutching her hand, he leaned forward and let his lips brush against her ear.

"You're the light of my life," he murmured, delighted at the blush rising to her cheeks. "You know that, sweet girl?"

Flora dropped her eyes to her lap, suddenly made shy. Instead of replying, she brought their intertwined hands to her breast, letting him feel the steady rhythm of her heart.

"This beats only for you," she whispered, feeling tears pricking on her eyelashes that were not entirely caused by hormonal fluctuation. "Always for you."

Alistair gazed back at her, dampness gleaming within his own hazel irises; the green flecks illuminated by the light of the hearth.

"You two are so precious, it's making my teeth rot," commented a dry, familiar voice from behind
them.

Finian – whose entrance had been announced by the steward but gone unnoticed – was hovering beside the table, picking at the leftovers. He grinned down at them, tossing an olive into his mouth before crooking an imperious finger.

"Floss, your birthday present is here. It's in our chamber."

Chapter End Notes

OOC Author Note: You know Flora isn't going to be dressed in some traditional silk bridal outfit and veil on her wedding day, haha! Everything about the coronation-wedding is symbolic and propagandised to some extent; even what she's going to wear. And some of Thedas' most famous denizens – Andraste, Calenhad, Flemeth, are Alamarri. Since Alistair is a bastard and Flora a former mage (deeply unconventional for a king and queen), I thought it made sense to publically emphasise their historic ancestry at the coronation - through their outfits.

I've always emphasised the Alamarri heritage thing way more than it comes up in game, because I find it so fascinating – I'm pretty certain it's based on Celtic culture. Calenhad is wearing a literal tartan kilt in his DA wikia page, the image of the Alamarri shows them painted in woad (Celtic face and body paint) and lots of the named Alamarri have Celtic-origin names – like Brona. Anyway, as a Welsh girl, I'm definitely into it, hehehe.
Bemused, Flora and Alistair both followed Finian the short distance down the passageway to the Cousland quarters. Retainers clad in the family livery hastened to open the doors; heads inclined in polite acknowledgement of king and future queen.

With a triumphant flourish, Finian led the way inside the quarters once used extensively by Bryce Cousland. The hearth had been piled high with the same perfumed cedar wood as the Royal bedchamber, but these flames illuminated stark differences in décor. The laurel of Highever was painted painstakingly on the plastered walls; fabric accents of navy and olive permeated throughout. A framed family tree, carefully inked on parchment, hung above the hearth itself.

Fergus was sitting at the table, a polite and slightly bemused expression writ across his auburn-bearded face. Opposite him was a rotund, middle-aged man with florid and weather-beaten features. He was wearing a rather odd combination of clothing: a grubby linen shirt, a striped mustard and tan tunic, and a bright orange fishing hat. The entire ensemble was much patched and clearly well-travelled in.

Alistair thought at first that it might be some familiar face from Herring, but this theory was quickly dashed when his lover appeared equally clueless as to the man's identity.

On seeing them, the man rose awkwardly to his feet; not used to being in such esteemed company.

"Floss," announced Finian from behind her shoulder, pride suffusing the words as they emerged. "I'm very pleased to introduce Wulfric Letholdus, formerly of Honnleath, currently of Dragon's Peak."

Alistair blinked - the name meant nothing to him. At his side Flora's jaw dropped, her eyes widening in disbelief. Finian had spent a half-candle deciphering this name with her at South Reach, his finger patiently tracing out the letters scored into the book's leather binding.

"You wrote Exotic Fish of Thedas," she breathed, awestruck.

"Aye, milady."

"My favourite book in the world. You fished up all those amazing fish."

The man nodded, eyeing her warily.

"Aye, that I did, ma'am. Every one, by my own net and pole."

"Oh," she continued, utterly enraptured. "That's amazing. I'm so jealous."

Wulfric let out a little grunt, shifting in his seat and shooting a surreptitious glance at the Cousland heraldry painted on the walls.

"How did you manage to catch the Rivaini Night Eel?" Flora whispered, with eyes like saucers. "It only comes out of the nest twice a year."

"All a matter of usin' a big-enough hook," replied the fisherman, with the dourness typical of his
profession. "And waitin' for a sou'westerly current."

Fascinated, Flora drifted forwards as though in a waking dream; taking a seat at the table and staring at the man as though he were the Blessed Andraste Herself returned to the mortal world.

"But what kind of bait did you use?"

Within moments, fisherman and future queen were immersed deep in a conversation that seemed utterly nonsensical to the others present in the chamber. Alistair had no idea what his best friend was babbling excitedly about – it was an incompressible tangle of fishing linguistics, interspersed with peculiar breed names he just about recognised from reading through Exotic Fish with her. Still, he was delighted to see his lover looking so animated, simultaneously grateful to Finian for organising such a deeply meaningful gift.

Fergus apparently had similar thoughts, the teyrn draping an arm about his younger brother's shoulders as he came to stand alongside them.

"How in Andraste's flaming smalls did you manage to track him down, Finn?"

Finian grinned, at once both proud and smug.

"He was a bugger to find," the new arl of Amaranthine admitted, cheerfully. "Had to use all my Orlesian contacts. I owe quite a few people favours now. But, it's worth it. Look at her sweet little face!"

Flora was leaning forwards, utterly enthralled, her chin resting in her hands and her pale eyes bright with fascination.

For the next two hours, fisherman and daughter of Herring were consumed by frenzied conversation. Unable to contribute, king and Cousland brothers ended up playing several quiet rounds of Wicked Grace in the corner of the chamber; Finian winning three times and the others a round apiece.

Finally, Wulfric Letholdus ended up rather awkwardly presenting Flora with a sheaf of parchment bound together with twine; coughing and raising his eyes to the ceiling. She used her finger to trace the words etched into the leather, reading them painstakingly out loud.

"'Even… More… Ex- Exotic Fish of Thedas.' Oh! Oooooh!"

"It's the sequel," muttered Wulfric, with the awkward demeanour of a man who spent more time alone in the wilds with a fishing rod than he did in the company of others. "Only a first draft, mind."

Flora clutched the book to her chest; so overwhelmed that she felt a choked sob surging up from her belly. Not bothering to restrain herself – after all, she was not in public – she let the tears of gratitude roll freely down her cheeks.

Wulfric, even less used to dealing with tears than he was women in general, shot a frantic glance towards the others. Alistair, whose head had shot around at the first sniffle, immediately rose to his feet; the cards falling from his lap to the flagstones.

"Three Serpents and a Rose," observed Finian quietly, smug in the knowledge that he would have won this round too.

Alistair came to stand behind Flora's chair, one hand settling gently on top of her head. Flora wiped roughly at her eyes, clutching the book to her chest as though it were a precious baby.
"I owe you more than I can say," she whispered tremulously, forcing some evenness into her reply. "Exotic Fish of Thedas gave me so much happiness during the Blight. I can't thank you enough."

"Well, we all owe you our lives," muttered Wulfric, the words accompanied by a little grunt. "Dragon-slayer."

Once Wulfric had taken his leave, Finian shot a self-satisfied grin across the room towards his little sister, who was still sitting – slightly dazed - at the table.

"Told you my gift was worth waiting for, Flossie," he declared, with equal parts smugness and pride.

Flora placed the Exotic Fish sequel atop the gleaming beech surface; propelling herself and her belly upright with a spread palm. Crossing the room in a handful of strides, she embraced her brother with a ferocity that knocked the air from his lungs. Finian laughed as he held her against him, hand patting her shoulder blades through the lambs' wool tunic.

"I take it you liked your present then, sweet pea?"

"I loved it!"

"Does it make up for me chasing you around Redcliffe Castle with some Templars when we first met?"

"YES!"

A short while later - much to Alistair and Flora's dismay - they were forced to part. Old Fereldan tradition dictated that the bride be kept in a separate room from her future husband on the night preceding the wedding. Eamon had sent Leliana as enforcer; knowing that both Alistair and Flora would do as the sweetly smiling, steely-eyed bard requested.

With Flora's nightgown over her arm, the lay sister manifested in the corridor outside the Cousland quarters, intercepting both former Wardens as they left. Alistair's face had been almost comical in its disappointment as he learnt that he was to be separated from his best friend until midday the next day – indeed, the next time he would set eyes on her would be in the Grand Chantry itself.

Flora, equally glum at the prospect of their parting, reached out her arms towards him; Mairyn's Star glinting in the torchlight.

"I'll have the horses ready at eleven bells tomorrow morning," Fergus murmured to Leliana, as the lay sister gave a small nod of confirmation. "The streets will be cordoned off to carts and wagons, and guards will line the route, but I suspect it'll still take longer than normal to reach the Square."

"In Orlais, it's fashionable for a bride to be late to her own wedding," Leliana replied, with a little snort reminiscent of Val Royeaux. "Oh, for the love of Andraste, you two are being parted for a single night, not a year! Florence, do try and leave Alistair some face left, won't you?"

A flushed Flora detached herself with extreme reluctance. Alistair appeared half tempted to take his mistress by the hand and lead her back into their own bedchamber, though he was rapidly dissuaded by a deadly glare from Leliana.

"I'll see you tomorrow, baby," the king called after Flora as she was steered down the corridor by the determined bard. "I'll be the one standing at the front of the Chantry in a gold hat."
Leliana, with the acumen of one who knew the layout of the palace intimately, led the way from the Royal quarters and into the eastern wing of the castle. They traversed branching corridors and passageways that Flora had not even seen before, passing over balconies overlooking mouldering hallways and barely-used reception chambers. Flora was so fascinated by this venture into the decaying depths of the palace that she abandoned her sulk at being parted from Alistair. The bard seemed to be leading her into a far older section of the castle – one in dire need of repairs. The stone walls were crumbling, the flagstones cracked and the tapestries on the wall visibly threadbare. Even the candelabras were cloaked in cobwebs, remnants of candles frozen in waxy drips. The corridor was lit sporadically, one torch lit for every three iron brackets.

"I've never been here before," Flora breathed, almost colliding with Leliana as the bard halted outside a wooden door inscribed with a wolf's snarling maw. "It smells like Herring."

"Damp and mouldering? I agree," murmured Leliana, giving the door an experimental nudge.

In contrast to the dilapidated surroundings, the door swung open easily; as though its hinges had been freshly oiled. Indeed, the small bedchamber that lay within appeared to have been recently renovated – a fresh coat of plaster had been applied to the walls, clean furs spread over the bed and sweet-smelling rushes strewn across the flagstones. A fire had been set in the hearth, crackling contentedly away behind the iron grate.

The neat little bedchamber was in such disparity to the mildewed corridor that Flora stared at it, and then twisted her head to peer up and down the dilapidated passageway.

"In, in," chided Leliana, ushering Flora inside and promptly closing the door. "You're going to let all the heat out."

Flora wandered across the room, her attention caught by the faded tapestry on the wall. It depicted several playful Mabari at play; one gnawing at a bone, the other chasing its tail, and the third barking up at its master. It was faded and frayed, clearly a great number of decades old.

"Whose room was this?" she breathed, touching a finger to the moth-eaten fabric and sneezing at the dust that rose in its wake.

"This was the childhood room of Moira Theirin," Leliana replied softly, heading to the window and pushing back the shutters. A sloping tiled roof ran alongside the wall; running a length of several metres before ending in a sharp drop to the courtyard below. Just beneath the window was a low balcony, barely large enough for two people to stand abreast.

"Moira Theirin?" Flora repeated, trying to recall Alistair's ancestry.

"The Rebel Queen of Ferelden, Florence. Do you remember nothing of my history lessons? Although," Leliana relented, seeing Flora yawn. "She wasn't yet the Rebel Queen when she lived here. She was a little girl, whose father was desperately clinging to his throne. The Orlesians had already captured the south-west-"

"Boo! Hiss!"

"Indeed, ma petite. The Orlesians had taken Redcliffe, and were rapidly encroaching on the Bannorn. King Brandel could not rally the Fereldan people, and so eventually he lost Denerim too. It was his daughter who united the people behind her and took up the rebel cause; in defiance of what seemed an insurmountable force."

Flora blinked, dropping an absentminded hand to her stomach as she felt the baby give an irritable
"I have a feeling I'm staying in this room tonight for a reason," she said carefully at last, and Leliana gave a small, patient nod of confirmation.

"Oui, ma crevette. It sends out a message to Ferelden, much like the entirety of tomorrow. You understand, yes?"

Flora nodded; she did understand.

All of Thedas' leaders will be at the coronation tomorrow; either in person or in proxy. They're not just there as guests, they're there to assess Ferelden's post-Blight strength.

Alistair and I, we both have to appear strong. Like leaders that can rally a nation behind us. If we look strong, Ferelden looks strong.

Leliana smiled, drawing the shutters closed and turning back into the room.

"Anyway! As isolated as this chamber may seem, I assure you that there are servants and stewards lingering nearby if you have any requests. However, I must suggest an early night - it's going to be a very exhausting day tomorrow."

Leliana's 'suggestions' were actually none-too-subtly disguised instructions. Minutes later, Flora was sitting on the bed in her nightgown, eyes watering as the bard wielded a merciless hairbrush.

"The dressmaker will arrive at eight bells tomorrow. We'll need to be up at dawn to wash and dry this great unruly mass of hair," Leliana murmured, finally satisfied that she had worked out all the tangles. "It'll take three hours to get you ready."

"Three hours?!" bleated Flora, who customarily took three minutes to get ready. "Hours?"

"Ssh! Oui. We'll depart at eleven bells. Does that suit you?"

Flora let out a little grunt of assent, winding several thick ropes of hair into a plump braid over her shoulder.

"Eleven hours," she repeated, fastening the end of the woven hair with a leather tie and lying back against the furs. "Alright."

Leliana leaned across to blow out the candle, settling back into the mass of overstuffed cushions. For several moments, both redheads were silent, thinking on the events of the next day. An owl called from somewhere beyond the closed shutters, the cry echoed by its mate moments later. The bard's sharp ears detected the sound of guardsmen's boots against the flagstones; a pair of soldiers stationing themselves at either side of the door. Clearly, Alistair was willing to take no chances with his mistress' safety on this final night they were to spend apart.

Flora felt the baby shift inside her belly and placed a warning hand over the fleshy curve, inwardly instructing the little creature not to get too acrobatic just as she was settling down.

Go back to sleep, Flora thought to herself, sternly. We both have a long day tomorrow.

"Bonne nuit, ma crevette." Leliana's voice drifted from the shadows; the outline of her face just visible against the cushions.

"Night, Leliana," Flora replied, reaching out to pat the bard gently on her freshly moisturised cheek.
"Don't let the weever fish bite."

Flora awoke several hours later to the sound of a faint tapping. Confused – and also a little terrified that it might be the headless ghost of the Rebel Queen come back to revisit her old bedroom - Flora opened an eye and squinted through the gloom.

The hearth burned low in the grate, casting a muted ochre glow across the small bedchamber. Leliana was sound asleep beside her, a pink silk Orlesian mask covering the upper half of her face. The chamber itself seemed deserted, and then the faint tapping came again and Flora jumped a little amidst the blankets.

A moment later, she realised that the sound was coming through the closed shutters; faint and insistent.

"Flo!"

Flora put down her impromptu weapon - *Even More Exotic Fish Of Thedas* - and pushed back the furs, swinging herself and her belly out of bed. Creeping barefoot across the flagstones, she reached up to unfasten the shutters, pulling them inwards to reveal a triumphant Alistair perched on the balcony below. He was still fully dressed and grinning triumphantly; untidy hair silvered by an indulgent, low-hanging moon.

"Finally!"

Chapter End Notes

OOC Author Note: Haha it was funny to write Flo proper fangirling over the author of Exotic Fish of Thedas, lol. Poor old Alistair, doomed to read about fish with his wife for all eternity!

I'm just making up Fereldan traditions left right and centre here – like the future queen spending the night in the childhood bedchamber of the Rebel Queen. But it seems like it makes sense to me, lol, so hopefully no one will be too offended at my headcanon.
A Restless Night

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Flora blinked down at Alistair as he balanced precariously on the ledge below, utterly astonished. Somewhere in the night-shrouded courtyard, the bell rang for the tenth hour; the sound echoing between the crumbling stone walls.

"You're turning into Zevran," she breathed after a moment, leaning out of the window to stare down at him. "What are you doing?"

"I wanted to come and see my beautiful bride," Alistair replied, taking hold of the balcony edge and using strong thighs to propel himself upwards. "Guillaume told me where you were staying. I've never been in this bit of the palace before!"

"Be careful," Flora said in alarm, aware that her long-limbed, broad-shouldered companion was not the most graceful being in Thedas. "Don't slip."

"I'm not going to slip – oh, shit – well, I'm probably not going to slip."

Now successfully perched on the balcony, Alistair grinned winningly up at her; the torch-lit exterior of the Royal Palace serving as a suitably dramatic backdrop.

"My love! No tradition can stop me from seeing you. If they catch us, I'll just plead ignorance due to my upbringing in Arl Eamon's stables."

"I thought you were the ghost of the Rebel Queen," Flora replied, leaning further out of the window as he reached up; one large, sword-calloused hand cupping the side of her cheek. "I was about to hit you with Even More Fish."

"Ah, Granny Moira," the king murmured distractedly, his thumb now tracing the planes and angles of her solemn face. "Sorry if I scared you, baby. I just wanted to come and get my goodnight kiss. Or… I won't sleep well, and then I'll forget when to raise the sword during the coronation ceremony tomorrow, and Leliana might actually kill me."

Flora smiled down at him, strands of hair pulling loose from her braid and falling down beside her ears. Alistair gazed back up at her, the green flecks in his hazel irises standing out stark in the moonlight.

"By the Maker, you're so beautiful," he said unsteadily a moment later, shaking his head slowly. "You take my breath away, darling."

Immediately afterwards, his eyes widened in alarm as Flora hoisted the nightgown up around her thighs and swung her leg over the windowsill; his arms shooting upwards to steady her as she clambered out onto the balcony. This accomplished, she beamed in triumph, hair askew and nightgown half slipping from her shoulder.

"Ha! Haha."

A slightly traumatised Alistair drew her into his arms, making sure that she was safely positioned on the interior of the balcony. The beam slid away as Flora turned her face up to him; the metallic mote on her iris like a stray golden fleck from a painter's brush.
After a moment, the king's stare dropped from Flora's eyes to her full Cousland mouth, fascinated by the natural sulkiness found in its solemn curve. Wanting suddenly to see those lips part and shape his name, he bowed his head and pressed his mouth against hers. While his tongue worked busily alongside her own, one hand was already reaching to draw her nightgown up around her hips. Alistair's mouth made its way lower to caress her throat, lips suckling a series of gentle kisses into the creamy skin. Flora's thighs wrapped readily around his waist as he braced her against the wall, his own breeches partway down his thighs and buttocks exposed. She pressed her face into his shoulder, wide-eyed, not quite able to muffle her little noises of pleasure.

The moon gazed benevolently down from above; a pallid wash of nocturnal light illuminating both lofty balcony and the figures moving together upon it. As the king's thumb worked in conjunction with slow rolls of his pelvis, he felt his lover tense, a half-strangled plea escaping her lips.

"Say my name, baby," he instructed thickly with the Theirin dominance of his father, increasing the speed of his thumb.

Sure enough, moments later his name escaped Flora's throat in a desperate half-moan, her thighs clamping vice-like around his waist. Alistair held her through the shuddering climax, pressing tender kisses to her bared breasts.

As soon as the post-coital haze cleared from her mind, Flora blinked up at him in slight perplexion.

"You.. you didn't…?"

"No, sweetheart."

She looked about the cramped balcony, wondering if there was space for her to sink to her knees. Reading her intentions clear on her face, Alistair almost gave into temptation. One hand hovered above Flora's shoulder, then drew back; the king forcing himself to resist.

"I'm going to save myself for the wedding night," he said, and then stifled a laugh, realising that he sounded like some blushing maid. "Maker knows I'll need all the help I can get, in the company of a wizened old crone from the Chantry and some fellow from the Landsmeet whom I'll never be able to look in the eye again."

Flora was unable to stop herself from cackling as he lowered her gently to the tiles. Alistair shot his best friend a faintly malevolent look, and then broke into a rueful laugh.

"I suppose we'll look back at this in years to come and laugh," he murmured, bowing to press a kiss against her forehead. "I'd better leave you to get your rest now, darling. It's going to be a long one tomorrow."

Alistair kissed her on the end of the nose and then once more on the mouth, fingers reluctant to release the folds of her nightgown. Only when Flora appeared ready to clamber back through the window unaided did he stop his affections; lifting her gently up onto the sill in strong arms.

"There we go," he murmured, manoeuvring each of Flora's feet back over the stone ledge. "Back to bed, and the bard will be none the wiser. See you at the altar, baby."

With a final kiss on the lips, the king was navigating his way across the rooftop, one hand on the wall to steady himself. His mistress, her face wistful, watched Alistair's progress until he disappeared into the shadows; presumably ducking inside another opened window.

Flora drew the shutters quietly behind her, and then turned back into the shadowed chamber that had once belonged to Ferelden's most revered queen. Leliana was still motionless in bed, facing the door
with the blankets pulled up to her chin.

Creeping across the tiles, Flora slid back into bed alongside her; letting out a little grunt as the baby swung a foot into her belly.

*Don't you start,* she thought sternly to her abdomen, tugging her nightgown back down over her knees. The next moment, she almost fell out of bed in terror as Leliana rolled over; raising her eye-mask to unleash a glower of epic proportion.

"Ma petite, the purpose of you sleeping in this chamber was to keep Alistair from seeing his bride until you come face to face in the Grand Chantry tomorrow. A purpose defeated if you allow him to illicitly grope you on balconies. You wanton little minx!"

"Yes… grope… that's all," said Flora hastily, worried that Leliana might have a minor heart attack if she discovered the full truth. "Sorry. It's the Herring girl in me. Shameless."

The bard let out a typically Orlesian sigh, plumping up the cushions before sinking back into them and replacing the eye mask. Flora eyed Leliana for a moment, then leaned over on her elbow and kissed her on the cheek.

"Lovely Leliana," she whispered, wistfully. "You're so clever. I wish we could keep you here forever with us. But I know you're going to be in demand all over Thedas."

"Ah, ma crevette!" The bard let out a soft laugh, her voice distant. "You are too kind. Do you really think that the Maker has some plan in store for me?"

"Definitely," Flora replied, immediately and without a shred of doubt. "There's lots of great things coming up in your future."

"Do you really believe so, ma petite?"

"Yes, of course!"

Leliana smiled at the young Cousland through the shadows, their faces resting a short distance apart on the embroidered cushions.

"I hope you're right, fleur. I am not yet ready to retire from His service."

A murmured prayer later and the bard was soon fast asleep, the eye mask firmly back over the upper half of her face. Flora rolled over, unable to get comfortable; the baby was digging itself into the base of her spine. Wishing that Alistair was there – his muscled chest was more comfortable to sprawl against than any mattress – she spent the next half-candle gazing gormlessly into the flickering hearth. A pair of servants entered a short time later, creeping across the flagstones with the breath suspended in their throats in an effort to be silent. They restocked the fire with new logs, sneaking out with equal care.

As the first layer of these fresh logs burned away, sleep continued to elude Flora. She turned impatiently from one side to another, until the furs tangled between her legs and she shoved them to the foot of the bed.

Finally, Flora clambered to her feet and went to the dresser, in the off-chance it would have some meagre contents. Sure enough, it contained a thick woollen dressing robe in an alarming shade of mustard. Pushing her arms through the sleeves, Flora shuffled across the flagstones and nudged the door open, inhaling the scent of mildew from the corridor. Immediately, the two guards posted at the entrance shifted their pikes from hand to hand to acknowledge her presence.
"Lady Florence," offered a Highever retainer, his loyalty recognisable from the navy livery he wore. "Is all well?"

"I'm fine," she replied, edging her way between them with a hand on her stomach. "I need to wait for baby to sleep before I can sleep."

Without any clear idea where she was going, Flora wandered barefoot down the corridor. Although Leliana had complained vociferously about the dampness, Flora had found it oddly comforting – almost reminiscent of Herring. The cold flagstones beneath her feet reminded her of the craggy rock protrusion that her home village was built upon. In the deceptive darkness, with the occasional call of a seagull drifting in through the arrow-slit windows; she could nearly imagine herself back home.

Except the air is too still for it to be the north coast, she thought idly to herself, continuing to wander without purpose. The air is placid and peaceful here, it drifts about aimlessly. On the north coast, it rages – whips itself into a frenzy and harasses the waves, pulls loose fishing nets and blows banks of sand up against the buildings.

By now Flora had emerged into a part of the palace that she recognised – the lofty minstrel's gallery that overlooked the great hall. Everything had been set up in preparation for tomorrow's wedding feast – empty plates laid with tankards nearby, unlit candelabras set at regular intervals. The tables were decorated with elaborate strands of woven laurel and crimson ribbons; a stage for additional musicians had been set up at one end of the hall. At the far table – which was raised on a low stone platform – two large wooden thrones stood side by side. They were decorated with laurel and ivy, crimson skeins of ribbon wound about their ornately carved arms.

After gazing down at the empty chairs in slight awe – there must have been at least three hundred placed there in preparation – Flora left the minstrel's gallery. She traversed a long passage lined with sculptures of figures from Andrastrian legend. Andraste stood at their head, her granite eyes staring sightless and accusatory across at Maferath, enclosed in an opposite alcove. Flora felt a little sorry for the prophetess, forced to gaze at her treacherous husband for all eternity.

The corridor branched into a torch-lit passageway that ran from east to west. Flora glanced from one side to the other; her eyes settling on a pair of guards clad in forest green livery stationed outside a nearby doorway. As she approached, the familiar portcullis emblem of South Reach came into view. Leonas did not usually stay within the palace, and Flora assumed that he must have relocated due to the coronation.

"Evenin', Lady Cousland," offered one of the guards, whom she remembered from Leonas' seat. He had often been posted outside the Wardens' chamber – and had thus been one of the first to suspect that the young redhead Warden might be with child; having brought her water on more than one occasion after she had been sick.

"Hullo, Iain," replied Flora, summoning his name from the depths of her memory as she saw candlelight gleaming beneath the arl's door. "Is Arl Leonas still awake?"

The guard nodded, stepping forward to open the door as she advanced. The quarters lying beyond were plain and unremarkable, with cream-plastered walls and dark wooden beams running the length of the ceiling. A four poster bed stood in one corner, the blankets and furs untouched.

In the opposite corner, Leonas Bryland was sitting at a desk; pouring over a sheaf of papers by the light of several candles and the smouldering hearth. He was fully dressed, a quill clutched awkwardly in his maimed hand and a frown of concentration embedded across his forehead. A half-drunk bottle of ale rested at the corner of the desk, precariously close to the edge.
As Flora wandered in, the arl glanced up; one eyebrow rising at the lurid mustard wool of her dressing-gown.

"Something wrong?" he enquired with the usual rough brusqueness, making as though to stand.

"No, I'm fine," Flora replied vaguely, shuffling across to the desk and nudging the bottle away from the edge. "What are you doing?"

Leonas glanced down at the papers spread across the desk, each sheet covered with tightly-packed words and figures.

"Correspondence with the South Reach restoration committee," he replied, the corner of his mouth curling upwards wryly. "Doing some initial valuation. Everything costs twice as much as it did before the damned Blight."

Flora nodded, shifting from foot to foot. Leonas glanced at his old friend's daughter for a moment but did not raise any query; knowing that she would speak when ready.

"Can I help you?" she asked instead, eyeing the papers.

Leonas gave a small grunt of affirmation, handing her several sheets of parchment and an ink-pen.

"You can read figures well enough, eh?" he sought to confirm, fully aware of Flora's limited literacy. "Numbers?"

"Mm."

"Well, whenever you see any numbers – underline them."

Flora nodded, taking the papers and pen over to a nearby armchair. Tucking her feet beneath her, she rested the papers on top of her stomach and began to pour through them.

They continued in such manner without talking for a half-candle, Leonas scribing lines of text in his neat, efficient hand while Flora dutifully underlined every instance of sum and cost. The hearth hissed and spat gently in its stone confines; from somewhere outside the tower, a seagull issued a harsh summons to its mate.

Eventually, Leonas put down his quill and poured himself an ale from the precarious bottle. Without speaking, he retrieved a second tankard and poured a drink for Flora; knowing that she found the taste unpleasant, he added a large dollop of water from a nearby jug.

"Thank you," she mumbled, putting down the ink-pen and taking the tankard.

The general let out a grunt of acknowledgment. Flora took several large and unladylike gulps, then eyed the arl over the tankard's metal rim.

"Arl Leonas?"

"Lady Florence," he replied with equal solemnity, putting down his tankard and turning in the chair to face her.

"What do you think… my parents would have thought about all this? Me marrying Alistair?"

Ah, thought Leonas to himself, here's the reason.

"Well, Bryce always planned for you to marry into the Theirins," he replied measuredly, dark
Bryland eyes meeting hers without wavering. "So I'd imagine he'd be pleased, though he was never one for fuss and bother."

"He wasn't?" Flora perked up a little.

Leonas snorted, shaking his head. "He had simple tastes. He might've lived in a castle, lass, but he was still a northerner."

"By that measure, so is Finian," Flora countered, and the arl gave a snort of acknowledgement; aware of the Orlesian-educated Cousland's love of ornamentation.

"Aye, you're right."

"What about my mother?"

"I think she'd be happy that you were marrying for love, rather than for political gain," Leonas said, coughing to hide the uncharacteristic sentimentality of his words. "She chose freely to marry Bryce, and I don't think the betrothal of you and Cailen as children sat well with her."

Flora rolled her eyes, the concept of binding one infant to another for political purpose utterly foreign to her.

"I love Alistair more than anything," she said gravely, as Leonas tried not to laugh at this statement of the obvious. "I'm doing all this for him. This big, fancy… show. Me being queen will make him a stronger king, won't it?"

Leonas grunted once more in confirmation, eyeing Flora over the rim of his tankard. She was sitting cross-legged on the chair, stomach resting neatly within the cradle of her thighs, her face no less solemn in profile. The grubbiness of the bare feet, the ugly mustard dressing robe and the general dishevelment of her hair could not disguise the keen beauty of her classically Fereldan features.

"Aye," he replied, bluntly. "It'll strengthen his throne. Marrying a Cousland will win the north to his cause, and they've always been the most troublesome region- "

"Ha! Haha."

" – and you're the ender of the Fifth Blight, slayer of the Archdemon."

The arl smiled wryly, replacing the tankard on the tray.

"Young, bonny, and the first royal baby for two decades lies snug in your belly. You're a valuable asset, Florence."

Flora wrinkled her nose; she did not like this attempt to quantify her worth. Still, Leonas' words rang true enough, and she bit thoughtfully at the wooden end of the ink-pen.

There was silence for a moment, the fire hissing as it belched gouts of sparks up the chimney breast. Outside, quiet voices murmured to one another as the guard changed watch.

"Are you nervous about tomorrow?" Leonas asked eventually, screwing the lid back onto the pot of Antivan ink. "Half of Thedas is going to be in that Chantry."

Flora tilted her face towards him, pale eyes aloof and ambiguous as sea-water.

"No," she replied, honestly. "I'm not nervous."
There are places I've walked and things I've done that are far more intimidating.

Leonas let out a hoarse laugh, sliding the ink-pot across the wooden surface of the desk until it rested beside its counterparts.

"Well, you let me know if there's anything I can do to make tomorrow easier," he said after a moment, the humour sliding abruptly from his face. "I mean it, Florence. You tell me, and I'll deal with it."

"Thank you."

"Bryce would be outraged if he thought that his daughter was anything less than perfectly happy on her wedding day. Since he isn't here, I feel an obligation to... well."

Flora glanced sideways at the arl as he coughed, uncomfortable but genuine in his offer. Privately, she wasn't sure of the accuracy of his words – her father, far from being concerned for his daughter's wellbeing, had sent her away to a remote village and severed all association – but she appreciated Leonas' offer nonetheless.

"Thank you," she repeated solemnly, then smiled at him. "I'm very grateful for everything you've done. You've always looked out for me, ever since South Reach."

Leonas let out a little embarrassed grunt. Flora heaved herself to her feet, ducking down to kiss him on the cheek on her way to the door.

"See you in the morning, Arl Leonas."

"Goodnight, pet."

Chapter End Notes

OOC Author Note: OK I thought it was about time for the sequel to have an interestingly-located smut scene, since the Lion and the Light saw them getting down in stables, up trees, on demonic altars in abandoned mage towers... So I thought I would include a brief acrobatic balcony shag before the wedding. Acrobatic shag – ACROSHAG – I'll show myself out, lol. Actually, Acroshag would be an amazing chapter title!

Ten points for anyone who can work out the reference in the second part of this chapter – Flora underlining stuff on important documents for Arl Leonas, her noble father-figure. It's a nod to one of my favourite classics 90s films, starring Alicia Silverstone (literally no one will get this. And it's not Batman ahaahaha)
The morning of the great wedding-coronation dawnd bright and cloudless, the sun rising with a benevolent beam over the Amaranthine Ocean. It was accompanied by an easterly breeze that carried the scent of seawater throughout the labyrinthine thoroughfares of the city; overhead, the seagulls wheeled and cried as though detecting the latent excitement below.

Flora awoke to the sound of bells, their muffled, tinny resonance penetrating her dreamless slumber. She turned her head reflexively even as she woke, tangled in the blankets and furs.

Before Flora had even opened her eyes fully, a bright-voiced figure had descended to the bed; kissing her on both cheeks and exclaiming.

"Congratulations, ma cherie!"

Flora squinted, rather blearily, at the bard; rubbing at her eyes and yawning.

"Eeehhh- "

"It's your wedding day!"

"Hnggh."

Flora let out a distinctly Herring-inflected grunt, peering around at the unfamiliar chamber before recalling that they had stayed the night in the Rebel Queen's childhood chamber. Leliana, whose face was plastered with some unguent cream, was beaming excitedly – and a fraction maniacally - down at her.

Sensing that it's mother was awake, the baby gave a little experimental nudge. Flora patted her stomach absentmindedly, ears pricking at the increasing resonant clamour from outside.

"What's that noise?"

"The Chantry bells, ma petite. They ring from the towers of every chapel in the city. Just wait until the Grand Chantry joins- "

Even as the bard spoke, the nine hanging bells of Ferelden's largest Chantry chimed in. Even at a mile's distance, their sonorous metallic pealing echoed about the palace towers; demanding the attention of those within.

Awestruck, Flora wandered to the window and stood on her toes, craning her neck to peer down at the city below – this chamber did not have such a lofty view as did the Royal quarters. The joyous ringing of the bells seemed to rise above the slate rooftops, resonating above the city like a miasma of sound.

"It's not Sunday," she observed, brow furrowing. "Why are they all going off?"

"Because it's the coronation," replied Leliana, who had just finished issuing a series of instructions to a hovering servant. "And your wedding day. They're ringing for you and Alistair, ma petite."

Flora thought of her best friend and former brother-warden, waking up alone in a far grander
bedchamber. He too would be able to hear the insistent clamour of the bells – she wondered if he was feeling nervous.

_I don't think he's at all anxious about the coronation, actually. I think he's worried about tonight._

She leaned forward, resting her forehead against the cool, leaded glass. Oddly enough, Flora's own heart was racing – fluttering against her chest like the caged wren she would have to wield at the altar in mere hours. This was accompanied by a peculiar curdling in the base of her belly that felt wholly unlike the nausea caused by the baby.

_I can't have had a nightmare. I don't dream anymore. Why am I feeling like this?_

Flora took a deep, steadying gulp of cool air, watching the moisture from her own exhalations slowly cloud the glass before her face.

_Am I nervous?_

There came a soft throb of pain from her hand; when Flora glanced down at her palm, she noticed a semi-circle of pink indentations dug into the delicate skin. These must have been caused by the pressure of her own bitten nails, driven into her palm by curled, overly tense fingers.

_I must be nervous. I wish Alistair was here._

"Right!"

Leliana advanced across the chamber with the feverish efficiency of a commander issuing orders to his cornered troops.

"The bath is being brought up – hopefully it's not cold by the time it makes it to this Maker-forsaken corner of the palace – and we have two candles to get you washed and that rampant mass of hair dried. The dressmaker is arriving at nine bells. We need to be ready to leave an hour before midday. We must adhere to this schedule, Florence, or all is lost!"

Flora nodded, boggling at the meticulous timings. There came a knock at the door, and the bard's head flicked around quick as a whip.

"Ah, that'll be the bath!"

Instead, much to Flora's delight, Zevran and Wynne were waiting in the mildewed corridor. The senior enchanter was clad in a rich crimson robe edged with bronze thread, her hair wound into an elaborate braid around her head, whereas the elf had managed to find a set of dark, high-necked leathers that almost appeared formal - at a distance. Flora beamed, ridiculously happy to see them both; the peculiar nerves in her belly subsiding.

In place of a greeting, the elf strode straight across the chamber. Without hesitation, he clasped Flora's face in-between his elegant, tan fingers and kissed her squarely on the mouth; hard and purposeful.

"There! Your last as an unmarried woman," he declared gleefully, stepping back as an astonished Flora blinked. "It is Antivan tradition that a bride be kissed by a man who is not her husband on the morning of her marriage."

"Oh! Really?" she replied, fascinated. "I've not heard of that."

"Antivan tradition, or lecherous elf tradition?" muttered Leliana, leaning out into the corridor in a
vain effort to spot the approaching bath. "I think the latter!"

Zevran let out a roguish cackle, darting a quick wink in Flora's direction. She smiled back at him, before turning to Wynne. To her surprise, the strait-laced senior mage appeared distinctly damp around the eyes, the corners of her lined mouth puckering.

"Wynne," Flora breathed, reaching out to clasp her companion's hand. "Wynne, I-"

"Don't start, Flora," retorted Wynne sternly, unable to disguise the distinct tremor in her voice. "I'll prove myself a foolish old woman by shedding an abundance of tears today; I do not wish to start prematurely."

Fortunately, the bathwater arrived before the senior enchanter could succumb further to her emotions. The bathtub was hauled into the centre of the chamber, water spilling over the flagstones as the great copper receptacle was lowered before the hearth. A gaggle of excitable maidservants scuttled about the room; one adding more logs to the fire, another bringing forth a selection of scented soaps on a silver tray. A third presented a delighted Flora with a small bowl filled with cubes of raw turnip and carrot – covered with a fine sprinkling of earth – while a fourth waited for any further instructions.

Leliana dismissed the maids with polite tenseness; neither requiring nor desiring assistance.

"Vêtements!" she commanded, keeping one ear out for the bell that marked the morning change of watch.

"Eh?" mumbled Flora - whom the command had been aimed at – through a mouth of raw turnip.

"Your clothing! Take it all off."

Flora obediently pulled loose the strings of her nightgown, shaking her shoulders to let the voluminous material pool around her feet. Leliana gestured her towards the bathtub, rummaging through the tray of scented perfumes with a clatter of glass.

"It is a large babe for only two-thirds grown," Wynne commented with a faint air of experience as she took a seat at the window; eyeing the swollen mound rising from Flora's belly. "Think it's a boy?"

"Possibly," agreed Leliana, placing several vials to one side. "Though according to the midwife, Florence herself was an overlarge babe. It could be a girl."

"Your body is as beautiful as I remember from the Temple of Sacred Ashes," Zevran commented kindly from the bed, in an effort to distract Flora from the horrors of birthing an overly large babe. "Even more so. My ripening little peach."

Flora smiled at him gratefully, taking Leliana's steadying hand as she clambered into the bathtub. The water was an inoffensive temperature – no servant was going to risk either freezing or scalding their future queen – and she let her head tip back to soak her hair. It floated up about her shoulders, like thick clumps of dark red seaweed.

The bells kept ringing in the distance, their anticipatory pealing echoing even up as high as the Rebel Queen's chamber. Leliana, aware of Flora's distaste for overly girlish scents, spurned the fanciful floral concoctions that she personally adored, using instead perfumed oils of rosemary and hazel.

"Your fingernails are filthy," Leliana murmured with gritted teeth, scrubbing them furiously against a horsehair brush. "What have you been doing, digging up handfuls of earth?"
YES, Flora thought defiantly to herself; unable to explain the strange urges that occasionally drove her to eat raw earth and gnaw on wooden spoons. Instead she smiled up at Leliana, peeling a wet rope of crimson away from her cheek.

"Thank you."

The bard blew her a kiss in response, working the oil methodically through to the end of each strand of hair. Flora settled back against the copper rim of the tub, eyeing the glistening milky orb of Mairyn's Star as it sat plump on her fourth finger.

"This ring would make excellent bait," she commented idly after a moment. "I bet some really interesting fish would be attracted to this if I attached it to the end of a line."

Wynne glanced across at Zevran, who gave a little helpless shrug; both hoping very much that Flora was joking.

After Flora was done soaking herself, she was given strict instructions to kneel before the hearth and direct her hair towards the heat of the flames, while Leliana took her place in the bathtub. Finian, who arrived clad in the full velvet-edged regalia of an arl, was promptly assigned the task of soaking up as much moisture as possible from the damp mass of tangled red.

"Don't you dare let that blanket fall, Floss," the young arl instructed sternly as he knelt on the flagstones, rubbing clumps of his sister's wet hair between two linen cloths.

Flora clutched the embroidered wool about her shoulders, letting the swell of her stomach rest on her thighs as she bowed her head. The baby gave a vigorous little nudge against one kidney, and she patted it gently through the skin.

"You're getting made not-a-bastard today," she informed it solemnly, knowing that it's ears were formed enough to hear. "So there's no need to kick me."

The scent of violets soon billowed throughout the room as Leliana liberally applied the perfumes that Flora had spurned. The bard hummed a soft melody under her breath; such was the beauty of her voice that the others paused in their conversations to listen.

A short while later, Leliana finished in the bathtub with a soapy flourish, water streaming in rivulets down her magnificently toned and athletic body as she stood.

"Hair?" she snapped imperiously towards Finian, who held up a half-dried strand of oxblood. "No, that's not yet dry enough. Keep going!"

"Maker's Breath," the young Cousland murmured under his breath as the bard strode, dripping, across the flagstones to retrieve her dressing robe. "Our Chantry sister is filled with urgency this morning."

"We have a strict schedule," offered Flora helpfully from somewhere beneath the mass of hair. "We have to stick to it, or 'all is lost'."

"How much will be lost, flower?" asked Finian innocently, shooting Zevran a sly glance.

"All!"

"Some?"

"No! All!"
As the morning watch changed, the excited rhythms of the Royal Palace increased in intensity, each occupant counting down the hours until the coronation began. Although the ceremony itself was taking place in the Grand Chantry, the attendants would be returning to the palace for feasting and festivities that would last nearly eight hours. It would be the most monumental occasion since the coronation of Cailan five years prior; and, especially in the wake of the Fifth Blight, everybody was looking forward to the celebrations. The coronation – and the wedding – were seen as yet another portent of hope for Ferelden's future; tangible as the lady Cousland's swollen belly.

Up in the Royal Chamber, Alistair paced back and forth across the length of the room in a frenzy of nervous excitement. Teagan, Eamon and Fergus attempted in turns to calm him down; while a grinning Oghren was determined to insert as many lewd wedding night puns as possible into every comment. A pair of smirking manservants had manoeuvred a wood-framed silken privacy screen into the room without comment; resting it discretely against the wall in preparation for later.

Alistair, who was clad in the traditional tan leather and pale fur garb of a Fereldan king, had his head bare in preparation for the ceremonial crown. He paused before the mirror, running a finger over the short, neatly trimmed facial hair over his jaw, before turning to face Teagan in mild agitation.

"How is she even getting to the Grand Chantry? She's not riding on horseback alone, is she?"

"I'll have her on my saddle," Fergus replied, in a tone caught halfway between reassurance and amusement. Like the other nobles of Ferelden, the young teyrn was clad in the formal livery of his family seat; the distinctive olive and navy colours of Highever reflected in the expensive cloth of his tunic.

"And with a proper escort? The people will all be on the streets – they've been given a holiday – I don't want them rushing towards your horse."

"Maker's Breath, Alistair!" Fergus retorted, a rueful smile curling the corner of his full Cousland mouth. "I'll not let a hair on my little sister's head be harmed."

Alistair grimaced, not entirely reassured. Reaching for a half-drunk and lukewarm tankard of ale, he swallowed it in three gulps before turning to Eamon. The Chancellor made a final few notes on a long skein of parchment before handing the letter off to a scribe.

"Once you're both inside the Chantry, the guards will allow the crowds into the Square; where they'll wait for your first public appearance as man and wife."

Eamon's eyebrows shot into his greying hairline as Alistair gave a slightly damp sniff in response, his hazel eyes gleaming with emotional anticipation.

"Come on, lad," the arl said, not unkindly. "Keep it together."

"I wish I could see Flo now," said Alistair in defiant response, turning his head longingly towards the tower where the Rebel Queen's childhood bedchamber lay. "I can't wait until midday. I might go and say good morning. See if the baby let her get any sleep."

"Best of luck getting past the lay-sister Leliana," Teagan murmured from where he was leaning against the window. "You know how much of a devotee she is to tradition. I believe the senior enchanter Wynne is also present in Flora's bedchamber."

A small muscle at the corner of Alistair's eye twitched, and he visibly deflated.
"Well, I'm not getting past those two," he admitted, resigned. "They're more effective than guard-Mabari. Speaking of Mabari, Ferg, how far in pup is Saela?"

"She'll be birthing them before your progress, by my estimates," replied Fergus, more than happy to distract Alistair from his own eager anticipation. "I'll train the strongest pair in the litter myself; I've got a knack for it. I... I trained Jethro."

The teyrn was silent for a moment, recalling the brave hound that had fallen in defence of Finian during the final battle.

"Thank you," replied Alistair, earnestly. "I can't wait to get more dogs around here. This place is far too clean; it wants for a nice layer of animal hair over everything."

Meanwhile, up in Moira Theirin's childhood bedchamber, Flora's hair was finally dry; due to a combination of the hearth's radiating warmth, Finian's efforts with a linen cloth – and, finally, some tactful application of Wynne's staff.

During the delay, Leliana had changed into her own outfit – the cream and maroon garb of a lay sister, the heavy weave of the material clinging to her athletic form like poured milk. Despite this necessary adherence to uniform, Leliana had managed to add her own Orlesian touches to the outfit. Beneath the long skirt, she wore a pair of rose-pink, raw silk slippers, and perfume was applied liberally to both wrists and behind her ears.

"How do I look, Wynne?" the bard asked with a coy smile, gazing at her own reflection in the warped surface of the mirror. "Acceptable, I hope."

"You look lovely, my dear," replied the senior enchanter, giving a soft laugh. "The perfect picture of devotion."

Flora was perched on the edge of the bed, a dressing robe clutched loosely around her bare shoulders. She had eaten her way methodically through the bowl of raw turnips, trying not to let the nervous squirming in the base of her stomach alarm her.

I'm not scared. Why would I be scared? I've been Warden-Commander, I've spoken in front of ten thousand troops.

Zevran was watching her carefully, the elf's keenly-honed perception sensing that something was perhaps not quite right. He was almost as skilled as Alistair at picking up on the fine nuances of Flora's expressions; at seeing through the customary solemnity to the latent emotion below. He was just about to lean towards her and whisper a soft query into her ear, when there came a quick rap at the door.

"The dress!" breathed Leliana, checking quickly to see that Flora was decent before scurrying across to the entrance. "Perfectly on time, just as instructed."

The dressmaker entered, with the shadowed eyes and limp hair of one who had been up all night. Leliana immediately swooped forwards to intercept the muslin-wrapped length of material, murmuring effusive thanks. The dressmaker handed over a small leather pouch, and Leliana returned the gesture with a similarly-sized silk purse. When the woman made to refuse – garbing the Hero of Ferelden on her wedding day would bring in business enough – the bard murmured an insistence, pressing the pouch into her hand.

While Finian and Leliana made to unwrap the dress itself, Flora peered out of the window down to the courtyard below. Servants were crowding over the cobblestones in a near constant stream;
carrying tables, wine-barrels, standing candelabra, and other items associated with great social gatherings. The baby gave a little nudge inside her stomach and Flora rubbed the heel of her hand absentmindedly over the high, swollen mound.

"Florence, ma petite," came Leliana's voice from across the room. "Are you ready?"

Flora nodded, letting the dressing robe drop from around her shoulders. She padded across the flagstones clad only in her smalls; much to Finian's dismay as he clapped his hand over his face a fraction too late.

"I'm now blind in my only remaining eye, Floss, thanks a lot!"

Flora let out a little grunt of apology, confusion mounting. She could recall Leliana describing Anora Mac Tir's wedding gown – the bard had not been present, but had come to hear of it through other channels. Anora's gown had been made from sky-blue silk velvet imported from Orlais, each yard of fabric costing hundreds of gold. The queen had worn a gossamer veil which sat, cloud-like, atop a tightly braided intricacy of golden hair.

"But this doesn't even look like a dress," she observed, brow furrowing as she gazed at the swatches of leather on the bed. "Where's the head-hole?"

"It's not a traditional wedding gown," Leliana confirmed, positioning Flora on the flagstones and lifting one of the swatches of leather. "That's the point. Zevran? She'll need to be sewn in right from the beginning."

The elf rose to his feet, duly producing a stiff, leather-working needle and a skein of thread. He went to assist the bard, dragging over the stool from the hearth to perch himself on as he bent to Flora's waist. Flashing a quick wink up at the astonished bride, he began to pin the leather around her hips.

Finian, who had been present in the relevant discussion between Fergus, Eamon and Leliana, took pity on his younger sister and went to explain; his gaze still firmly directed at the ceiling.

"Floss, your greatest asset as queen will be that you're not traditional. You're the Hero of Ferelden; a girl with the power to summon and lead armies; a dragon slayer."

"It was a demon in the form of a dragon, not an actual dragon," Flora corrected with Herring pedantry, lifting her arms obediently as Leliana fastened a swathe of buttery-soft leather around her waist.

Finian rolled his eye at his sister's exactness, leaning back against the bed cushions.

"It doesn't matter. Flossie, do you know how many eyes across Thedas have been studying the map over the past year? Knowing that Ferelden is vulnerable? Wondering how far they could possibly encroach upon our borders while we've been dealing with Darkspawn in the east?"

Flora blinked, feeling Zevran's deft fingers brush against her hip as he worked the needle skilfully through the leather.

"Now, it helps that there's a popular Theirin on the throne once again," Finian continued, as his sister rotated according to Leliana's quiet instructions. "Alistair has the look of Maric, and has proven himself in battle. But there's a message that needs to start spreading across Thedas from now – that Ferelden's new rulers are undoubtedly unconventional, but they're as strong as silverite and twice as unyielding."

"Oui," mumbled Leliana, her mouth full of pins. "And that Alistair's queen is one who can summon
and lead armies. Who has slain Archdemons and ended Blights."

"Just the one Blight. What's that got to do with my outfit? – oh," said Flora, suddenly recalling the conversation from yesterday. "You're dressing me like one of the Alamarri."

Finian clapped his hands together, finally daring to look at his sister now that her bosom had been sewn into a leather corset.

"Like one of the ancient tribal queens, yes," he murmured, and although he did not say the name of the Maker's Bride; the inference was clear. "The women who rallied armies of thousands and then fought like banshees at their side. This is the image we are presenting today."

Flora scratched her nose, thoughtfully. She had been told a hundred times of her typically Ferelden colouring – the milk white skin, the dark red hair, usually in conjunction with remarks on her traditionally-hewn profile. All the Couslands were descended from one of the oldest Alamarri tribes; it just so happened that these ancient phenotypes had manifested particularly strongly in her.

It took a full hour for Flora to be sewn fully into the leather garb. She bore it with northern stoicism; it had taken almost as long for her to don full Grey Warden ceremonial garb.

"This reminds me of when we were preparing for the Landsmeet vote," she said, lifting her mass of hair above her shoulders so that Leliana could adjust a final strap. "Remember, when I got dressed up in proper Warden stuff for the first time?"

"Oui, and this outfit today is also for the purpose of spectacle. Can you breathe?"

Flora had been a little worried when she had seen the corset – with painful memories of being laced into them tight enough to disguise her swollen stomach – but this one had been cut perfectly to the curve of her belly, to emphasise rather than to hide.

"I can breathe," she said, eyeing her fur-lined, leather-boosted cleavage in awe. "But I think I might knock the Grand Cleric's hat off with these if I turn around too quickly. I feel all… thrusty."

"I can't breathe," announced Zevran dramatically, collapsing backwards on the bed and gazing at Flora in a great imitation of a moonstruck youth. "You're going to feature prominently in my erotic fantasies tonight, mi sirena."

Flora continued to stare at herself in the full length mirror, eyes wide. The bodice emphasised her breasts and her high, rounded belly, the soft, dark leather clinging lovingly to the flesh. It was cut low in the back to expose her from neck to base of spine, and the skirts flowed about her legs like liquid; cut up to the thigh. She would wear no boots, since the Alamarri traditionally wed barefoot.

"When you said it was a leather dress, I thought I'd get really sweaty," Flora said at last, letting out a cackle. "But I can see that's not going to be a problem. How many cows died to make this? Actually, probably only half a cow. There's not much of it."

"A cow-leg," added Zevran, with an appreciative smirk. "If that."

*It's meant to show off the baby*, Flora thought to herself, eyeing herself a final time in the mirror as Leliana stepped back, placing needle and thread proudly back in the pouch. *And the marks left by the Archdemon on my thigh and between my shoulder-blades.*
It's a message without words. Just like when I was Warden-Commander and wore my hair in the high ponytail every day. On the morning of the final battle, everyone had the crimson ribbon wrapped about their weapons.

"You look beautiful, and very Fereldan," Leliana murmured, unable to stop a beam of pride from spreading across her own lovely features. "Let them see that this queen does not wear Orlesian silk or Nevarran scent."

"She wears FISH OIL!!"

"She does not," countered the bard with a moue of horror, a small glass vial manifesting in her hand. "She wears essence of violet. Give me your wrists."

Chapter End Notes

OOC Author Note: OOoohhh the wedding day is finally here! How exciting. And Flo's getting all strapped up into her hot leather mama gear, haha.

Flora is not going to be a hot leather mama at her own wedding if she gets her own way and drenches herself in fish oil though, haha.

Incidentally, the film reference scene from the previous chapter was CLUELESS! The bit where Cher helps her lawyer-father with underlining deposition documents.
As the eleventh hour of the wedding day crept nearer, the taverns and inns of Denerim began to empty. The citizens had begun their celebrating early – many had been eating and drinking since dawn – but all were aware that at the eleventh hour, the lady Cousland would be making her way from the palace to the Square of the Bride. The route that she would take was obvious – soldiers of the Royal Army were already lining the street on both sides, under the direction of General Bryland – and the people wished to claim a decent spot from which to view their future queen and her brothers.

Eager to show their appreciation for the girl who had become the public face of Ferelden's victory over the Fifth Blight, spectators had gathered fistfuls of wildflowers to throw before the Cousland horses. Others – aware of Flora's unusual background – had scattered dozens of seashells across the road. Crimson ribbons had been tied to sticks, ready to be waved frantically once the bridal procession came into view.

Children, who did not quite understand what was going on, but who had picked up on their parents' excitement, scampered about the stern-faced soldiers; picking up handfuls of scattered blossoms and tossing them into the air. Others plucked up stray strands of crimson silk and ran alongside the canals to make the ribbons flutter joyfully in their wake.

The king, Chancellor and other members of the Landsmeet had already made their way to the Grand Chantry an hour prior. Those who had gone early to claim their vantage points along the route were rewarded with a glimpse of the royal retinue. Alistair, a sheen of sweat on his brow, cut an impressive figure on his warhorse; head bare in preparation for the coronation regalia. He lifted a distracted hand to acknowledge the crowds that had gathered to greet him, smiling with excitement and nervousness mingling on his handsome face.

Back up in the Rebel Queen's childhood bedchamber, the bride's final preparations were taking place. After the novelty of the leather garb had worn off, Flora wandered over to the window seat. Propping her bare legs up against the stone wall, she gazed down at the activity in the lower courtyard. The bells were still pealing joyfully in the city below; their mingled metallic chiming echoing the great sonorous boom of the Grand Chantry belfry.

Idly, Flora twisted Mairyn's Star around her fourth finger, then remembered that she was supposed to place it on her other hand in preparation for the marriage band.

Finian and Wynne had departed to seek out Fergus, but Zevran was seated beside her, plaiting a handful of slender braids into her loose, dark red hair. Flora had not cut it for over six months, and it now fell in a heavy mass to her waist. She was not wearing the Cousland diadem – for the crown of a queen would soon be placed upon her head – but a dozen laurel leaves worked in gold, each no larger than a fingernail, had been threaded amidst the cloud of oxblood curls; cunningly placed to catch the light.

Leliana, in the meantime, was finishing off her own subtle makeup, a handheld enamelled mirror held before her carefully painted face. Underneath the austere Chantry garb, she had donned a pair of silk stockings edged with ribbon; a source of secret pleasure that would be hidden by the robe's long skirt.
"There: I am ready," the bard announced, aware that all eyes would be on her during the closing hymn. "Zevran, are you finished?"

The elf replied an affirmative in his native tongue, licking his thumb and sweeping back a stray curl from Flora's forehead.

"Sí. Are you ready for her?"

Leliana nodded, gesturing impatiently for Flora to come over to the bed. There was a faint glow of perspiration on the bard's forehead – she had contributed as much as Eamon to the day's organisation, and was acutely aware that the success of the coronation could open many potential doors for her future.

Lowering her bare legs, Flora rose to her feet and padded obediently across the flagstones. Sitting down on the bed beside the bard, she let Leliana take her chin and tilt it upwards.

"The Maker worked His best artistry on your face, ma petite," said the lay-sister after a moment, giving a small, slightly rueful laugh as she set aside the gilded palette that had been in her possession since Val Royeux. "We need not enhance your eyes or mouth with cosmetics."

Instead, Leliana went to open a small, rounded tin, which turned out to contain a dark red paste with a familiar herbal odour.

"Is that- " Flora started, and Leliana responded with a little nod.

"Oui, it is kaddis. Nowadays the people of Ferelden daub it on the faces of their Mabari; but the Alamarri once wore it on their bodies when they were going into battle."

Flora eyed the crimson paste for a moment, and then shrugged her shoulders cheerfully.

"Mm. Is this the last thing we have to do?"

Leliana nodded, dipping the tip of her smallest finger into the crimson paste.

"Oui. You have been very patient, daughter of Herring."

The daughter of Herring made to smile, and then froze as Leliana lifted her finger to her cheek, daubing a simple, archaic pattern beneath Flora's gold-flecked eye. Withdrawing her hand, the bard beamed; delighted with her own handiwork.

"Et, voila! We are ready. I admit, it is nice to see you out of the same three dull tunics that you always wear."

Flora stood before the mirror, gazing at herself in astonishment. The dark leather clung to the augmented curves of her body, sewn into place so that there was not an inch of spare material. It was deliberately archaic in design – a dress from an Age long past. In the back, it dropped to the base of her spine, leaving her shoulders and arms bare; in the front, the cut of the leather emphasised the swell of her breasts. The skirt was slit high enough to show her Archdemon-marked thigh, her feet left traditionally bare. Her hair fell to her waist like thick, curling tendrils of dark red seaweed, glinting where the golden laurel leaves had been threaded. The kaddis pattern daubed beneath her right eye stood out stark against the paleness of her cheek; the only cosmetic enhancement used on her solemn, fine-boned face.

"I don't usually look like this," she said in awe after a moment, in the understatement of the Age. "I look…"
"Like a beautiful, fearsome woman who *kills dragons* and *births kings*," murmured Leliana, the pride aglow on her features. "Or queens. Whatever this little one is."

"Sí," agreed Zevran throatily, manifesting on Flora's other side and sliding a lean arm around her waist. "I'd wager that Arl Teagan, Leonas Bryland - *all* the men who usually call you *pup* and *poppet* and *child* - will not be doing so today."

"It was a demon, not a dragon," Flora corrected for the second time that morning, still distracted by the startling, painted girl in the mirror. "Can I have a quick snack before we go? Otherwise my stomach will rumble throughout the ceremony."

Leliana appeared about to acquiesce, and then the distinct, clear sound of the eleventh-hour bell rose above the distant chimes of the city Chantries. The bard shot upright as though electrified by mage lightning; her blue eyes widening in alarm.

"You'll have to eat and walk, *ma petite!*"

The bard led the way down the corridors, her head held high with the imperious self-import of the Chantry. Flora followed in her wake, munching methodologically on some carrot sticks, the flagstones cold against her bare feet. Bringing up the rear, the elf glided along with leonine elegance, the corner of his mouth curling upwards as he noted the reaction of those whom they came across.

Sure enough, as they passed the stained glass Calenhad window, the servants in the corridor ahead drew back against the walls; dropping into far deeper bows than were customary.

"*Your Majesty,*" they breathed, in tones that ranged from respectful to reverent.

Flora eyed them in mild confusion, swallowing the last bite of carrot.

"I'm not married to Alistair yet," she said to Leliana's cream-silk clad shoulders as the bard swept towards the entrance hall. "Why are they calling me that?"

"Because you look like a queen, *ma crevette,*" her companion replied, her gaze fixed straight ahead.

Flora shrugged; it was a fair point. Two wide-eyed guards shoved hastily at a pair of double doors, and then they were emerging out into the palace entrance hall.

This cavernous space, with its great flying buttresses and dual lines of opposing hearths, had also been decorated in honour of the upcoming nuptials. The entwined Cousland-Theirin banner hung from the lofty ceiling beams; each one hanging down in a glorious parade of crimson, emerald green and gold. Sunlight cascaded in through the high windows, casting an array of gleaming patterns on the newly-replaced velvet carpet.

At the far end of the hall, the Cousland brothers stood amidst a crowd of their retainers. They formed a mass of Highever colours, clad in matching livery; Fergus wearing the teyrn's crown on his short-cropped russet hair, and Finian wearing a smaller band to denote his newly granted arl's status. The latter was saying something to Fergus to make him laugh, gesturing to one of the great Mabari statues that guarded the entrance. The teyrn grinned, making some comment back while raising a tankard in an impromptu toast.

At the sound of Leliana's heels tapping against the flagstones, the retainers fell into a respectful silence. Finian, trying not to smile, nudged for his brother to look around.

"– don't want to get started too early," Fergus continued saying jovially as he turned. "The ale isn't worth the-"
The young teyrn broke off his sentence abruptly, jaw falling open. The tankard dropped from his hand – fortunately, the contents splattered over the carpeting as opposed to his navy velvet tunic – and he mouthed silently for a moment.

"I told you," Finian declared gleefully, striding forward to greet their little sister when it appeared that elder brother was still struck dumb. "Floss, you look like something from the old stories. Elethea the Fair and Unyielding."

Flora had no idea who that was, and so gazed up at her tall brother without responding. Finian brushed a slender scholar's finger over her cheek, his feather-light touch tracing the kaddis pattern daubed there.

"You look ravishing," he said, admiring the golden laurel leaves woven into her hair. "Ravishing, and a little like you need to be tamed. You wild beauty."

Fergus managed to gather his composure sufficient to come forwards and greet his sister. Instead of embracing Flora, he chose to ruffle her on the head in a gruff, almost fatherly manner.

"You do look astonishing, Florence," he said, keeping his eyes firmly fixed on her face. "I can understand what Eamon was going on about last night now- the whole Alamarri concept. I thought he had drunk a little too much Antivan port-wine and forgotten what Age we were in."

Flora smiled up at him while Zevran gave an appreciative snort; more than aware of the potency of his native country's port-wine.

"Anyway, I've – I've got something for you," the teyrn continued, reaching into the pocket of his velvet tunic. "I don't know if it'll match what you're wearing, but… I thought it would be a good gift."

"But it's not my birthday," Flora replied, relatively certain that had passed several days prior. "Why are you giving me a gift?"

Fergus did not mention that three storage chambers in the palace had currently been stacked to the brim with wedding gifts brought by the foreign guests; each one trying to outdo the other. Instead, he held out a slender golden bangle in the shape of an elongated laurel leaf. Flora gazed at it, wide-eyed; Fergus reached for her hand and slid the bangle on over her slender, nail-bitten fingers. The metal band fell down about her wrist, heavy and gleaming in the hearth-light.

"Now you can take a piece of Highever with you down the aisle. Your father, by the way, will be seated with us – next to Finian. So you'll be able to see him well enough."

"Thank you," Flora breathed after a moment, absurdly touched by her elder brother's thoughtful gift. She reached up and Fergus ducked his head, letting her put her arms around his neck. He went to pat her back, then realised that the entire expanse of skin – from her neck to the base of her spine – was bare, and hastily went to pat her shoulder instead.

The great doors were opened to the sunny gravelled forecourt, the Cousland retainers flooding out in a sea of navy and olive. The horses had already been brought out from the stables – crimson ribbons plaied into their manes and tails, and pale lilies woven around their bridles – but there followed a slight delay as they were allocated out to each rider. The men milled around, laughing and exchanging light-hearted comments as the stable-boys frantically tried to assign each horse to a knight.

"I definitely left instructions regarding this!" snarled Leliana, abandoning her demure lay-sister
demeanour and plunging into the melee. "I should never delegate!"

"Flora?"

A soft, familiar voice echoed from the shady patch beside the wall. While everyone else busied themselves with the horses, Flora picked her way carefully over to where the senior enchanter was standing. Wynne was clad in her best maroon silk robes, the fabric expensive and weighty; her silver hair caught up in a simple, elegant bun.

"Ow, I hope there's not too much gravel between here and the Grand Chantry," Flora whispered, lifting one bare foot and then the other. "Ouch. You look lovely, Wynne."

Wynne smiled down at her, and there came a sudden gleam in the old mage's periwinkle-blue eyes.

"As do you, Flora. But that's not the praise I wanted to give you on this morning: you've always been a beautiful girl, regardless of outfit."

Flora's brow furrowed, but she remained silent to let the elder mage speak. Wynne took a deep breath, her gaze not leaving Flora's face.

"I know that I've been strict with you on our travels; perhaps overly so at times. I think I've spent more time lecturing you during this past nine months than I did in four years at the Circle. And I did so because… I was afraid that you were not ready for the burden of the Blight to be placed upon your shoulders: I saw at first only a naïve little girl fresh from a Tower, supremely inexperienced and possessing a minor obsession with fish."

"Not minor," Flora corrected; the senior enchanter smiled and continued.

"I may be a stubborn old woman, but I'll readily admit when I'm wrong. Now, I don't know whether you call it grace, or grit, or northern stoicism – but you've borne yourself with great merit throughout all of this, child."

Wynne spread out her hands, somehow encompassing all of it: the gathering of the armies, the Landsmeet, the final battle, the wedding and the crown that would follow; a golden band that would bind Flora to a public life for the rest of her years.

"I know you asked for none of it. But you've made me so proud, 'Flora Cove'."

The senior enchanter had clearly rehearsed these words alone in her chamber, so that any tears could be expended on the practise and not the actual.

"I was glad to have you lecture me, because you're so wise," replied Flora, immediate and heartfelt. "And I needed you to be strict, because sometimes I was silly and naive. You've been like a mother to me, Wynne, and I'll always be grateful for it."

"More like a grandmother," Wynne corrected, in a vain attempt to suppress the surge of emotion that followed. "You're far too young to be my daughter."

During her rehearsals, the senior enchanter had envisioned what Flora might reply - but this was certainly nothing that she had predicted. It was too late: the tears had broken free and were trickling down the senior enchanter's face.

Flora looked about her for a cloth- there was certainly no room for pockets on her dress – and finally just used her thumbs to gently brush the liquid away from the older woman's cheeks. Wynne took a deep breath, steeling herself and envisioning Gregoir's stern and un-amused expression.
Fergus approached on the saddle of a lofty chestnut mare, the Highever colours hanging down in silken tassels from its bridle. The horses had finally been assigned correctly; the retainers who would go on foot were whispering excitedly to one another.

Flora gazed at her eldest brother, putting up a hand to shield her eyes from the overhead sun. Fergus grinned back at her, removing a leather riding glove and reaching down a hand.

"Ready to go?"

Ser Gilmore approached with eyes professionally lowered and arms outstretched. Flora let herself be picked up, grateful for the respite on her bare feet. Fergus leaned down, receiving his little sister from the knight's arms and settling her in the saddle before him.

"Comfortable?" he said in her ear, sliding one arm around her stomach as he had seen Alistair do. "More importantly: secure?"

Flora nodded, leaning back against her brother's chest. She noticed Ser Gilmore trying his hardest not to look at her exposed leg as it dangled by the horse's neck. The skirt of the dress fell in such a way that it revealed her thigh, and she remembered suddenly the purpose of the dress' design.

*Not just to remind the audience that we're descended from the Alamarri. But to remind them that I survived the assault of an Archdemon's soul.*

She dropped a finger to trace the white starburst-shaped mark on her outer thigh, large as a man's spread hand. There was a similar one on her abdomen, though this was hidden by the dress, and smaller silvered marks on the flat of her palms. The largest scar was on her back, between her shoulder blades – the aftermath of the Archdemon tearing through her body in a frantic attempt to gain purchase had utterly obliterated her *Peraquialus* freckles.

Before mounting her own grey mare, Leliana advanced forward with the same dark sable fur that she had draped around Flora in the Guerrin manor. The bard passed the fur up to Fergus, who wrapped it carefully around his sibling's bare back.

Feeling the heavy weight on her shoulders, Flora gazed up at the encroaching midday sun and then cast a plaintive look down at Leliana.

"I'm going to sweat like a pig!"

"Think of cool things," Leliana instructed, sternly. "Think on Herring. The wind, the waves…"

*The unfriendly locals, the depressing stone huts, the relentless drizzle,* the bard continued, mentally.

Flora nodded mutely, clutching the fur around her chest and shifting position on the saddle. Suddenly, she was grateful for the exposed back, shoulders and leg of the dress; the gaps in the leather would hopefully allow for some air to circulate.

"Right," announced Fergus, raising his voice. "Let's get my little sister married, eh?"

There rose a cheer from the gathered retainers, and Finian let out a cackle that echoed to the lofty crenelated towers above.

"It's only taken nine Ages to get a Cousland on the throne. Better late than never!"
Chapter End Notes

OOC Author Note: So I don't know if I ever mentioned this or not, but I envisioned the Royal Palace entrance hall as looking like the only bit of the castle that you get to see in game – the bit with the blue carpeting.

Elethea – who Finian compares Flora with – is actually a Cousland ancestor. She was the Alamarri teyrna of Highever who led an army against Calenhad in an attempt to resist the unification of Ferelden. It was actually super fun to write about Flo getting all dressed up for a change, since- for pretty much the entire time I've written her – she's been wearing Alistair's shirts, plain tunics, ratty old wooden jumpers. I also thought the kaddis thing on the face was a nice Alamarri-esque touch (reminiscent of the whole Celtic warriors woad facepaint thing) though it's just headcanon, lol.

Flora Cove is of course the name that Flora went by in the Circle, named after the little cove that Herring was located on.
As Fergus nudged the mare gently in the ribs with the toe of his leather boot, Flora felt a slow roll of fear in her stomach; curdling the carrots and porridge she had eaten for her breakfast.

*What's wrong with you?* she berated herself inwardly, furious at her own nervousness. *You've faced down hordes of Darkspawn, assassins – and demons in the Fade. Why are you scared of this?*

The Cousland procession made its way down through the palace hunting grounds; which seemed far sparser after its trees had been taken for reinforcement scaffolds and siege weaponry during the last weeks of the Blight. As they neared the boundary walls, the sound of the city bells grew louder, rising into a tangled metallic choir of pealing. Loudest and deepest of all, the Grand Chantry bells rang out an imperious summons.

*Florence Cousland, your king and crown await you.*

Flora swallowed, feeling her pulse surge in her throat like a runaway horse.

*I wish you were still here,* she thought miserably, knowing that her spirits were unable to hear her – if even they still existed. *I don't know if I can be brave without you.*

Palace guardsmen and soldiers from the Royal Army were lining the route ahead, the crowds having flooded out of the taverns and onto the streets to catch a glimpse of the bride. As soon as the first Cousland retainers came into view, a cheer went up; the people clustering as close as they dared to the side of the road.

Finian, who openly delighted in the attention, grinned and raised his hand to acknowledge the cheers. Leliana, who also enjoyed the attention but was more graceful in her reception of it, let a mysterious smile play over her lips; bowing her head demurely as she guided her mare with an expert hand.

Flora was grateful for the natural neutrality of her face; she had become so renowned for her solemn demeanour that not even the crowds were expecting her to smile. She turned her head from side to side, looking at the frantically waving crimson ribbons, while children threw flowers and tiny pink seashells into the road before the horses. Their iron-clad hooves crunched the delicate curlicues of calcium into fragments; the sound reminded Flora of when the Waking Sea flung a great wash of sand and shale against the reef in furious temper. Fragments of shell – from broken barnacles and conches – would be strewn over the rocks, along with fragments of driftwood and clumps of blackish-green seaweed.

As a bead of sweat broke out on Flora's forehead, she decided to take Leliana's advice and *think on Herring.*

She could not close her eyes to summon the memory, so instead opened her mouth and let the salt-edged Denerim air linger on her tongue. The seagulls called out mournfully overhead; in her mind, she envisioned a harsh northern edge to their tone and added the other birds of the Storm Coast: cormorant, gannets and silver-backed terns.

*The gulls are fatter and tamer here in the city, used to feasting on gutter run-off and the deluge of rotting waste from the fish-markets. In Herring, they have to fight for every scrap and bone; too*
slow, and they'll get a swift kick from an irate fisherman. When I was too young to go out on the boats, I used to chase them away from the lobster pots.

How many lobster pots were fastened to the reef? We could never build piers and jetties like those here that extend out into the sweet-natured Amaranthine Ocean. The Waking Sea would chew them apart in an instant and hurl their remains onto the beach in contempt.

Sixteen, I think. Was it sixteen?

It was sixteen. The last two were fastened to iron rings bolted right at the end of the Hag's Teeth. I used to clamber over the reef barefoot to empty them, avoiding the patches slick with weed.

I was always barefoot, wasn't I? I don't think I started wearing shoes until the Circle Tower. Even then it took about two years before I grew used to them. The Templars kept shouting at me to put my boots on.

Flora looked down at her bare feet – her toes extending out beneath the soft, rich brown sable fur - and felt oddly comforted.

I remember the drizzle always coming through the roof; every building in Herring leaked like a sieve. No one had rugs or carpeting – it would have rotted away in weeks – just planking, or compacted wet sand. You grew used to being always damp and cold, no matter the season; I bet it's raining in Herring now, even as the sun shines down here. The sky would be a muddy wash of cloud, darker in patches where storms were brewing.

What else do I remember?

The answer came as a crashing resonance in her mind, echoing with the sound of prevailing winds and the lash of rain. The waves hurled themselves against the confines of her skull, relentless in their assault. The Waking Sea was far from the largest ocean in Thedas; it was narrow and vicious as a snake, perpetually furious and ready to wage war on those who dared venture onto its waters.

I spent ten years living in the thrall of your almighty wrath; in defiance of your frenzied storms and treacherous tides. You chewed up entire fleets like toothpicks, spitting out the wreckage of galleons and men onto our rocks and beaches. How many times did I press my lips to the mouths of drowned men, trying to breathe some life back into them? Most of the time, you won; you claimed their lives in watery tribute.

But, not always.

My Herring-dad went out on you every day in a boat no larger than a bathtub. I lived my childhood chasing the waves, collecting driftwood and emptying rock-pools. I don't know how many nights I spent roped to the Hag's Teeth with golden light surging outwards from my skin; until the ships turned away from the deadly reef and back into the safety of the open water.

I wasn't scared of you, although I was a child and should rightly have been terrified. And the reason why I wasn't scared, wasn't because of my spirits. It was because my dad wasn't scared. He was from Herring, after all; and the people of Herring have seawater in their veins and coarse sand in their hearts. They don't frighten easily.

Flora looked down at the plump white pearl on her finger – *Mairyn's Star* – and knew that at the centre of its lustrous beauty lay a tiny fleck of grit; without which there would be no jewel at all.

I might be Bryce Cousland's daughter and the lover of Ferelden's newest king, but I'm still a Herring girl. There's coarse sand in my heart, too.
A moment later, she realised that her anxieties had dissolved like salt in water; her stomach settled and her heart beating at its normal, sedentary rhythm.

What was I even scared of? Come on, now. There are harder things than walking down an aisle and having something placed on your head.

And I'll be married to Alistair at the end of it. I'll be his wife.

The horses came to a halt with a stutter of hoofbeats and Flora startled as though awakened suddenly from a deep sleep. They had reached the Square of the Bride – emptied of crowds by the guards – and the Grand Chantry loomed above them like the shadow of the Maker Himself. The pealing of the great bells in the lofty towers had reached a crescendo, the sound resonating between the Chantry offices and Templar headquarters that flanked the Square.

The Cousland retainers immediately busied themselves with the horses, their faces bright with excitement. After the murder of the old teyrn and teyrna, and the general slaughter at Highever; this wedding seemed to confirm the triumphant resurrection of the bloodied but unbroken Cousland family.

Fergus slid down onto the cobblestones, the golden band on his forehead glinting in the sun. It was a few minutes before midday, and the Square was bathed in a mellow, cloudless light. He reached up to help his sister from the saddle, gazing down at her with a touch of anxiety.

"Are you alright, Floss? You didn't say a word on the way here."

Flora smiled up at him, realising that she was alright; that the nervousness from earlier had evaporated, leaving a steely resolution in its wake. The fur sat snug around her shoulders; no longer hot or overly weighty.

I have to get this right. Not just for Leliana, but for Alistair, and for Ferelden. If we get this right, it sends a message across all Thedas.

Before she could reply, Leliana herself swept forwards; the Chantry headress already pinned in place over her braided auburn locks. The bard gave the young Cousland a quick once-over, purring in approval as she rested her fingers against Flora's forehead and felt the coolness of the skin.

"Good girl – I told you that you wouldn't sweat! Now – are you ready?"

"Herring girls are ready for anything," Flora replied, immediately. "A Hurlock could pop up from behind Andraceste's flame and I'd take it out with Alistair's royal skarp-skorp – spork."

"Sceptre," corrected Leliana, with a little laugh. "And I doubt that scenario is likely, but it's good to know that you're prepared for it nonetheless."

The bard reached up to add the final touch to Flora's entrance garb – a sheer black veil, lined with a hundred tiny ivory pearls.

Remember how we practised the disrobing of this and the fur last night, the bard's eyes reminded her silently. A dozen times with the pillowcase and bedsheet, until you had mastered it.

Flora nodded: she remembered.

Once the horses had been led to the Templar stables nearby, the others prepared to take their leave. They would not be ascending the fifty four basalt steps that led up to the Grand Chantry's great oak doors; but instead travel a short distance around the west face of the building, entering the cathedral.
by a side entrance to take their seats. Wynne and Leliana departed arm in arm with Zevran and Finian in their wake; the elf blowing a kiss over his shoulder as they left. The rest of the Cousland retainers followed soon afterwards, and eventually Fergus and Flora were left alone in the shadow of the Chantry towers.

"Are you alright going up all these steps?" asked the teyrn as they approached the dark basalt stair, eyeing Flora's bare feet and the heavy fur wrapped around her shoulders. "I'm not built quite on the lines of your future husband, but I'm reasonably sure that I could piggy-back you up to the top."

Flora gave a little cackle, the sound slightly muffled behind the dark veil; proving her capability by doggedly plodding her way up one step at a time. Focusing on planting her bare feet on each sun-warmed ledge in turn, she barely noticed Fergus quicken his pace to catch her up.

"Flossie?"

"Mm?"

Halfway up the stone flight of steps, Flora stopped and turned to face her oldest brother; her elder by ten years. He was gazing down at her, expression conflicted and grey-blue eyes clouded. Fergus had more the look of Eleanor than Bryce; the Cousland colouring diluted somewhat by his maternal heritage.

"You – this is alright with you, isn't it?"

"Eh?"

Fergus flashed her a brief, rueful smile, one hand lifting up to rub at the back of his head in a way that triggered a faint flicker of memory in Flora's mind.

I think my father used to do that. My Highever father.

"All this," he muttered, not quite meeting her gaze. "It feels a little as though – you've not had much choice in the matter. The wedding happening so quickly, becoming queen- I know it must be overwhelming."

Flora gazed thoughtfully up at him through the dark veil, seeing the sincerity behind his surface awkwardness.

"I won't have you forced into anything you don't want to do," her brother continued, determinedly. "So – tell me now, Floss, if you don't want this to happen. I'll stop it, I'll stop it all. And I can protect you from any repercussions, so…. don't worry about that."

"But everyone has come from all across Thedas," Flora said, watching his face closely. "The Landsmeet are all here. You'd be in so much trouble if you stopped it. And – Finian said it earlier. The Couslands have waited nine Ages to put someone on the throne."

Fergus flushed slightly, but his reply was steady and even.

"You're my little sister. I failed at protecting you once; I won't let it happen again. Everybody else be damned."

Flora stood up on her bare toes and put her arms around her brother's neck, pressing her lips to his bearded cheek.

"Thank you," she whispered, smiling at him as she withdrew, settling back down on her heels.
"You're a good brother to me. But I promise: I'm ready for this. I can do it."

"You're certain, pup?"

Flora nodded earnestly, laughing at the look of relief that swept over Fergus' face.

"Thank the Maker," he commented, exhaling loudly as they resumed climbing the last dozen basalt steps. "Alistair would most likely have attainted me on the spot; right after the Grand Cleric's excommunication."

Flora smiled sideways at him through the veil, wondering idly how grubby the soles of her feet were going to be. Fergus made another light-hearted comment, but this was drowned out by the deafening pealing of the great bells directly overhead. The belfry was located at the highest point in the Chantry's central tower, five hundred feet above.

They came to a halt outside the vast oak doors that marked the main entrance into Denerim's Grand Chantry. Unable to talk to Fergus due to the joyful exuberance of the bells, Flora gazed at the scarred wooden surface of the doors, vaguely remembering a legend that Leliana had told her at Revanloch.

Wasn't there a siege here once, during the Orlesian occupation? Sixteen Ferelden knights barricaded themselves within the Grand Chantry; managing to resist an entire battalion of chev – chavolors – chevoolers - Orlesian knights for a week before succumbing.

The ancient doors were littered with dents and gouge-marks; Flora wondered if there was any truth to the old story. The baby gave a little nudge inside her belly, waking up after a long nap. She dropped an idle hand to her stomach, sliding her fingers inside the fur to rest on the form-fitting calfskin.

Almost ready to go and see your papa. I hope you're prepared for your role in all this.

Beside her, Fergus shifted from foot to foot, a bead of sweat rising to his forehead. Flora realised with a small twinge of astonishment that her confident older brother was nervous; perhaps worried on her behalf, perhaps reminding himself of the role that he had to play in the ceremony. She withdrew her hand from the fur and placed it on Fergus' elbow, giving it a little squeeze of reassurance. He reached out to clutch her fingers in place on his arm, lines of tension carved out around his mouth.

"It'll be fine," she mouthed as his anxious eyes slid down towards her. "Don't worry."

Just then, the bells overhead stopped ringing; arrested in their movement by the timely grip of a rope. Their silence was unexpected and somehow deafening, and even Flora's own breath suddenly seemed loud. Moments later, as though the Grand Chantry belfry had issued some sort of signal, the Chantry towers across the city fell silent; the bells that had been pealing since dawn finally granted some respite. An electric, anticipatory quiet settled over the city, as though its people had inhaled collectively.

Fergus glanced down at his younger sister, his own breath catching in his throat. Beneath the dark, beaded veil Flora was staring at the oak doors as though she could see straight through them, her jaw set with the usual graveness and her stare as steely as silverite.

"Ready, Floss?"

She nodded wordlessly, long past talking; her entire body posed in readiness.

Deep breath, chin up, eyes straight.
OOC Author Note: Lol I promise the actual wedding will take place next chapter! If there's one thing you've learnt after reading over a million words of my crap, is that I like to draw it oooout, hehhe.

Flora still carries out her internal dialogue, except without the spirits answering back! It's just an ingrained habit, since she spent so much time talking to voices in her own head while growing up.

I like the bit with Fergus here – I thought it would be a nice parallel. The teenage Fergus ratted his little sister out as being a mage, which led to her being sent away to preserve the Cousland reputation. Now, fifteen years later, he's willing to stop the wedding – which would destroy the Cousland reputation – to protect the wellbeing of the same sister. As a reminder, being attainted was the worst punishment that could befall a noble – it was the stripping of the family name, land and title.
The Grand Chantry doors swung inwards, pulled simultaneously by a pair of strong-armed Cousland retainers. The great open space of the Chantry billowed out and up before them; vast, ancient and hewn from basalt. The light pouring down from the high windows was a lustrous greenish-gold, tinted by great, long skeins of Highever laurel. Every standing candelabra trailed crimson ribbons beneath fat beeswax candles, and each pillar was decorated with a hanging standard. Yet the decorative augmentations paled in comparison to the stark splendour of the architecture itself. The vaulted ceiling arched overhead in an intricate dance of stone beams and flying buttresses; the complexity above drew the eye upwards from the brutal simplicity of the basalt flagstones.

The pews on both the ground level and the upper gallery were filled beyond bursting point; many retainers relegated to standing against the walls. Never before had such an extensive spectrum of colour been witnessed with Ferelden’s Grand Chantry; the most luxuriant fabrics that Thedas had to offer wrapped around some of its most notable – and notorious – personages.

As Ferelden’s closest trading partner, the men and women from the Marches had been placed immediately behind the members of the Landsmeet. They wore a clashing riot of colours that reflected their divided houses; there were three separate dynasties present within their crowd. The Orlesians – silently annoyed at being placed behind the Marchers – were grouped either around the Grand-Duc Gaspard or Madame du Fer, a mage of impeccable elegance, according to their own factional preference. Due to their predilection for expensively weighty silks, the Orlesians rustled in their seats whenever they moved; a miasma of perfume rising from their collective mass.

The Pentaghasts of Nevarra were similar in feature – richly tanned skin, sable-dark hair – and wore matching shades of mustard and black. They were seated near a cluster of Antivan trade princes, one of whom had spent the past ten minutes sweating frantically after catching sight of Zevran. Templars had been posted ostentatiously near the contingent from Tevinter. The magisters wore long jewel-toned robes in shades of violet and crimson, cut to show off swathes of oiled olive flesh. Several of them were twitching nervously after being divested of their staves on entering the Chantry.

Few who had been sent an invitation had declined: it would have been fascinating enough to witness this new son of Maric and long-lost Cousland daughter take the throne, but the fact that they were both former Grey Wardens who had almost single-handedly raised an army and defeated a Blight with unprecedented swiftness, added to their allure. The bride slaying the Archdemon while reportedly with child was additionally enthralling – although most present had no idea how heavy with child she was, assuming it was only a handful of weeks at most.

The congregation rose to their feet, turning as one to greet the bride and her brother as they made their entrance. Three hundred of the most prestigious faces in Thedas turned towards the slight figure draped in dark sable fur, her face and hair covered by a modest black veil and her hand placed on the elbow of the Teyrn of Highever.

I thought she would be taller, was the collective thought of the foreigners present. This is the one who slew a dragon.

Beside her, Flora heard Fergus take a deep breath, lifting his chin and summoning every inch of their late father’s commanding presence to chase away the last tell-tale fragments of nerves.
Flora, on the other hand, could not feel more at ease. Any remaining anxieties had evaporated the moment that she had set eyes on the broad-shouldered figure standing near the altar; a head taller than those positioned at his side. Although the space between them was too far to discern any details – the aisle was two hundred feet in length – Flora knew that Alistair's eyes were focused unblinking on her; his fingers twitching impatiently at his sides in readiness to take those of his former sister-warden.

*Though our blood-bond is broken, our fish-rope is stronger than ever.*

Alistair was clad in soft tan leather, the supple material cut to emphasis his warrior's frame and edged with gleaming silverite trimmings. Fur lined his collar, cut high around the neck, and the facial hair that Alistair had so determinedly cultivated since becoming king granted him both maturity and authority. Eamon, as Chancellor of Ferelden, stood at his side clad in Redcliffe finery; nearby, the Grand Cleric Elemena took advantage of the congregation's distraction to surreptitiously adjust the angle of her lofty hat.

The flagstones were cold beneath Flora's bare feet as she shifted her weight onto her stronger leg, waiting for the agreed signal. She could feel the prickling of hundreds of curious eyes – from the pews extending out before her, from the gallery overhead – and ignored them; her own veiled stare fixated on her best friend as he stood awaiting her arrival.

Without warning, the slow and stately drumming began from both sides of the Chantry, the measured beat echoing up to the vaulted ceiling. Fergus, anchoring his sister's fingers tightly to his elbow, began the first few steps down the aisle. Flora trod dutifully at his side with her veiled head cast down demurely; for all purposes, a shy young bride. Before them, a half-dozen Chantry sisters proceeded with swinging censors, leaving behind perfumed trails of incense in the cool, shadowed air.

"The elf said that you wanted to jog down here during the rehearsal," the teyrn murmured out of the corner of his mouth, the words disguised by the steadily increasing vigour of the drumming.

Flora couldn't help but let out a little snicker, grateful for the veil covering her face. More drums had joined the first pair, the drumming building in volume and intensity until a great, thunderous roll echoed up to the laurel-draped flying buttresses.

"I also stopped for a snack halfway down the aisle," she whispered back, spotting the grand duc and his Orlesian retinue in a lustrous crowd of silver and periwinkle blue.

"I heard about that," Fergus replied, his pace slow and measured at her side. "I hope we aren't getting a repeat performance today."

"Have you seen this dress?" Flora retorted without moving her mouth, keeping her gaze fixed on Alistair. "There's not enough room for an extra button, let alone a hidden snack!"

The congregation turned slowly to follow the bride's progress down the aisle; curious stares moving from the sheer dark silk covering her face, to the thick sable draped over her body. Many had already noticed that she was barefoot beneath the fur, more than one eyebrow rising into a finely plucked hairline.

It took a full three minutes before Fergus and Flora arrived at the wide swathe of stone steps that led up to the main altar, where king was stood waiting with the Grand Cleric of Ferelden at his side. The copper trough filled with Andraste's eternal flame blazed behind them, casting a mellifluous golden light across the flagstones. The great statue of Andraste Gloria loomed up at the rear of the transept; one stone palm held out to receive the Maker's blessing.
From the corner of her eye Flora could just about glimpse a host of familiar faces gathered in the pew at the front – she had already spotted Leonas Bryland's study frame, the general having arrived clad in full armour. Near him she caught sight of a silverite breastplate adorned with a familiar griffon emblem; with great difficulty, she managed to stop herself from turning to look.

*Focus, Flora. You have to get this right.*

Her tall brother Finian was clear to discern, his lofty autumnal head rising above the squat figure of her own Herring-dad. Pel was awkwardly dressed in borrowed garb, and looked extremely uncomfortable.

*You and me both.*

Flora had already seen where Leliana was standing, tucked discretely to one side amidst a row of similarly-attired lay-sisters. The bard's face was caught in a tangle of pride and nervous anticipation; the reflection of Andrastian flame flickering across her ivory robes.

The king, who had not taken his eyes off Flora since the doors had opened and she had entered, continued to stare at her with an unmatched intensity. They were now only feet apart, separated by three shallow steps and centuries of rigid protocol. Flora lifted her eyes to gaze back at him through the sheer filmy fabric of the veil.

The drumming stopped as abruptly as the bells had earlier; their last echoing rolls absorbed by the cool basalt of the Chantry walls. The silence that followed felt almost tangible; anticipation humming in the air like the cicadas of the south. Flora could feel the heat of three hundred stares, the congregation behind her blurring into a singular, scrutinising mass. Halfway down the neat row of lay-sisters gathered near the altar, Leliana gazed out steadily ahead; the bard's sweaty fingers wound into her robes.

*Don't worry, Leliana,* Flora thought to herself, taking a deep and steadying breath of air. *We practised this next bit with pillow-case and bed-sheet last night for an hour. I'll do it exactly as we rehearsed.*

Eamon took a single step forward, his face grave and portentous. The last echoing beat died away as Fergus reached up about his sister's shoulders to retrieve the fur; ready to enact the traditional Andrastrian ritual before their fascinated guests.

*It feels more like an audience than a congregation,* Flora continued internally, ensuring that her loose mass of hair was still strategically caught into the collar of the fur. *I suppose we are putting on a show. Just like at the Landsmeet.*

"'And then Maferath said O! give my wife covering from our own stores. Scent of our scent and blood of our blood. So that she may be fully a Part of our House.'"

The Grand Cleric's sonorous voice rang to the very heights of the vaulted ceiling as she began the wedding ceremony with the traditional recitation. Elemena had compensated for her two decades of hearing loss by gradually increasing the volume of her own words; until every sentence was almost a shout.

Fergus, at the Grand Cleric's cue, removed both fur and dark veil from his younger sister in a single gesture. As planned, the dark-red bulk of Flora's hair – carefully twisted into position beneath the collar, was swept to the side; she reached up a quick hand to draw it over her shoulder.
Just like we practised.

With fur gone and hair pulled to the side; those gathered in the Cathedral were able to set eyes fully on that which had been the source of so much rumour. They had hoped to gain a glimpse of the old god’s rumoured residue on the lady Cousland’s body – perhaps a hint of silvered flesh at the neckline of a gown, or a quick peek at a scarred palm – but now it was displayed before them; in all its strange, otherworldly glory. The leather dress dropped to the base of Flora’s spine – an inch lower and it would have been inappropriate even for a Fereldan Chantry – and left her back entirely exposed to the eyes of Thedas.

Flora could feel the incendiary heat of their stares, the mass rustling of fabric as the audience shifted to get a better look; the barely restrained whispers and fascinated hisses. She knew well enough what they could see – the silver-white markings across her shoulder-blades, one branching arc extending up the column of her neck and the other to the base of her spine. It was remarkable and ironic how alike the branding appeared to the Chantry sunburst – the similarity was remarkable.

One. Here’s the proof, Flora thought fiercely, in-between counting laboriously to ten. I survived an Archdemon.

Two, three, four.

It tried to take my soul and failed.

Five, six, eight - no, seven.

And I killed it.

Eight, nine, ten.

So I dare you to try and take Ferelden from Alistair and I.

After counting to ten, Flora turned on her heel, not quite facing the enthralled congregation; giving them a full profile view of her swollen stomach. The realisation that this was no babe fresh in the womb – that it appeared to be well into its third term – was enough to send a ripple of shock through the crowd.

That’s right, Flora mused defiantly, resting a hand on the restless baby for emphasis. Our fierce little creature survived the Archdemon too. Good luck ever trying to ooze – uzle – usurp this one in the future!

Ouch, thank you for kicking me in the kidney. Great timing.

Having unleashed both back and belly in quick succession on the reeling audience, Flora now let loose the final weapon in her arsenal. Lifting her chin and letting the dark red mass of hair fall loose about her shoulders, she let a haughty stare sweep across the crowds; discharging the full intensity of her imperious Alamarri beauty, with no cosmetic enhancement save for the painted kaddis mark on her cheek.

Pale grey eyes - cold and shifting as the Waking Sea - moved across the spectrum of faces, barely bothering to register livery or emblem.

I don’t care if you’re a pirate-prince from Antiva or the Grand Duc of Orlais. Any ill designs on our country can be dashed right now on the hard flagstones of this Chantry. Alistair rules in Ferelden, and I am with him.
Flora let her eyes linger momentarily on her companions, who – as veterans of the Fifth Blight – had been afforded a prime position in a front pew. Wynne was nodding slowly, fully aware of Leliana's instructions; Oghren was unashamedly leering at Flora's bodice-boosted cleavage; Zevran's face was arranged in careful neutrality. The elf clearly had one eye on her and the other on the congregation, and Flora felt a surge of gratitude towards her former Crow for his ever-present watchfulness.

Nearby, she could see Finian trying not to grin – the Orlesian part of her brother adored a good show – and at his side stood her Herring father. Pel, who conversely had no time for theatrics, was busy eyeing up the Grand-Duc's lavender mask in faint, incredulous disbelief.

The last face that drew Flora's eye before she turned back to her husband-to-be belonged to none other than Loghain Mac Tir. The Warden-Commander of Ferelden – accompanied by his female counterpart – stood to one side dressed in full griffin-augmented regalia. They were accompanied by a gaggle of junior Wardens that Flora did not recognise, and with a small pang she realised that they must have been new recruits.

Loghain caught her gaze for a moment; one greying eyebrow rising. To his credit, there was no bitterness there – although he must have remembered standing within the same Chantry nearly ten years prior when Anora had married Cailan. Instead, the corner of his mouth flickered ruefully – having noted the calculated display of back, belly, beauty – and he gave her a grudging little nod.

Finally, Flora turned back to face the Grand Cleric, Alistair and Eamon. She had been so focused on following Leliana's instructions to the letter that she had not yet noticed Alistair's reaction to the leather gown. He was staring as though she had revealed herself to be naked underneath the fur; the pupils in his hazel eyes blown wide with a combination of disbelief and raw desire.

Eamon reached out and took Flora's hand in the same manner as they had rehearsed with Teagan the previous day. She clutched his fingers, letting him guide her up the three shallow steps towards where Alistair was waiting.

The king reached a hand behind him, seamlessly receiving a wolf pelt cloak from a Chantry clerk. Stepping forward, the desire in Alistair's eyes melted into soft, bruised affection as he wrapped the cloak about his mistress' bare shoulders. As he tied the strings loosely across her chest, he leaned forward to murmur in her ear.

"I need a moment to catch my breath, darling. Leliana should have given me some warning about that outfit."

Flora smiled up at her best friend, the first time that her grave expression had dissolved since entering the Grand Chantry. He smiled back down at her, and for a moment it was as though they were naught but a stable-boy and a fisherman's daughter plighting their troth in the local chapel.

The Grand Cleric had meanwhile decided that too much time had been spent gazing at the bride and her dubiously appropriate attire; clearing her throat.

"The Maker receives all ye who chose absolution into His arms; represented in corporeal form by this dwelling of stone and wood," she bellowed, indeed compensating for deafness with volume. "It is the Maker and the Maker alone who grants us redemption for our sins; the Maker and the Maker alone who can offer salvation and eternal peace at His side; the Maker and the Maker alone who can join two souls in sacred union."

Flora stood before Alistair, head dutifully bowed, gazing thoughtfully at her own feet. Thanks to Leliana's scrutinising eye, even her toenails were clean – something which Flora did not believe had ever happened before. She could feel Alistair's eyes, bright with adoration, boring into the top of her
head, and resisted the urge to return his gaze.

*I can't stand around smiling all day. I have to look stern and resolute: Leliana's instructions.*

"Now will you confirm your full names for the scribe?" the Grand Cleric commanded, drawing a deep breath as she paused in her monologue. "So that it may be writ down in both sacred and secular record."

"Alistair Theirin," replied Alistair immediately, the words emerging with strident resonance.

Flora eyed her former brother-warden, proud at how confidently he had announced a name that he had once spurned. There followed a pause, and she realised that the Grand Cleric had turned expectantly to her.

*Make sure you at least get this part in the right order. Remember: 'fish can't poach rabbits'.*

"Florence Chastity Popelyn Ragenhilda," she replied solemnly, then quickly added "Cousland," at the end.

The Grand Cleric nodded ponderously, stretching out her robed arms like a great, ivory-winged bat. Elemena was used to presiding before members of the Landsmeet, but she had never before had the chance to pontificate before such a vast collection of Theodesian notables.

"Florence Cousland, do you come here of your own free will and accord?"

"Yes," replied Flora, impressed by the height of the priestess' lofty hat.

"And who has presented you here with their blessing and offerings?"

"I, Fergus Cousland, Teyrn of Highever," her brother said on cue, raising his voice so that it echoed to the laurel-draped ceiling. "And Highever will offer the house of Theirin a dowry of twenty thousand sovereigns, the northern island of Wickway, quarrying rights in Mentmore, fifty Fereldan steeds and five hundred sheep."

Flora did not dare to look at Alistair for fear that she would burst out laughing. Out of the corner of her eye she could see Zevran in silent contortions in the front pew; his fingers clamped on Finian's elbow. *Five hundred sheep!* the elf was mouthing gleefully to Flora's brother.

"Alistair Theirin, do you accept this nuptial offering?" the Grand Cleric prompted, her beady black eyes settling on the king's face.

"I accept it," replied Alistair gravely, resisting the comedic temptation to demand *more sheep*.

"Now," continued Elemena, raising her voice once again and letting the sonorous tones ring about the thick pillars and side-chapels. "The Maker desires those bonded in His purview to pledge their devotion aloud and in the presence of witnesses. Alistair Theirin, speak now your vow."

Alistair took a deep breath to steady himself, his eyes fixated on Flora's face as though welded there by some blacksmith's forge. Flora blinked, staring up at him with sudden, absolute absorption; the rest of the audience suddenly utterly inconsequential. When her best friend spoke, it was as though he were speaking to her and her alone.

"I vow to you the first cut of my meat, the first sip of my wine," he said, soft and resolute. "Yours will be the name I cry out at night, and the eyes I smile into in the morning. I shall be the shield for your back; blood of my blood and bone of my bone. I pledge to you my spirit and my body."
My sister-warden, my partner in all things. Light of my days, mother of my child. The love of my life.

Flora felt a lump rise in her throat and she swallowed it; the words of Alistair's earnest, heartfelt promise echoing in her chest. He smiled down at her, his hazel gaze warm and certain.

"Florence Cousland," instructed the Grand Cleric, her strident voice echoing to the rafters. "Speak now your vow."

Flora had practised her vow on Leliana eleven times the previous night; the words inscribed in blazing letters on the inside of her skull.

"You cannot possess me, but I give you all which is mine to give," she replied, grateful for the natural evenness of her northern tongue. "You cannot command me, but I shall serve you in the ways you require. And the honeycomb will taste sweeter coming from my hand. I offer myself to you in every way."

**Brother-warden. We were welded together by the events at Ostagar; nothing can break a bond forged in the heat of an Archdemon's flame.**

The Grand Cleric waved her wrinkled hand imperiously to one side, gesturing for Eamon to step forwards. The arl did as instructed, lifting his palm to reveal a glint of gold.

"Alistair Theirin, if it is your wish, take the ring and place it on the finger of this woman."

Alistair reached out, choosing the smaller of the two rings from his uncle's outstretched palm. Flora let him take her hand; his blazing eyes not leaving her face.

"Maker knows it's my wish," he murmured, sliding the ring onto the fourth finger of Flora's left hand. "My greatest desire."

Flora looked down at the ring, her breath catching suddenly in her throat. It was forged from old Fereldan gold – the same as her own Cousland band – and made up of two twisted strands; weaving harmoniously about each other. A quick glance confirmed that Alistair's band was the same, albeit on a larger scale.

*It looks like a rope,* she realised, suddenly. *It's meant to be the fish-rope. How did they know— oh, of course.*

**Teagan organised the rings. If anyone was going to arrange this, it would be him. He's known us the longest out of any noble here.**

Gently removing *Mairyn's Star* from its temporary relocation on her other hand, Alistair pushed it gently atop the twisted golden rope of the wedding band; a sudden, bright gleam in his eye. Flora gazed up at her best friend, wishing suddenly that she could put her arms around his neck.

"Florence Cousland, if it is your wish," continued the Grand Cleric, portentously. "Take the ring and put it on the finger of this man."

Flora dutifully plucked up the larger ring, running her thumb over the burnished metal. From the front pew, she could hear the sound of damp sniffling, and wondered idly who it could belong to.

*Maybe Wynne?*

"It is my wish," she replied confidently, reaching out to take Alistair's large, warm hand. The king still practised for two hours with blade and shield every day; but now Flora was unable to heal the
calluses left in the wake of the cloth-bound grips.

She could feel a faint tremor in her best friend’s hand as she held it; Alistair was clearly trying his hardest not to let his emotions show before their audience of hundreds. Flora gave his wrist a little, surreptitious squeeze, before sliding the ring onto his fourth finger.

Alistair stared down at the marriage band sitting bright and burnished below his knuckle, then reached up unprompted to cup her cheek in his palm, a thumb gently tracing the dried mark of the kaddis.

"Sweetheart."

The Grand Cleric cleared her throat pointedly, nostrils flaring, the leather strap already gripped in her lined hands. Flora reached up to slide her fingers through Alistair’s own, linking them together in the familiar fish-rope; incorporating their own private ritual in the midst of Fereldan tradition.

The priestess began to wind the leather strap around their conjoined hands, reciting the old verse from the Chant with sonorous solemnity.

"And the Maker smiled down upon His Bride and said Now let us never be parted. Sit at my side in the Black City and know eternal happiness."

Elemena stepped back to display her work, showing the congregation the leather-bound hands of king and former mistress. Taking a deep breath, aware that every word was being recorded for posterity, she projected her declaration up to the vaulted ceiling.

"With the blessing of the Maker, I name you man and wife!"

The nobles of Ferelden and the Marches – who shared many ancient customs – began to drum their feet against the floor, a thunderous roll of leather boot against basalt flagstone. This wordless salute lasted until the leather strap had been unwrapped from the hands of both parties; then abruptly ended as the Grand Cleric raised her arms once again.

Flora could see a discernible gleam on Alistair’s cheek as he gazed damply down at her, a single tear having made a break for freedom. She reached up in a parallel of his own gesture, using a gentle thumb to brush his cheek dry. The baby, having slept through the vows and ring-exchange that made it legitimate, woke up and stretched its limbs; pressing against the confines of her belly.

"Alistair Theirin," announced the Grand Cleric, stepping back hastily to get out of the way. "You may greet your wife."

This was the part of the ceremony that needed no rehearsal. Alistair stepped forwards, one hand spreading across the small of Flora’s naked back as he drew her towards him. She tilted her face upwards with the smooth ease of familiarity; the two coming together with a much-practised rhythm. Ducking his head and leaning down to close the foot difference in height, Alistair pressed his mouth to hers, lips parting with an involuntarily surge of desire. His tongue slid brief and tantalising against her own, the need palpable.

Feeling a pulse of inappropriate lust deep in her belly, Flora was half-tempted to put her arms about his neck. Just in time, she remembered the location and audience; Alistair came to a simultaneous realisation, and withdrew with obvious reluctance.

More, his languid hazel gaze promised as his palm lingered on the small of her back, fingers brushing the bare skin. Later.
The Grand Cleric swept forwards – eager to reclaim centre-stage - and this time she was not alone. By the time that Alistair had reluctantly released Flora from his grip, Ferelden's most esteemed priestess had been joined at the altar by the nation's most eminent nobles. Fergus, as the sole remaining teyrn, was joined by the arls of Redcliffe, Amaranthine, South Reach, the West Hills and Edgehall. These men would represent the Landsmeet during the upcoming proceedings. Each one was clad in the full regalia afforded by their station, faces grave and purposeful.

The nature of the ceremony took on a distinctly different tone. Now that the marriage had been legalised and recognised, it remained only for the king and his new queen to be formally crowned.

"The Maker, in His infinite wisdom, desires for His creations to be steered in their mortal lives by a ruler both just and wise," intoned Elemena, her eyes raised to the lofty ceiling. "The throne of Ferelden currently lies empty. Who, men of the Landsmeet, do you desire to take up this position of great responsibility?"

Fergus stepped forwards, eyes moving affectionately over his sister before focusing themselves on the man at her side.

"The lords of the north desire Alistair, son of Maric, as king of this nation," he replied, the words emerging clear and sonorous.

Leonas Bryland was the next to step forward, clearing his throat before responding.

"The lords of the east desire Alistair, son of Maric, as king of this nation."

As the general withdrew, Flora shot a surreptitious glance sideways at her once brother-warden; now husband. Alistair was gazing straight ahead, chin raised and naught but steady confidence could be found in his face. Self-assurance – boosted by the golden ring he now proudly wore on his fourth finger – radiated from him like an over-fuelled hearth. It was accompanied by a distinct tinge of impatience, and not because Maric's youngest son was ill-at-ease with the formalities of the ceremony.

Alistair Theirin had long since accepted that he was king of Ferelden, had ruled as king since the end of the Blight, and was fully aware that this coronation was more for the audience than it was for any practical purpose.

"The lords of the south desire Alistair, son of Maric, as king of this nation."

Eamon returned to his position, head bowed respectfully. The Arl of the Western Hills, who had been one of the first nobles to join their cause at Radcliffe Castle, strode forward with an equally purposeful expression.

"The lords of the west desire Alistair, son of Maric, as king of this nation."

There followed a long drumroll from a single drummer, intended to represent the assent of the voiceless freemen of Ferelden. The Grand Cleric turned with an imperious expression to Alistair; the old priestess clearly revelling in the attention.

"Alistair Theirin, do you accept the nominations of the Landsmeet?"

"I accept them," Alistair replied without a beat of hesitation, his voice strong and confident.

"Do you accept the mantle of kingship?"

"I accept it."
The Grand Cleric raised her arms once more, the ivory silk sleeves of her robe hanging down like great wings. Inch by inch, she rotated on the spot until she was facing the eternal flame and statue of Andraste. The Maker's Bride loomed at the back of the transept, thirty feet tall and wholly unamused; her sightless basalt eyes staring out over the heads of the congregation.

"Those who rest upon the throne of Ferelden must show due deference to Our Lady and submit themselves to the Maker's Will. Do so now."

Alistair shot a quick glance at Flora, who was gazing ahead with the usual ambiguous neutrality. This was the part of the ceremony that he had been most unhappy with – but it was an essential part of the coronation ritual, and its omission was unthinkable.

Turning as a pair, Theirin and Cousland turned to face the great, stern statue of Andraste. Together, they sunk down onto their knees on the cold basalt; bowing until their foreheads touched the stone.

Bent uncomfortably over her swollen stomach, Flora gritted her teeth and hoped that she wasn't going too crimson as the blood rushed to her head. The Chantry chill teased up the soft, downy hairs on the backs of her arms, and she could feel her strapped knee giving a petulant throb of protest at such artificial contortion. The only pleasure Flora could find in the whole display was that she had managed to manoeuvre her hair to one side as she knelt; revealing her Archdemon-branded back once more to the congregation. As before, a ripple of fascination ran through the audience and she heard the rustling of expensive clothing as many shifted to afford themselves a better view.

*I hope Leliana is proud of all this.*

Flora was aware of Alistair peering sideways at her, the corners of his mouth pulled unhappily taut. He had not wanted her to kneel on the cold basalt tiles, but it was an inexorable requirement of the ceremony.

"Having shown due reverence to our Maker and His Bride, you may rise," intoned the Grand Cleric, growing more mystical and exaggerated in mannerism by the moment.

Alistair immediately reached out to grip his new wife's left arm, while Fergus stepped forward to reach for her right. Together, husband and brother aided Flora to her feet; while, Flora thought privately that she could have managed adequately enough on her own.

*Though, to be fair, it would have been far less elegant.*

Just as they had rehearsed the previous day, both he and she turned together to face the congregation as another slow and steady drumbeat arose from the back of the cathedral. This hollow rhythm was soon joined by a second and a third, and then more chimed in until a single, thunderous pulse emanated up to the vaulted ceiling like the heartbeat of a slumbering Titan.

Flora extended her hand blindly to the side, and felt the cool, metal length of the sceptre being placed into her palm; Eamon's shadow falling across the flagstones. It was heavier than the stick that they had practised with, and she felt the muscles in her forearm tauten. At her side, Leonas passed Alistair the Orb of Fionne, a black onyx sphere caught in a delicate golden filigree web and crested with a Chantry symbol.

With the seamless, fluent synchrony of a pair who had rarely been further than an arms' length apart for the past year; the sceptre and Fionne's orb were exchanged with barely a mutual glance. Alistair was staring straight ahead, trying not to glare directly into the masked visage of Grand-Duc Gaspard – whom the king still resented for his ill-advised marriage proposition to Flora several weeks prior.
Flora let her gaze settle on her fisherman-father; suddenly desiring the familiarity of Herring amidst all the formality and ritualistic splendour. True to form, Pel was barely sparing her and Alistair a glance – instead, he was gaping with incredulity and suspicion at the rainbow silk ensembles of the Orlesian contingent.

In contrast to the unimpressed fisherman, the majority of the congregation were gazing avidly at the pair standing at the nave of the Grand Chantry. Each guest there was aware of the unconventional background of both figures; yet it was hard to reconcile this awareness with the smooth self-assurance on display at the front of the church.

Alistair Theirin, bearing an uncanny likeness to his father, took the sword from his bride with fluid ease; the honed muscle of a warrior’s body clearly apparent behind the form-fitting leather of his garb. Likewise, his new wife had commandeered the attention of the congregation the moment that she had unveiled herself at the front of the Chantry, deploying the well-honed edge of her traditional beauty in conjunction with the roundedness of her belly and the branding of the Archdemon’s soul upon her body. The sword had been long and weighty; she had needed two hands to lift the blade while Alistair took it with a single arm. He gave her the caged wren in return, she clutched the handle of the cage without blinking; neither of them needing to look at the other to know what their partner was doing.

The Grand Cleric moved behind them, her arms extending once more as she turned her face upwards to the bright glass window above the rear doors. This final part of the ceremony had been impeccably timed to coincide with the gradual cresting of the sun over the Chantry towers. The drumbeat stopped abruptly, its final echoing vestige reverberating between the thick line of pillars that flanked the pews.

A lay-brother, his chest swelled with importance, approached the elderly priestess with the coronal of Calenhad and Mairyn's circlet resting atop a crimson cushion. These traditional crowns were used only during the coronation of newly appointed Fereldan monarchs, their golden filigree glinting in defiance of the Chantry gloom.

Simultaneously, Leliana stepped forward, her own moment of prominence finally arriving. She took a deep breath - filling her lungs with damp air - then began to sing one of the oldest hymns in the Chantry songbook. It was an ode of praise and reverence to the Maker, beautiful and melancholy; each word imbued with solemn purpose as it emerged from the bard’s throat. Her soprano voice, clear and high, rose to the vaulted ceiling without need for artificial augmentation.

The sung notes flew like birds released from a cage, haunting and ethereal. The Grand Cleric lifted first the larger crown; a band of spiked gold crested with an onyx the size of a hen’s-egg. Alistair gazed straight ahead, his hazel eyes still and utterly focused, as the coronal of Calanhad was lowered onto his brow. The coronation crown was weightier than the golden band he customarily wore, yet his head remained unbowed.

While Alistair gazed out above the heads of the audience, Flora let her pale, clear-water stare sweep over the assembled faces last time; cool and contemplative. Behind her, the Grand Cleric took Mairyn's circlet – a stepped tiara of gold and silverite – from the proffered velvet cushion, raising it high into the air before placing it atop Flora's head.

Flora felt the weight of the metal rest heavily against her ears and lifted her chin a fraction to compensate. Her eyes settled on the grey-bearded face of her Herring-father, who was staring up at her with a mix of pride and sadness.

Papa.
Leliana finished her verse and stepped back into the ranks of lay-sisters; Eamon striding forward to take her place with a triumphant note in his voice.

"It is acknowledged and anointed," he began, the words emerging with strident resonance. "With the Maker's blessing, I present to you: King Alistair Theirin, first of his name, and Florence of Highever, Queen of Ferelden."

Alistair, perfectly on cue, raised the sword with a strong warrior's arm. The Landsmeet led the roar of approval that followed; quickly joined by Oghren and the rest of the companions. The congregation rose en masse to their feet, palms colliding in a thunderous cannonade of recognition. Scattered cries of Theirin! Theirin! and Cousland! rose up from amidst the applause.

Oh no, Flora thought, gloomily. Do I have a new family name now? It took me six months to learn how to spell Cousland. I still can't write Theirin properly.

The drumroll began once more as Alistair lowered the sword, handing it off to a carefully studious lay-brother. The king turned to his new queen and peered at her, a thread of anxiety running through his hazel stare that was visible only to Flora.

I know you never wanted all this. I'm sorry.

Flora blinked back at him, the corner of her mouth flickering upwards in the shy, private smile that she usually reserved for when they were alone.

Don't be sorry. I'm happy to be your wife and I'm ready to be your queen.

He offered her his arm and she gripped it, letting her fingers curl into the leather of his sleeve. The congregation were still clapping; the raucous din of their applause blending into the thunderous roll of the drums. As one, they descended the three shallow steps that led down to the main aisle. The audience turned to follow the progress of king and queen as they traversed between the pews, arm in arm and with matching furs draped around their shoulders.

"At least that part is over," Alistair murmured under his breath as they passed a pew full of Marchers. "I lifted the sword at the right time."

"And I didn't drop the bird," Flora replied, gazing down at her fingers as they curled against Alistair's sleeve. Mairyn's Star, plump and glossy, sat proudly atop the woven strands of gold that made up the wedding band.

A rumble of laughter sounded from within Alistair's throat and he squeezed her fingers affectionately.

"I think we both did Ferelden proud. Oh, and nice outfit, baby. Can we go and consummate our marriage now? I'm extremely up for it after seeing you dressed like that."

Flora bit back a cackle, shooting a little sideways glance at her new husband as they approached the sealed rear doorway.

"We have a seven hour feast to get through first," she replied, infusing her reply with solemnity. "And speeches. And then the Grand Cleric has to bless our marital bed before we get in it."

"Maker's Breath! You really were listening to Leliana's instructions, weren't you?"

"Mm!"
OOC Author Note: Lol longest chapter ever?

It's like a Thedas who's who at the wedding! Spot the DA:2 and DA:I cameos! Hehehe. I'm writing the bit where they get formally introduced at the feast atm, it's fun to have Flo and Alistair meet the likes of Sebastian and the Vaels, the Pentaghasts, etc etc…

So there can't be a royal wedding without a DOWRY attached! Even in the aftermath of a Blight, tradition has to be upheld – and dowries were pretty standard for any marriage in Medieval times. When two children from important dynasties were wed, the dowries were pretty hefty. When Catherine of Aragon married Arthur (Henry VIII's older brother, who died shortly after their wedding), her dowry was 200,000 escudos! Obviously I just made up the details of the dowry for Flo, but I thought it'd be fun to include. The entire wedding ceremony and traditions are also just pure headcanon, I tried to make it a mix of Medieval Catholic and Celtic ritual (plus a big dose of IMAGINATION haha). The wedding vows are based on old Celtic vows (probably not authentic ones, lol).

Incidentally, Flora wouldn't be expected to actually use Alistair's last name despite joining his family– kings and queens rarely used their surnames anyway! The Tudors were the first dynasty in England to really do so!
The Newlywed Royals

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The newly crowned king and queen of Ferelden paused before the great wooden doors at the rear of the Grand Chantry. These led out atop the high steps that descended into the Square of the Bride; where thousands of Denerim's cityfolk had now flocked to catch a glimpse of their newly anointed king and queen. Flora could almost *sense* the great mass of people swelling on the other side of the wood, and shot a quick glance sideways towards Alistair.

Alistair gazed back down at her, more used to wearing the heavy crown atop his brow than she. With a gentleness that belied the strength inherent in his muscular frame, he reached out and adjusted the angle of the golden diadem as it rested amidst the cloud of dark red hair. That being done, Alistair dropped his hand to her cheek; stroking the angle of the high bone with his thumb.

"My precious girl," he breathed, candlelight catching the sudden gleam of tears. "Despite all this... *fuss*, I swear I'm the happiest man in Thedas right now. My own sweet wife."

Flora reached up to cover his hand with her own palm, twining their fingers together in the ritual that had inspired the design of the wedding rings.

"I love you," she replied solemnly, and her northerner's lack of eloquence did not diminish the earnestness of the words.

Eamon and Fergus had manifested at their sides, Chancellor and teyrn having followed them at a respectful distance up the aisle.

"Ready to face the crowds?" Fergus asked in an undertone as two soldiers stepped forward to open the doors. "I believe half the city have come out to see you."

Alistair glanced down at Flora, who looked supremely unconcerned.

"Well, we've faced more intimidating things, haven't we, darling?"

"Yes," replied his new wife. "Like me facing down this *dress* this morning. You know it's *sewn* onto me?"

He laughed, giving her hand a hard, affectionate squeeze.

The soldiers pushed open the doors, and the sun spilled into the porch of the Grand Chantry, dust motes dancing in columns of mellow light. The breaking of sanctuary officially indicated the ending of the ceremony, and the congregation broke into excited chatter behind them; a variety of tongues melding together into a tangled polyglot that echoed to the laurel-draped, vaulted ceiling.

Yet this could not compare to the wall of sound that rolled forwards from the crowds below. The Square of the Bride was full of faces, packed with as many people as the wide expanse could contain. Only a channel through the centre remained clear, lined with shoulder-to-shoulder soldiers. Many of those present held aloft sticks decorated with crimson ribbon; waving them back and forth like a vast bank of seaweed. The roar that rose up when their crowned Theirin and his new queen emerged at the top of the high steps was almost physical in its force; a great storm-surge of sound that broke against the stone face of the Grand Chantry like waves against Herring's Hag's Teeth reef.
"Maker's Breath," muttered Fergus, his eyebrows shooting into his hairline. "I'd wager there's nobody left in the taverns."

Alistair squeezed Flora's fingers, feeling her return the pressure immediately. Having been faced with crowds whenever he had ventured out of the palace for the past month, he had grown somewhat used to them.

"Is this alright, darling?" he murmured, rubbing his thumb over each of her knuckles in turn.

"Mm," replied the stoic Flora, who was relatively sure that this crowd was no larger than the army she had addressed on the day of the final battle.

"Shall we close the door, my lord?" enquired the bolder of the two soldiers standing in the Chantry entrance.

"Leave them open," instructed Eamon, then added a quick aside to Fergus. "Let our guests hear just how loudly Ferelden values their king and queen."

With Flora's fingers still tightly anchored in his own, Alistair stepped forwards, halting at the low basalt wall. The volume of the crowd escalated as they gained a clearer view of their Theirin and his bride. The sight of Flora in her Alamarri garb, full-bellied and bare-shouldered with her hair in an untamed fall of oxblood, met with intense vocal approval – the folk of Denerim were inordinately proud of their ancestral heritage, and recognised immediately the style of her dress.

"Give her a kiss," hissed a new voice from behind them. Clearly, Finian did not want to miss an opportunity to make an appearance before the crowds. "That's what they're all waiting for."

Alistair glanced down at Flora, seeking silent permission for such a public display of affection. In place of a reply, she reached up and cradled his bearded cheek in the white-scarred palm of her hand. He smiled back at her and duly bowed his head, pressing his lips tenderly against her own.

"This is the strangest day of my life," Flora thought even as she smiled up at Alistair. A year ago I was the most useless apprentice in the Circle; getting thrown out of class for being unable to light a candle and sneaking up to the roof to try and glimpse the sea. They called me the 'Vase' – pretty to look at, but containing nothing of value.

The cheering did not abate even when they descended the steps into the vast courtyard; Alistair still keeping a tight and protective grip on his new wife's hand. The soldiers of the Royal Army kept a careful watch on the people swelling in the Square, their pikes held out to keep the eager citizens at bay as they pushed forwards for a closer glimpse.

The horses were led out from the nearby Templar stables by carefully solemn-faced initiates; their external discipline not betraying the fierce competition that had resulted in their selection for such an important role. The proudest boy led a large, muscular bay mare to the king himself, the reins
clutched in a trembling hand. The stable lads had been instructed to keep their eyes respectfully
downcast, yet several could not help staring at Flora's Alamarri garb. The soft leather clung to the
curves of her body, revealing far more flesh than was customary for a modern gown.

The king stroked the bay mare's neck, scratching it behind the ears with a familiarity honed during
years of working in the Redcliffe stables. This was the same horse which had carried them
unfalteringly along the crumbling city wall with the Archdemon in heated pursuit; she was far more
passive and placid than her bulky appearance suggested.

Satisfied that the mare was not disconcerted by the cheering crowds, the king gripped his new queen
gently about the waist and lifted her up onto the front of the saddle. Flora shifted into a more
comfortable position against the pommel, feeling Alistair swing himself easily up behind her. One
hand reached forward to take the reins, his other arm curling protectively about her belly.

"Ready, sweetheart?"

"Mm, I'm hungry."

The ride back up to the palace took nearly an hour - twice as long as it would have taken for a lone
horsemanship. The speed of the procession was hampered by the crowds and their obvious delight at
seeing the wedding party; and the reluctance of Alistair to ride at anything quicker than a leisurely
amble.

Crimson ribbons tied to sticks were waved frantically, seashells were tossed onto the dusty
thoroughfare before the slowly advancing horses, and flower wreaths hung onto the pikes of the
carefully neutral-faced soldiers that lined the route. The cheering continued unabated, along with
scattered cries of Theirin! and Cousland! The sun beamed down benevolently on the riders, the
procession trailing back for nearly a mile as the other attendees in the Grand Chantry mounted their
own horses. The people of Denerim gazed with unbridled fascination – and a hint of misgiving – at
the brightly dressed foreigners, wondering at the oiled beards of the Antivans and the silken masks of
the Orlesians.

Bringing up the rear were Loghain Mac Tir and Leonie Caron, the joint leaders of the Fereldan
Wardens, accompanied by a select handful of new recruits. The brightly polished griffins
emblazoned on their breastplates flashed in the sunlight; the distinctive silver and navy stripe of their
tunics distinguishing them from the other guests. For the first time since his fall from grace, Loghain
was not met with a chorus of jeers and booing. Instead, the people gazed at him with faintly
suspicious eyes. The residual anger at the former general's betrayal was somewhat assuaged by his
futile attempt to stay the Archdemon, which had scarred his face and cost him his leg. Rumours had
also emerged in recent weeks that Loghain had once defended the lady Cousland against an ill-
intentioned maleficar. Although the people were uncertain of the veracity of such a statement; it was
clear that Flora herself no longer bore the general any significant ill will.

Meanwhile at the forefront of the procession, Flora was busy rubbing each of Alistair's knuckles in
turn, her fingers tracing firm little circles on the back of his hand as it rested lightly on her stomach.
Despite the height of the mare, which stood a full seventeen hands above the dirt and cobblestones,
she felt secure and unassailable against her best friend's chest.

When passing through the public parts of the city, Alistair had put on the expected show – lifting his
hand in acknowledgement of the crowds, grinning at their vocal enthusiasm. Now that they had
reached the noble district, the streets were far quieter. The residents had attended the service at the
Taking full advantage of the brief lull in activity, the king had parted Flora's thick fall of hair; nudging the dark red locks over her shoulder so that he could caress the back of her neck with his lips. His mouth meandered over her bare shoulder-blades, planting a series of kisses that alternated between desirous and affectionate.

"I can't believe I have to wait until tonight to bed you," Alistair murmured in her ear, a vein of frustration running through the words. "If we'd been married in a little chapel with just our friends in attendance, I could have had you in the nearest tavern within minutes of the ceremony ending."

Flora laughed, wondering idly how dirty the soles of her feet were after walking around shoeless all day. She wound her fingers more tightly in Alistair's, tilting her head back against his shoulder.

"But then you wouldn't have been able to put on this… this show for the Orlesians," she reminded him, reasonably. "The point of all this fuss was to show them the strength of Ferelden's king."

Alistair let out a little grunt of acknowledgement, barely needing to steer the horse's head as it plodded instinctively towards the Royal hunting grounds.

"Still," he murmured, as the sawn-off forest of tree-stumps came into view; the formidable grey fortress of the palace looming at the top of the hill. "I'm definitely going to have words with Leliana. It's tantamount to cruelty to put you in an outfit like that, then make you sit chastely next to me for the rest of the day. It's torture."

Flora snorted at his dramatics, shielding her eyes against the sun as they turned onto the final approach leading to the palace.

Chapter End Notes

Awwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwww they're MARRRIIIIEEEEDDDDDDDDDDD
Once the Royal Procession arrived on the gravel forecourt before the imposing basalt façade of the Palace, Guillaume came out to greet them. He bowed very low, a smile curling upwards to meet the ends of his oiled moustache.

"Congratulations, your majesties," he murmured, watching Alistair bound expertly from the saddle and then immediately turn to reach up for his new queen. "I heard that the ceremony went impeccably, and that all in attendance were much impressed."

"News travels fast," commented the king with eyebrows raised, lifting Flora down from the saddle. Recalling that her feet were bare, he refrained from lowering her to the gravel; instead keeping her suspended in his arms. "Leliana?"

"Aye," confirmed the chief steward, as the others dismounted in a flurry of excitable chatter; the lay sister herself arriving soon after on her grey mare. "Her raven left the Grand Chantry before you did. I'm at a loss as to how she manages it, but it's rather impressive."

Leliana slid down from the saddle with the skill of a consummate horsewoman. Somehow, she had also changed from her lay-sister garb; a silver Chantry amulet rested on a peach silk gown edged with bronze lace. Her face was alight with adrenaline, the excitement making her seem a decade younger as she strode across the gravel towards both former Wardens.

"Félicitations, mes amis," she declared, kissing first Alistair and then Flora on both cheeks. "I admit, I was rather worried after the rehearsal yesterday – especially after you ate the replica Orb of Fionne, Flora – but you both were sheer perfection. I could not have asked for a better performance."

Flora smiled, delighted as her companions rode up to join them alongside other members of the Landsmeet. Oghren, who was astride a long-suffering stocky pony, dismounted with a loud crunch of gravel and let out a roar of congratulations.

"What's next, eh? At dwarven weddings, the bride and groom both get dunked in a vast vat of ale, which they then got to drink their way out of."

"Certainly not that," the bard hissed in response, unable to hide how appalled she was at the very notion. "No, this is how events will proceed-"

Leliana went on to explain the next stage of the celebrations. The afternoon and evening would be dominated by a great feast; interspersed with musical performances, dancing, speeches and even a short pageant demonstrating Ferelden's victory over the Fifth Blight. The entire event would be fuelled by vast quantities of alcohol – barrels of honey mead larger than Qunari had been dusted off and brought up from the cellar, accompanied by hundreds of bottles from every corner of Thedas. Antivan port strained the wine-racks, alongside Orlesian brandy, Marcher ale and even a rare, extremely potent fire-whiskey from Rivain. The first part of the feast would see the guests all seated within the great hall, whereby Flora and Alistair would then enter and take their seats at the highest table. The more notable guests and foreign dignitaries would then file past for a formal introduction, simultaneously offering their congratulations.

Flora was only half-listening to the bard. The most stressful part of the day was over – the ritualistic
ceremony in the Grand Chantry – and as far as she was concerned, as long as she managed not to spill soup down her front, the rest of the day would be a success.

Instead, she was craning her neck in an effort to try and see her Herring-father. Zevran, who had ridden up alongside Fergus, was chatting idly to the teyrn; disguising the dull ache in his heart by making a surfeit of jokes and witty remarks. Nearby, Eamon, Teagan and Leonas Bryland conferred in low voices, agreeing that the coronation itself – and Flora’s Alamarri-inspired appearance – had been a definite success.

Yet there was no sign of Pel, and Flora felt her brow crease in confusion. This crease only deepened as she and Alistair were guided inside the Royal Palace; where they were greeted by the entire assembled castle staff – over a hundred in total. The gathered servants gave a lusty round of applause, pleased that the Royal baby would no longer have the shadow of bastardy looming over its small head. A legitimate Theirin heir meant stability and security; both for the future of their nation, and for their own employment within the castle.

Leliana guided Alistair and Flora quickly away from the public areas of the palace, aware that the guests would soon start to arrive. She led them down a narrow, well-appointed corridor and past a series of realistic Mabari hunting tapestries, finally leaving them alone in a small receiving chamber. The room contained a hearth, couch, candelabra and little else; the noise from the adjacent great hall filtering through the party wall.

Alistair eyed the couch with an appraising view, wondering if he could quickly consummate his marriage against the stuffed cushions and have a practice round with his wife without the unwanted audience. If Flora had not been distracted, a similar thought would have occurred to her – in fact, she would have already have bent herself over the arm of the couch, pulling her skirts impatiently to the side. However, Flora was anxious over the odd absence of her Herring-dad, who she had last seen seated beside Finian in the Grand Chantry.

The thought was soon driven from her mind as Alistair ran greedy hands over leather and bare skin; cupping her part-covered breasts in his palms with a low moan of desire. He had just tugged the bodice low enough to reveal her nipple when they heard footsteps and familiar voices in the corridor outside. Alistair let out a throaty grunt of frustration, unable to stop himself from flicking the tip of his tongue over the little pink peak before reluctantly tautening the bodice strings.

Moments later Finian entered with a slightly odd expression on his face; reaching up to run a nervous hand through his autumnal curls. The movement dislodged the thin golden arl’s circlet, and he moved it back into place with an impatient grunt.

"Flossie, petal?"

Alistair shot a quick sideways glance at his former sister-warden, whose brow was furrowed in consternation.

"What's wrong?" she breathed back in response, knowing instinctively that all was not well. "Tell me."

Finian came to an abrupt halt, grimacing without meaning to; aware that he was about to be the bearer of bad news.

"I've tried to persuade him to stay," he began, velvet-clad shoulders rising in a helpless shrug. "Zev is trying to delay him right now. I'm sorry."

Alistair looked vaguely confused, head swivelling between the two Cousland siblings. Flora - who
knew exactly what her brother was talking about - felt her stomach plummet, a sudden, sharp curl of nausea snaking its way through her belly.

"My dad's leaving," she said in a small voice, barely registering Finian's nod of confirmation. "Isn't he?"

Alistair's jaw dropped and he gave a quick, disbelieving shake of the head.

"No, Lo, that can't be right," he replied, immediately. "Why would he leave today of all days?"

But Flora did not stay to offer any response. With a rustle of leather she had stridden off down the corridor; bare feet making hasty progress against the cool stone tiles. Alistair and Finian exchanged a quick glance, then followed rapidly in her wake.

As she retracted their route down the corridor, Flora fought to suppress the nausea that rose with every step. These were servants' passages, mostly deserted since the majority of the castle was assisting with preparations for the feast. Occasionally, a dwarven steward or human maid would flatten themselves against the wall with a squeak of surprise, before quickly dropping into startled bows.

Questions kept breaking on the surface of Flora's mind like loose fragments of fishing net; she unsuccessfully tried to submerge them again.

You knew he wouldn't stay forever. He's already missed most of the summer fishing season. He has to go back to Herring.

But I'm not ready for him to leave.

You'll never be ready.

Flora inhaled unsteadily, pushing her way through a door and emerging, squinting, into bright sunlight. Knowing that her father would not want to use the main road leading up to the palace – not with the last few wedding guests still making their way in – she had headed instead for the back courtyard. This led to the palace's more discreet rear exit route through the apple orchard; the one that she had once taken with Riordan, Sten and Oghren.

Her hunch had paid off: her Herring-father stood in the middle of the gravel courtyard, a battered leather pack slung over one shoulder and his fishing rod resting against the other. His eyes were narrowed against the early-afternoon sun, a dubious expression on his face as he gazed at the slender elf stood before him. Zevran was clearly exercising his full powers of persuasion; yet all the Antivan charm and guile in the world could not wear down a northerner's obstinacy.

"Pa?"

It was a single word containing a book's worth of questions, the hurt raw and exposed as a fresh abrasion on the skin.

Peli raised his dark gaze over the elf's shoulder; a resigned expression setting over his lattice-wrinkled face. His mouth tautened behind the full, grey beard and he lifted his chin to silently greet his adopted daughter.

"Lo siento, mi florita," murmured Zevran as he stepped back with head bowed. "I tried my best to change his mind."

Flora stopped abruptly on the gravel a yard away from her fisherman-father, barely noticing the
throbbing of her bare feet. The baby stretched sleepily against the confines of her stomach, and she ignored it.

"Papa," Flora repeated, her eloquence deserting her. Her thoughts were squirming like oiled fish in a bucket; she could not grasp one to enunciate it clearly.

"You've a husband now," muttered Pel, jerking his head towards where Alistair stood at Zevran's side, his face drawn and unhappy. "Don't need me to stay."

"But I do need you," Flora whispered, feeling the tears rising unprompted to her eyelashes. "You can't leave me here."

You're my Herring, the plea continued, unspoken but clear. You can't take that away from me.

"What can I offer you to stay, ser?" the king asked, without much hope. Flora had learnt her stubbornness from her Herring-father, and Pel's obstinacy was honed over five decades. "Name anything, and it's yours. As much as it's in my power to give."

"I need t' get back t'north coast," muttered the fisherman, as Flora inhaled unsteadily. "Got to reinforce the tide-break barrier before summer storms set in. The beacon on t'Hag's Teeth needs repairin'."

Without warning Flora dropped to her knees before him on the gravel, Mairyn's circlet slipping sideways in her mass of hair.

"Please- " she wailed, as a horrified Alistair reached down to her. "You can't! You can't go- "

"Flora Cove!"

The voice emerging from the fisherman's tangled beard was as sharp as the Teeth themselves. Flora's head shot up reflexively; this was a tone that she was familiar with from her childhood.

"I didn't raise yeh to fall about weepin'," Pel continued, harshly. "I raised a lass who gets a job done. You got a new job to do, here- "

He waved a vague, weather-beaten hand that somehow encompassed crown, castle and throne; shooting her a stern look.

"So get on wi' it and stop this blubberin'. You're a Herring lassie, ain't yeh?"

Flora stared numbly down at her own bitten-nailed fingers as they curled into the gravel; the plump white jewel of Mairyn's Star catching her eye as it sat above the twisted golden loop of the wedding band.

There'd be no pearl at all without the grit at its heart, she repeated to herself, recalling her thoughts from the ride to the Chantry. If you scratch away the fancy layers of finery, it's still just a speck of dirt.

She took a deep breath, drawing from the sandy grit at the centre of her soul; summoning every inch of the northern stoicism that had been embedded in her over the course of ten years. The tears arrested themselves on her eyelashes and she blinked them back, determinedly.

No matter how much they dress me up and call me majesty; I'll still have Herring sitting like a layer of silt in my heart. It won't ever leave me.
Pel squinted down at his adopted daughter, his suspicious stare searching her face. A white-faced Flora gazed solemnly back at him; faint tear marks on her cheeks the only trace of her distress. The next moment, she had taken Alistair's anxiously extended hand, heaving herself to her bare feet with a little grunt of effort.

"Sorry, pa."

"S'alright, lass," he mumbled, shouldering his pack before nudging his thumb brief and affectionate against Flora's damp cheek. "Don't chase after me, now."

With one more glance up at the imposing heights of the Royal Palace, Pel cleared his throat; directing his final words to both Alistair and Finian.

"Look after my girl, eh?"

The old fisherman turned abruptly, setting one foot before the other as he made his way across the gravel towards the apple orchard. Flora stood motionless, barely registering the blood trickling from her grazed knees; her eyes not leaving the broad-shouldered figure until he had disappeared between the trees and vanished from view.

She hung her head for a brief moment, then took a deep breath and lifted her chin. Reaching up, Flora adjusted the angle of the golden diadem on her head until it sat proud and straight once again.

"Sweetheart," breathed Alistair, his eyes bruised with concern. "I don't know what to say. I'm so sorry, my love."

"I knew he wouldn't come to the feast," Flora said, in a small and dejected voice. "I knew he wouldn't sit next to all those... fancified people. I just didn't think that he would- he would leave."

Zevran gave a little grimace of apology as a seagull overhead let out an irritable caw; just having been threatened with violence from the sweating kitchen staff.

"I'm sorry, carina. My persuasive tongue rarely lets me down, but your old man is... well. He is very stubborn. I attempted to beguile him into staying, but to no avail."

"Thank you for trying," Flora replied, her pale eyes searching the elf's tattooed face. "And thank you for coming to get me."

This second remark was directed towards Finian, who gave a wan half-smile of apology.

For a moment the four of them stood silently together on the gravel, the afternoon sun bearing down on top of their heads. A salt-edged breeze blew in from the ocean over the ramparts, and this breath of freshness seemed to give Alistair some new inspiration.

"Darling, why don't we take a detour on the royal progress to visit Herring? We can stop there on the way to Highever."

Flora's face immediately flooded with hope; she turned to her new husband, wide-eyed and astonished.

"We could do that? Really?"

Out of his sister's eye-line, Finian gave a wince of sympathy: volunteering to visit the grimmest, sourest little village on the northern coast was a true act of love.
The king nodded, feeling a swell of pride in his gut at his new queen's transparent delight. Flora reached out her arms to embrace him; he drew her against his chest and pressed a kiss to the top of her head. The baby, indignant at being ignored earlier, squirmed hard enough for both of them to feel. Alistair beamed, dropping a hand as he drew back to caress the leather-encased swell. The next moment, his eyebrows shot into his hairline with surprise.

"Maker's Breath, Flo! You're roasting."

"It's the stupid leather dress," Flora retorted, feeling a bead of sweat running down her forehead. "It's so tight, I feel like a sea-snake with two skins."

"Let's get back inside," Alistair replied, relieved that his bride seemed somewhat cheered. "I bet you ten silver that Leliana is having conniptions wondering where we are."

Fortunately, the lay sister had been delayed with a minor incident over seating arrangements – the Vaels could not be sitting opposite the Trevelyans, due to a recent trade dispute. She arrived in the small chamber adjacent to the great hall minutes after the bridal couple themselves returned.

The sharp-eyed Leliana soon detected that something was amiss; not fooled by Alistair and Flora sitting innocently side-by-side on the velvet couch beside the hearth. Her eagle-like stare went straight to Flora's bloodied knee, sore feet, and slightly smeared kaddis below her damp eyes.

"Créateur! What on Thedas- "

No longer wasting any time with words, Leliana pulled two silk handkerchiefs from her sleeves with a jester's flourish, swooping forwards with steely determination. A handful of minutes later and the blood had been cleaned, the kaddis refined and the eyes patted dry.

"There we go, ma fleur," murmured Leliana, drawing back to survey her work. "Now, are we ready to proceed into the great hall?"

Alistair, despite the ominous spectre of upcoming prolonged socialisation, beamed reflexively; squeezing Flora's knee gently as they rose to their feet in unrehearsed synchrony.

"I'm going to be the envy of every man in the room," the king declared, his gaze sweeping over his new wife from head to toe once again. "My wild rose."

Flora smiled up at him, reaching out to entwine their fingers together in the familiar fish-rope ritual that meant far more than any of the Chantry traditions they had enacted today.

Chapter End Notes

OOC Author Note: OK I definitely want to bring back the archaic word STRIDDEN (another word for strode), lol. Flo still talks to herself in her head, an old habit from when her spirits used to respond to her.
Flora had gained a glimpse of the wedding feast preparations in the great hall during her nocturnal wanderings; but this would not have prepared her for the sheer transformation that the largest chamber in the Palace had undergone in the past few hours. The great hall's ceiling reached near sixteen metres in height, the ornate wooden scaffolding decorated with trailing banners a dozen feet long. There were so many pennants hanging from the rafters that the eaves had been transformed into a riotous assembly of colour; the emblems of all the great Fereldan houses represented. The flint and timber walls, decorated with meticulously arranged shields and weaponry, were lined with full-sized laurel trees in ceramic planters.

Long wooden tables lined three sides of the room, accompanied by chairs sufficient for several hundred people. The candelabras and blooming flower set-pieces were almost hidden by the massive quantity of food arranged in cauldrons, on platters, in little dishes and on tiered stands. The first course had been set out already – beef marrow fritters, miniature pastries filled with cod liver, cuts of meat in cinnamon sauce and eels in a spicy puree. There was a large space left between the arranged tables for dancing, and a small wooden stage had been constructed in one corner for minstrels.

At the far end of the hall was a raised stone platform, upon which the top table rested. In the centre, two large and ornately carved wooden thrones stood side by side, flanked by chairs of diminishing grandness. Overhead, a great green-and-white wooden table was hung on the back wall; this was allegedly the table at which Calenhad and the Alamarri tribal leaders had sat to discuss the unification of Ferelden. Nobody knew if there was any truth in the object's history, but it had become one of the nation's most revered relics regardless.

The guests were already assembled along the tables – men and women from all corners of Thedas; many of whom had travelled for several weeks to reach Denerim. Naturally, they were seated according to dynasty and nation, the colours of a hundred different liveries gathered in distinct groupings along the tables. The Valmonts were clad in blue and argent, clustered around Grand-Duc Gaspard; their expressions tactfully hidden by silvered face masks. The Pentaghasts of Nevarra were seated nearby in stripes of mustard and black, their richly hued skin and dark hair in stark contrast to the pallid, sun-shunning Orlesians. The Marcher families were seated according to alliance; green-clad Trevelyans at the opposite end of the table to the four redheaded attendees from House Vael. Flanked with a glowering Templar guard, a group of Tevinter magisters gossiped quietly at the furthest table; they had come solely for a glimpse of the Archdemon’s markings left on the lady Cousland's body.

Flora's companions – as veterans of the Fifth Blight - had been afforded a table at the very front of the room, second only to the top table itself. They sat adjacent to the Landsmeet; Leliana’s seat empty as the bard continued to orchestrate proceedings from behind the scenes. Oghren was already getting stuck into the free-flowing Antivan port, greeting Zevran with a hiccup as the elf slid neatly into his assigned place.

Finian also arrived late to the top table, where the members of the King's Council were already seated. Fergus shot his younger brother an enquiring stare from the corner of his blue-grey eye; nodding thanks to an elven servant who had just finished refilling his ale.

"Where've you been?"
“Minor crisis,” the middle Cousland sibling replied, taking his seat and exhaling. Leonas Bryland, who was sitting at the adjacent chair, gave a small grunt.

“What crisis?”

“Flora’s ‘pa’ just left.”

Nearby, Eamon abruptly broke off his conversation; leaning sideways across his brother to listen in.

“What do you mean, the man's left?”

“Gone, departed, défunt,” explained Finian, with a helpless wave of his fingers. "Apparently there are lobster pots in Herring that need repairing, or something along those lines. He's gone."

"He's missing the feast? That's always the best part of a wedding!"

Fergus fell into a bemused silence, while Eamon and Leonas shared a mutual grimace. Teagan, who understood a little better why one might desire to spurn noble festivities, let out a soft sound of sympathy under his breath.

"Poor creature - is she alright?"

Eamon, meanwhile, had more practical concerns on his mind. Flora had played her role to perfection in the Grand Chantry; he did not want her bursting into tears at the sight of the jellied eels. Finian, who had learnt to read the face like a book during his tenure in Orlais, let the corner of his scarred mouth tug upwards in a wry smile.

"Don't worry. I highly doubt she's going to collapse weeping into her bowl."

Just then, the herald at the entrance gave a loud and resonant bellow, demanding the attention of those present within the chamber. There was a prompt clatter as tankards and flagons were downed, knives replaced on plates and general conversation paused.

"All rise for their majesties, the king and queen of Ferelden!"

There followed a scraping of chairs as those assembled dutifully rose; eyes turning to the vast archway at the far end of the room. The minstrels in the corner struck up one of Ferelden's most well-known patriotic songs, 'The Legend of Calenhad, First of his Name.'

The king and queen of Ferelden entered the great hall a moment later. Instead of the bride resting a delicate hand upon the groom’s arm in the customary manner, their fingers were wound together in a show of mutual support and joint strength. The king was more jovial than he had been when immersed in the sacred formality of the Chantry; at ease with the attention and inordinately proud of his new wife. Those older dignitaries present noted once more Alistair's resemblance to Maric; father and son possessed the same long-limbed, muscular warrior's frame, accompanied by honest and handsome features. They also shared the same tousled, burnished gold hair, which never quite rested flat despite liberal application of water and the weight of a crown.

His northerner bride still had not spared a smile for any other apart from her husband, her pale grey stare sweeping quickly across the audience as though finding little worthy of resting her eyes on. The haughty, finely-hewn features were undoubtedly beautiful, but as unapproachable as her cool gaze. Those who knew Flora were aware that this grave stillness was just the natural set of her face; that the solemnity was a mask that she used to disguise her nervousness; that the coldness of the limpid, dark-lashed eyes was utterly misleading considering the shy and obliging character of the girl within.
Eamon let out an inward sigh of relief on seeing no crack in Flora's stony exterior. If Alistair was bright, burnished gold; she appeared the steely silverite that added strength to the alloy.

Alistair and Flora proceeded hand in hand across the space left clear for dancing, the length of his stride carefully tempered not to out-pace his barefoot wife. Flora could feel the heat of several hundred pairs of eyes; no surprise, since the Alamarri garb was cut to show off the ripe curves of her fecund body as well as the Archdemon's traces on her skin. This did not bother her overmuch – she was used to being closely observed in varying states of dress from her tenure at the Circle.

King and queen made their way steadily up towards the top table. Flora passed her companions seated at a prominent table near the front; she turned her head to the side and smiled at them, her face lit like sunlight dappled across seawater. Wynne smiled back at her wryly, trying not to chuckle. The senior enchanter knew full well that Flora thought this whole charade ridiculous – why did she and Alistair have to proceed formally into the hall together? They'd already proceeded out of the Chantry! Why can't we just walk into the room with everyone else?!

Zevran and Oghren were also trying to stifle snickers as the couple proceeded up to the thrones at the top table. The dwarf had just made his hundredth lewd remark of the day; this time wondering if Flora remained so stern and straight-faced in the bedchamber.

"Trust me," the elf replied, with the over-familiar air of the consummate voyeur. "She doesn't."

To Flora's dismay, the two wooden thrones were the most uncomfortable seats at the top table. They were astonishing pieces of craftsmanship, carved with Fereldan hunting scenes – his had a pair of Mabari tussling over the corpse of a halla, while she had a hunter atop a horse with a hawk perched on his arm. The carven hawk was protuberant enough to stick directly into the base of her naked back.

There came a few moments of noise and bustle as those standing took their seats once again, following the leads of king and queen. Fergus, who was seated at his sister's side, noticed her shifting uncomfortably in place.

"What's wrong, Floss?"

"Nothing," she said hastily, not wishing to cause a fuss before the assembled audience.

Now that the king and queen had arrived, the eating could resume. The guests gratefully picked up spoons and knives once more, setting into a banquet that had taken two dozen cooks a full week to prepare. The minstrels struck up a jovial melody of Fereldan folk-songs; many of which Flora recognised as native to her beloved northern coast.

"You're going to have to eat in sporadic bursts," Eamon murmured quietly in Alistair's ear. "The formal introductions will begin in just a moment, and they'll last quite a while."

"How long?" Alistair asked in mild dismay, having already placed an entire wheel of cheese and several thick slices of rye bread onto his platter.

"Until the soup course," chimed in Teagan from the far end of the table, passing down a flagon of Antivan port. "At least."

Alistair grumbled under his breath, forking a defiant mouthful of sharp Fereldan cheddar into his mouth.

Meanwhile, beside him, Flora let out a little squeak of recognition. She nudged Alistair in the ribs, her face lighting up.
"Alistair, listen to what the musicians are playing! Do you recognise it?"

Alistair obediently canted his head to the side and listened. The minstrels were playing a haunting, beautiful melody with an echoing refrain that raised the fine hairs on the back of his neck.

"It's a pretty tune but I don't think I know it, darling."

Flora drew her eyebrows together at him in disapproval, nudging him a little harder.

"It's *Bones in the Sand*, the traditional Herring wedding song. I've sung it a hundred times, you should have recognised it!"

Alistair mouthed for a moment, unsure how to explain that Flora's dissonant caterwauling sounded nothing like the sweet, lilting melody currently drifting to the rafters of the great hall.

"Ah, I think I must be tone-deaf, my love," he said kindly after a moment. "Of course it is."

"I'm not surprised he didn't recognise it," chimed in Finian, who had already ingested half a pint of Orlesian brandy. "Floss, your singing sounds like a drunken dwarf passing a kidney stone."

Finian then immediately redeemed himself by leaning sideways with the low cushion from his own chair, sliding it behind Flora to act as a barrier between carved bird's beak and bare back. Just then, the herald made everyone jump and drop their knives by bellowing across the echoing expanse of the great hall.

"*The Grand Duc of Verchiel, Gaspard de Chalons!*"

The first guest to climb the three stone steps onto the elevated platform was the *Grand-Duc* Gaspard. The Orlesian noble had been staying within the noble district since his unsuccessful proposition of Flora, and had spent the fortnight gathering information on the strength of Ferelden's new leaders.

Now dressed from head to toe in the cornflower blue and argent of House Valmont, Gaspard advanced along the table and came to a halt before Ferelden's newly crowned monarchs. He bowed, removing his elaborate mask in the same seamless gesture. The members of the Landsmeet bristled slightly; Teagan shifting in his seat and double-checking that his dagger was in its sheath.

"*Félicitations, vos majestés,*" the *duc* murmured in his distinct Val Royeaux accent, the clever blue eyes moving from Alistair to Flora in turn. "That was a very… unique ceremony."

Alistair bowed his head in acknowledgement, jaw stiff with the effort of maintaining a neutral demeanour.

"I pass on the congratulations of my niece, the Empress Celene, also," Gaspard continued; the corner of his mouth curving upwards superciliously. "I am sure that she will be writing to you soon to express such in her own words."

"Well, I await her correspondence with bated breath," Alistair replied drily, taking a gulp of ale. "I'm sure it'll make great bedtime reading."

The *duc* nodded and made to continue along to the end of the platform; the next moment he paused, unable to resist throwing one final jibe.

"But one query – forgive me – I thought that the ceremony was to be held in Ferelden's *Grand* Chantry? What made you change your mind and hold it in a… lesser church?"
Alistair tightened his jaw at the none-too-subtle implication that Ferelden's most important Chantry somehow did not deserve the prefix *Grand* – not like the famous Great Cathedral in the Orlesian capital. Eamon sighed under his breath; at the far end of the table, Teagan let out a dark mutter.

"I don't think the Maker cares much about gilded tiles and expensive mosaics," the new queen offered quietly without looking up, having heard Leliana's description of the Cathedral at Val Royeaux many times. It was the first Flora had spoken since commenting on the minstrel's tune earlier. "Andraste worshipped Him under the naked sky while kneeling in the dirt clad in rags, and He loved her no less for it."

She raised her pale, cool eyes to the *duc*, unimpressed by his snide remark. Gaspard gazed back at her and then smiled, relenting with calculated graciousness.

"Very true, *ma reine*. Congratulations once again."

He bowed as much as his Valmont pride would allow; replacing the silver domino on his face and advancing to the end of the platform to descend the steps.

Flora speared a piece of smoked cod with her knife, and then nearly dropped it as Alistair gave her a little nudge of delight. He looked about to say something, then simply grinned and kissed her on the cheek; lips lingering against the skin.

"*Lord Vael of Starkhaven and his sons!*"

The Marcher family wore matching red and tan checked tartan, their ceremonial daggers sheathed on their belts. Each member possessed rich auburn hair – though Lord Vael's shoulder-length locks were beginning to fade with age - and the same shade of startlingly vibrant blue eyes.

"Well met, your majesties," declared the Lord of Starkhaven, the Chantry amulet around his neck dropping low as he bowed. "May I introduce my heir and younger sons – Corbinian, Gideon and Sebastian."

The two eldest Vael sons made identical bows, murmuring their polite congratulations. After a deep bow, the youngest – Sebastian – reached out to anchor Flora's hand in his own, kissing the back of her fingers with deliberate reverence.

"You remind me of a famous Marcher poem, your majesty," he said, each word coated with the distinctive Starkhaven burr. "*Lips pink as the blush of a maid, hair red as the sunset in Solace.*"

Flora, who did not understand the purpose of poetry, stared at him blankly. Alistair appreciated neither the over-familiar tone of the young prince - nor his reference to Flora's *lips* - and narrowed his eyes.

Lord Vael, sensing an impending diplomatic incident, swiftly cut over his youngest son.

"*Sebastian!* Any more of that nonsense, and I'll have you sent to the monastery. Alistair, may I just say how strongly you resemble your father?"

The next few minutes were spent in harmless conversation about Maric, during which Flora subtly ate another mouthful of smoked cod and Sebastian sulked alongside his brothers.

As the Marcher lord and his sons retreated back to their own table, Finian leaned behind his brother's chair and poked Flora in the arm. She looked at him through a mouthful of jellied eel, eyebrows raised.
"What did you think of the oldest son? His father had plans for you and he to be married!"

Fergus, who had not told his sister of the proposals he had rejected on her behalf, kicked his brother promptly under the table. Flora, who had no idea what Finian was talking about, swallowed her jellied eels and smiled vaguely.

"Well, we'd have had lots of redheaded children. I barely understood a word he was saying, though, with that accent."

"Not necessarily a bad thing for a marriage," replied Finian, with a little snicker.

Chapter End Notes

OOC Author Note: So we've got some Trevelyans, Pentaghasts, Kirkwall nobles and Antivans to meet next chapter! I like doing these little cameos. They're actually pretty unrealistic – in real Medieval times, national leaders would have sent envoys and ambassadors in their stead, since travel was so dangerous and lengthy. But let's just ignore that because I like name-dropping all these characters from DA2 and DA:I, hehe.

I envision the great hall as looking like the great hall in Winchester (even down to the green and white table, although that has (false) Arthurian origins). It's easily google-able if anyone wants a mental location to envisage!

The food sounds ABSOLUTELY DISGUSTING – but is all authentic to Medieval banquets, haha. Jellied eels, cod liver, beef marrow… eeeehhhhhhh.

I mentioned that Teagan knew what it was like to not want the noble lifestyle - this is based on him initially not wanting to leave the Marches and take up the position of Bann of Rainesfere (which he did so reluctantly, on the request of his brother). Based off his DA wikia page!

Sebastian's eyes freak me out so much! Why are they SO blue? They remind me of toilet cleaner/bleach.
The Crow

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The next man to make his way up to the Royal table did so at a leisurely pace, with a smirk playing across his features. He had olive skin and a curling dark beard, scented with a pomade so strong that it overwhelmed the odour of roasted meat rising from the platters. A golden hoop hung from his left ear, and matching rings decorated his calloused fingers. He was clad in a spectrum of gaudy colours; a mustard yellow shirt, forest-green breeches and an eye-catching crimson waistcoat. As he strolled along the platform, there came a sudden metallic clatter from the lower tables, as though someone had abruptly dropped their knife.

"Claudio Valisti of Antiva!"

"Your majesties," murmured the Antivan trade-prince, dropping into an ornate bow. "May I pass on the gratitude of all Antiva for your role in vanquishing the Fifth Blight; which would surely have come to threaten our shores in time."

Alistair nodded while Flora gazed at the man in slight awe, having never seen before such a rainbow of riotous colour on one man.

"As you can see for yourself, Ferelden is free from Blight," Eamon interjected politely, his green Guerrin eyes fixing themselves on the merchant-prince's tan face. "So there's no need to maintain the quarantine on our ships. It's in both of our interests to lift the embargo and open the trade routes up again."

"Sí," murmured Claudio Valisti, a smile pulling at the corner of his mouth. "It would seem that the quarantine is no longer necessary. We will have to discuss terms before I return to Antiva, sí lo desea."

For no reason other than the merchant-prince had spoken in his native tongue, Flora let her gaze slide downwards to where her own Antivan companion was sitting. To her alarm, Zevran was visibly quivering behind the table; rigid as a board and white as a winding-sheet, the rich, stewed-tea colour of his skin entirely drained. His eating-knife lay on the floor – it had been him who had dropped the utensil – and Leliana was hunched at his side, whispering urgently into his ear. As Flora watched in alarm, the elf rose silently to his feet and slipped out through a side-entrance, pale and insubstantial as a ghost flitting through the Veil.

"Anyway," continued the merchant-prince, a gold tooth glinting as he smiled. "Let us not discuss business on such a joyous occasion. Felicitaciones on your nuptials, King Alistair. Your wife is a flower in all meanings of the word. The flower to which all the butterflies flock."

"She is," agreed Alistair, slightly gruffly. He was not one for grandiose metaphors, but was readily prepared to agree with anyone who praised his best friend's beauty.

The merchant-prince bowed his head, his dark Antivan eyes sliding sideways to Fergus.

"Speaking of beautiful women, I must give my commiserations to the teyrn. Oriana Orsini was a jewel, stolen from us far too soon. I dined with her father a fortnight ago - he was gratified to hear of Howe's death, yet distraught that he could not pursue his own vendetta against the treacherous bastardo."
Fergus had half-thought that his wife's family might attend the coronation, and did not know whether he was disappointed or relieved at their absence. He gave a small nod, not quite trusting himself to give a verbal reply. The loss of his son was still far too near a tragedy to speak of in public; especially when the most important eyes in Thedas rested upon him.

Claudio Valisti retreated to his seat with another elaborate bow; Flora noticed that Zevran had still not returned to the table. Her stomach gave a slight roll of trepidation – she had never before seen the elf so visibly disconcerted, not even when confronted with demons or Darkspawn. She was about to nudge Alistair, when the steward announced a pause in the formal introductions to allow the next course to be served.

This was clearly going to be a lengthy process – servants flooded in from every available doorway, exchanging empty plates and tureens for freshly-prepared platters. Whole geese stuffed with aniseed and other spices were escorted by freshwater fish and capon and olive pastries. Great cauldrons of broth with bacon accompanied slabs of herbed venison, blackberry and veal tartlets, and roast bream with darioles. Giant pots of leek and chicken stew were carried between pairs of sweating servants.

"I need to use the privy," Flora whispered in Fergus' ear, patting her swollen stomach as an excuse. "Sorry. Can I get out?"

Alistair's head swivelled as his new wife made to leave, fingers extending to rest on her bare wrist.

"Darling?"

Flora put her mouth to his cheek in the pretence of kissing him, instead directing a whisper into his ear.

"Zevran went as white as a fish belly when he saw that man, then ran off. I'm going to see what's wrong."

Unable to resist, she then planted a real kiss on her husband's bearded cheek; wishing that she could sit in his lap and embrace him properly.

Alistair gave a little nod, reaching out to touch her chin affectionately with his thumb.

"Take Leliana," he murmured, dropping his hand to grip her fingers, then bringing them up to his mouth and kissing them. "I won't have you wandering the palace alone with all these strangers."

Flora nodded, clambering to her feet. To her astonishment, there followed a cacophonous scraping of chairs as the entire banquet hall hastily rose to their feet in a show of respect; heads swivelling towards her.

"So much for my stealthy exit," Flora thought to herself with a little grimace, raising her chin and heading towards the same exit that Zevran had darted out of a short while earlier. After receiving a pointed stare from Alistair, Leliana dabbed her lips with a linen napkin and padded softly in the queen's wake; drawing far less attention to herself.

Zevran had exited the room through a servants' passage, which was fortunately limited in its choice of destination. With Leliana on her heels, Flora ventured down the torch-lit corridor; avoiding the chattering servants as they carried empty platters and piles of tankards back to the kitchens.

"Why did he leave?" Flora asked over her shoulder, the flagstones cold against her bare feet. Leliana gave an elegant shrug, her pale blue eyes darting behind them to ensure that they had not been followed.
"You will have to ask him, ma petite. Here, try this way – I doubt he's gone as far as the kitchens."

The bard gestured to a wooden door on the left, tucked away beneath a discreet archway. Flora nudged tentatively at the door, which gave way into a vaulted storage chamber. Rows of wooden shelving stood empty apart from the occasional cracked bowl or tarnished silver platter. It was lit by high windows set into the wall overhead, dusty afternoon sunlight filtering in through half-opened shutters.

At the far end of the chamber, the elf perched with feline elegance on a low wooden bench. He was gazing unseeing at the cobwebbed stone wall before him, fingers running compulsively over the linen-wrapped handle of his blade. Another knife lay across his thigh; the silverite gleaming like arcane fire in the filtered sunlight. Although he must have heard them come in – Zevran had the hearing of a bat – he remained motionless, dark eyes fixed on nothing.

"Zevran! Why are you hiding back here?" Leliana demanded, aware that the second course would not take forever to set out. "What's wrong, chérie?"

The elf made no reply, though his fingers shivered on the blade's handle. Flora sat beside him on the bench, her knee relieved at the sudden lack of pressure; and methodically removed each of the knives from Zevran's person, placing them carefully to one side. Next she lifted the crown from her head, letting Mairyn's ancient circlet rest gently beside the blades.

Sharp objects now removed, Flora put her arms about the elf, reaching about his lean torso to embrace him. She did not need a spirit of Compassion to tell her that her friend was in pain; it was writ naked across his richly-hued face. For a moment Zevran remained rigid in her arms and Flora loosened her grip, giving him the choice whether to pull away or return her embrace.

Ultimately he chose the latter, drawing her arms more tightly around his chest. Ironically enough for one who had been raised without much physical affection, Flora had a natural affinity for giving it. She rested her cheek on Zevran's shoulder, letting one palm smooth gently up and down the lean muscle of his back. From this angle she could see each fine line snaking its way outwards from the elf's eye; intersecting with the faded pigment of his tattoos.

Zevran inhaled against her unruly mass of hair for several moments, breathing in the remnants of Chantry incense and Leliana's violet perfume. It was a rich and heady scent, and it took some measure of willpower for the elf to draw back; pulling in a quick gulp of mildewed storage-chamber air to ground himself.

"I am sorry, carina," he murmured, sensing Flora's anxious grey eyes searching his face. "Give me but a moment to compose myself and we shall return to the feast."

Flora nodded, without making further enquiry. As a native of Herring, she knew that prying open a locked container would often damage its contents; whereas if it were left to sit out in the wind and saltwater spray, it would yield in its own time.

As it turned out, Flora did not need to wait long. She had just dropped her gaze to her bitten fingernails when Zevran spoke, his carefully measured words echoing about the hollow storage chamber.

"Three years ago, Claudio Valisti took out a contract with my Crow house-master, Eoman Arainai. The contract was on a bastard daughter of Prince Estefan, who was accused of plotting against the throne. A woman by the name of- "

"Rinna," breathed Flora, remembering a conversation in the Brecilian Forest six months prior.
The elf gave a single nod, a flicker passing across his dark eyes.

"I claim no innocence in the matter, Taliesin and I carried out the contract on her life. Only afterwards did I learn that the evidence was a fabrication; that it was merely a ploy by my House father to demonstrate how worthless each Crow was. That our lives did not matter, and that bonds of friendship were merely illusory."

Flora stared at her friend for a moment, then reached out and took his elegant, long-fingered hand in her own, squeezing their palms tightly together.

"What do you want to happen?" she mumbled, bringing their conjoined hands to her throat and clamping them beneath her chin. "Alistair can have him thrown out of the palace. Then I can deliver some Herring-style street justice."

Zevran smiled as Leliana paled, bowing his head in response to Flora's offer of vengeance.

"Ah, mi florita, I wish for no diplomatic incident to arise from my actions. Though I appreciate the offer, nena."

Flora gazed at her friend a moment more, still anchoring his fingers with hers. Zevran continued on, his voice gaining steadiness by the minute.

"No, amor, I will take down Claudio Valisti - but it will be on my own terms, at a time of my choosing, and it will be the culmination of a meticulously planned operation. I will not throw your wedding day into chaos with an impulsive, ill-thought dagger thrust."

Leliana exhaled in relief, wiping away a bead of sweat from her forehead. Flora leaned forwards, tilting the elf's face towards her with a palm and pressing a kiss against the faded tattoo on his cheek.

"Want me to go and throw some jellied eels at his head, then?" she whispered solemnly, only half-joking.

The elf laughed, the fine lines at the corners of his eyes crumpling. Reaching for the stepped golden crown, he slid it gently back into Flora's hair, straightening it with the shrewd eye of a perfectionist.

"Ah, novia," he murmured, leaning back to survey her with a touch of wistfulness. "I hope Ferelden realises how fortunate it is."

Once back in the great hall, Flora returned to her seat; eyeing the audience with slight wariness as they rose dutifully to acknowledge her entrance. Alistair also rose to his feet, reaching towards his wife and touching her bare arm as she lowered herself down onto the cushion. It was good timing; the last platters of the course were just being brought out and soon the formal introductions would be resumed.

"Is Zev alright?" the king murmured into her hair, rubbing the callused ball of his thumb around the shell of her ear.

"Mm, I'm not sure," Flora replied, smiling gratefully up at a servant as they brought her a flagon of apple-flavoured water. "That Antivan – Claw, Claws – Claws Velocity – is evil."

Alistair's eyebrows shot into his gilded hairline as he blinked; trying to decipher this latest piece of Flora-speak.

"Eh? Who? Oh – Claudio Valisti? Wait, what do you mean he's evil?"
"I'll tell you later," Flora whispered back, restraining herself from tipping the entire platter of crab tartlets directly down her throat.

Alistair grimaced unhappily, but there was no time for further questioning. The steward had risen to his feet once more, preparing to announce the next set of formal introductions.

"The Bann Trevelyon of Ostwick, and his daughter Beatrix!"

Chapter End Notes

OOC Author Note: OK, hopefully I'm not butchering lore too badly here, hehe. I took the Claudio Valisti information from his DA wikia page! I also made up a generic maiden name for Oriana Cousland, seeing as it's not listed anywhere that I could find.

Anyway, I thought there was a nice parallel in this chapter – several chapters ago, Zevran tried to persuade Flora's Herring-father Pel to stay (thus preserving an element of her past); and now Flora is looking after Zevran as he deals with an unwelcome aspect of his own past (Claudio).
"The Bann Trevelyan of Ostwick, and his daughter Beatrix!"

The Marcher Bann turned out to be a middle-aged man with a kind, weary face; a necklace of Chantry symbols rattling around his neck as he bowed dutifully before king and queen. His daughter had dark hair twisted up into a tight bun, and unusual mauve eyes. Like her father, she wore the Chantry symbol prominently around her neck.

"The Maker smiled upon Ferelden when he set the burden of Blight on your capable shoulders," the Bann murmured, fingers rising to touch the Chantry symbols reflexively. "He must have had great faith in you both, praise be."

Alistair smiled politely, recalling the terrible, chaotic days immediately after the tragedy at Ostagar. With his sister-warden lying senseless in a witch's hut in the Wilds, his commander and his king dead in a Darkspawn-overrun valley, and the rest of his Order obliterated – it had not felt as though they had been specially chosen by the Maker. He had attributed their survival to some random twist of fate, since only a cruel god would have placed such a burden on two inexperienced young recruits.

"Weren't you afraid for the health of your child when you fought the Archdemon?"

This question was from the bann's daughter, and was directed towards the queen. Those at the tables closest to the raised platform pricked up their ears, curious to hear the response.

Flora lifted her pale eyes to meet Beatrix Trevelyan's curious, plum-coloured gaze.

"Well, if I hadn't fought the Archdemon, we would mostly likely be dead anyway," she replied, softly. "And the child has a warrior's spirit, like it's father."

Alistair grinned sideways at his wife, leaning over to spread his palm proudly over the swell of Flora's leather-clad belly.

"And like it's mother," he added, loyally. "Bann Trevelyan, I remember being told once that Ostwick was protected by a double wall. Am I confusing it with Ansburg?"

"No, your majesty, you're not mistaken," replied the old bann, reaching up compulsively to touch the Chantry symbols around his neck once more. "We are renowned for our double wall throughout the Marches and beyond."

Alistair sat up a little straighter, leaning forward on his elbows.

"Much of our city wall was damaged during the battle with the Archdemon. I'd be interested in hearing how your engineers built a double-wall foundation on marshy land."

As king and bann engaged in conversation – with occasional interjections by Teagan – Beatrix Trevelyan fixed Flora once more with her peculiar, mauve stare.

"The markings left by the Archdemon on your body look like the Maker's symbol. What could that mean, I wonder?"
Flora looked down at her hands, nonplussed. The white scars across her palms did indeed bear some resemblance to the Chantry sunburst; as did the other scars scattered across her torso.

"I think it's just a coincidence," she replied, hoping that the inquisitive bann's daughter would leave it at that.

This was clearly not a satisfactory answer, and Beatrix Trevelyan's dark eyebrows drew together in chagrin. Fortunately for Flora, Alistair and Beatrix' father had just finished their conversation on the city walls, and the bann was preparing to take his leave.

Trevelyan bowed once more, with a promise to add the health of king, queen and royal baby to his nightly prayers. His well-trained daughter matched her father's genuflection; throwing a final curious glance over her shoulder as they returned to their seats.

As the steward prepared to announce the next guests Flora leaned towards Fergus and nudged his navy, velvet-clad shoulder.

"Why are you giving Alistair five hundred sheep for me? Is it a bribe? You should be paying him in fish. I've never associated with any sheep."

Fergus laughed, reaching over to pat her cheek.

"Not just sheep, pup. Twenty thousand gold coins, and an island, and – anyway. It's a dowry, it's expected whether you're a princess or a peasant. Do brides not come with dowries in Herring?"

Flora shook her head, her brow furrowed.

"Do you get anything in return from Alistair? In exchange for me?"

Fergus replied in the negative with a smile to hide the faint regret in his tone; but his sister was perceptive and detected the rueful edge to the words. She blinked at him with a question in her eyes, watching her eldest brother take a long draw from his tankard.

"It… feels a little as though Finn and I are losing you to the Theirin," Fergus murmured after a moment, replacing the tankard on the table. "And we've only just found you again. I suppose I just – I just wanted you as a Cousland for a little longer."

Flora opened her mouth to say something, then realised that there was nothing that she could say; Fergus had spoken truly. This period of the three Cousland siblings coming together was brief and would not last much longer – she would soon be leaving on a royal progress with Alistair, while Fergus and Finian headed off to govern Highever and Amaranthine respectively.

The steward's call echoed out over the feast, indicating that the next noble guest was ready to be presented.

"Lord Halward Pavus, lord of Asariel!"

A Tevinter magister rose to his feet, resplendent in rich crimson with a golden trim. He was accompanied up to the top table by two grim-faced Templar; Flora was delighted to see Chanter Devotia as one of the pair. The Chanter inclined her head slightly to acknowledge Flora, even as the magister made a bow towards king and queen.

"Congratulations, your majesties," the Tevinter lord murmured, streaks of silver adding a venerable air to his dark, slicked-back hair. "I apologise for the unplanned absence of my son and heir. Dorian has been most wilful of late – it is… disappointing."
Fergus sat up a fraction in his seat, narrowing his eyes. House Pavus had made a tentative enquiry regarding a marriage alliance between Flora and the aforementioned disappointing heir, Dorian. The proposal had been hastily retracted once news spread that the lady Cousland had lost her connection with the Fade, as a consequence of the fight with the Archdemon.

"Your majesty," the Tevinter magister repeated, turning to Flora and reaching out expectantly.

Realising that he wanted to kiss her hand, Flora obediently extended her fingers. Lord Pavus took them and bowed his head; they all were treated to the scent of the fragrant pomade in his beard. After pressing his lips to Flora's knuckles, the Tevinter lord swiftly turned her hand over to look at her palm. His dark pupils constricted with enthralment as he gazed at the silvery markings standing out stark against the pale skin. Flora blinked, momentarily taken aback.

"Fascinating," he breathed, eyes moving over her palm. "I should like very much to inspect the other marks on your person."

Alistair bridled like a provoked tiger beside her, nostrils flaring as he prepared to snarl a most undiplomatic retort towards the presumptuous Tevinter magister. He was not alone in his indignation; Halward Pavus' suggestion had caused a ripple of consternation along the table.

Flora let the man inspect her palm for a few more moments and then withdrew her hand; lifting a stare cold as the Waking Sea to meet the man's honey coloured gaze.

"Well, I should like very much to see a Rivaini basking shark in its natural habitat," she replied quietly, the softness of her words in stark contrast to the steeliness in her eyes. "Tragically, I've resigned myself to the fact that it will never happen."

The Tevinter magister could infer well enough Flora's meaning and withdrew with an abrupt little bow. The Templars escorted Halward Pavus back to his seat, with their scowls ingrained even more deeply than before.

Beside Flora, Alistair was still prickling with indignation, directing furious whispers in Eamon's ear.

"Audacious, insolent son of a – he's not staying in the palace, is he? I don't want him within a mile of Flo."

"Lord Pavus is staying in the noble district, under the supervision of the Templars," Eamon replied in placating tones.

"Well, I want the Templar guard on him doubled," hissed Alistair, not prepared to relinquish his outrage just yet. "The bloody cheek of the man – wanting to inspect my wife. My wife!"

Flora had already mentally moved on from the presumptuous magister, heroically trying to gulp down an entire bowl of vegetable broth before the next guests were introduced.

"Lord Marlowe Dumar, Viscount of Kirkwall and his son, Saemus Dumar!"

The Viscount of Kirkwall was a stately, dour-faced man clad in dark velvet from head to foot. A black iron spiked crown rested atop his balding head, and he had the tired expression of a man under the thumb of some greater force. The son, a dark-haired and less world-weary copy of his father, appeared a fraction friendlier.

"Congratulations, your majesties," the Viscount murmured with a bow. "On both your marriage, and the vanquishing of the Blight. Does this mean that the stream of Fereldan refugees into Kirkwall will abate? The city is at bursting point."
"Most of those refugees left under Loghain's residency," Eamon countered, swiftly. "When it appeared that the government was ignoring the threat of the Darkspawn. Believe me, Marlowe, we desire the tide stemmed as much as you."

"We can't rebuild a nation with half of our people disappearing across the Waking Sea to the Marches," Alistair added, wryly. "So if any Ferelden refugees fancy making the journey back, please encourage them."

The Viscount snorted, his eyes drifting ruefully out of focus for a moment.

"There's one troublesome individual I'd particularly like to see the back of," he murmured, almost to himself. "Unfortunately, him and his family seem… well-entrenched."

Dumar's son spoke up tentatively, after casting a final look around the crowded tables.

"Excuse me, your majesties," he enquired, shy but determined. "I was under the impression that you had a Qunari with you on your travels. Is he not here?"

"Big social occasions aren't really Sten's cup of tea," Alistair replied, just about refraining from adding that they weren't really his cup of tea, either.

"Oh," replied Saemus, slightly disappointed. "That's… that's a shame. I'd been hoping to see him."

The Viscount shot a little sideways glance of warning towards his son, then took a deep breath and rapidly changed the topic.

"Eamon, we must meet tomorrow about re-opening the trade channels across the Waking Sea. The dressmakers of Kirkwall are complaining for want of Ferelden wool."

"And we sorely need more Marches lumber for our rebuilding efforts," Eamon replied, steadily. "We'll work out the particulars tomorrow."

"Aye, business has no place at a wedding," agreed the Viscount, with a courteous bow towards Alistair and Flora. "King Alistair, you're a fortunate man indeed. Your wife is very beautiful."

"And her bravery is equally impressive," Alistair countered, valiantly.

A short while later, the Viscount and his son made their way slowly back down to their table. The next course was ready to be brought in; the servants were clustered in doorways with trays and platters, waiting for the formal introductions to be finished. Fortunately, they did not have much longer to wait – the final family to offer congratulations to the king and queen were making their way up to the top table in a mass of mustard and black silk. One of them – an old, plump man with slender fingers and a shining bald egg-like head, was escorted by two Templars; indicating his mage status.

"Here come the death cultists," Alistair breathed in Flora's ear as the Pentaghasts proceeded up the three steps to the royal platform. "Do you think they've resurrected some corpses to add their numbers?"

Flora almost choked on her spoonful of vegetable broth, hoping very much that Alistair was joking.

"The honourable Vestalus Pentaghast, leader of the Mortalitasi," the steward announced as the bald-headed man glided forwards with surprising elegance considering his bulk. When Vestalus spoke, it was in the hushed, reverent tones of one who spent most of their time in the depths of a necropolis.
"Your Majesties," he whispered, bowing even as he gestured the rest of his family forward. "I am honoured to meet you both. May I introduce my relatives- "

Several near-identical young Pentaghasts were introduced, each of them sharing the same tan skin, dark hair and hawk-like features. Finally, Vestalus gave a particularly aggressive beckon, and a young woman clad in the garb of a Chantry soldier stepped forward. Her features were as keen as a blade, and she looked thoroughly disapproving. Her bow was perfunctory and mechanical, resentment visibly emanating from her demeanour.

"Congratulations."

"I apologise for my niece, Cassandra," the Mortalitasi murmured, flapping elegant fingers in contrition. "She takes her duties as a Seeker of Truth very seriously. It took much persuading before she agreed to attend today."

"We were in the middle of investigating a nest of Templar deserters near Ostwick," Cassandra retorted, bluntly. "They'll have gone to ground by the time I get back."

"Right," said Alistair, somewhat nonplussed. "Well, then. I'm sure they won't get far, with experts like yourself on their trail."

Flora had meanwhile been eyeing each of the Pentaghasts in turn, now reasonably certain that Alistair had been joking about the Mortalitasi's necromancy practises. They all looked healthy enough, though in the midst of her scrutiny, she noticed that Vestalus wore an ebony skull in place of a belt buckle. Flora stared at it for a moment, then realised that it appeared as though she were gazing intently at the Nevarran's crotch. Hastily, she raised her eyes once again; fortunately, the squat man was still focused on Alistair.

"Tell me, your majesty, what kind of arts do the Ferelden people engage in? I have seen little in the way of portraiture since my arrival. Are there few artists in this part of Thedas?"

Flora was confused for a moment, not knowing that Nevarra was the cultural capital of Thedas, widely renowned for its festivals of art. Most citizens thus had some vested interest in culture; though the wealthy tended to invest in art rather than dabble in it personally.

"In Ferelden, we carve much of our art from stone," replied Leonas, gruffly. "Sculptures."

"Aah," murmured the Mortalitasi, in the strange, soft voice of the necropolis. "Do you not find the finished results a little…. rough around the edges?"

"Perhaps," retorted Leonas, dark Bryland eyes flashing. "But they last far longer."

The Pentaghasts returned to their seats in a cloud of mustard and dark livery, murmuring to one another in their native tongue. Alistair, relieved that the formal introductions were now over, slung his arm around Flora's shoulders and kissed her on the cheek.

"I'm counting down the hours until we're alone, baby," he murmured, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "Me, you- "

"A Chantry mother, a member of the Landsmeet," Finian reminded him, with an evil cackle. "Probably Zevran hiding in the rafters."

Alistair grimaced; he had been trying very determinedly to forget about their upcoming audience. Downing the remainder of his tankard, he immediately topped it up once again – clearly deciding that some liquid courage was needed to get through the evening. Flora, who grew nauseous at the
full un-distilled toxicity of alcohol on her tongue, was unable to use ale as a similar coping mechanism, and fell into a slight sulk.

The sun was beginning to dip itself leisurely into the horizon. Servants moved discreetly about the hall, tugging on long ropes that pulled down the shutters over the high windows. Any candle which had burnt to its base was replaced with another expensive beeswax length; elongated wooden tapers were used to light the spiked iron candelabras hanging overhead. The great hall was soon bathed in a warm, flickering glow, muted candlelight cast over the faces of those sat at the benches. Belts were being loosened and top buttons undone; still more food was being brought out on silver platters. The cooks of the Royal Palace were determined to lay the rumour of bland Fereldan cuisine to rest with their offerings.

Pears soaked in warm red wine were brought out in vast silver tureens, followed swiftly by candied rose and violet petals. Rabbits, birds and Mabari had been cunningly sculpted from marzipan and arranged in natural poses atop the bronze dishes. A custard tart the diameter of a cart-wheel was brought out on the shoulders of two sweating cooks. Finally, curls of sweetened ginger imported from Antiva were nestled inside small terracotta bowls and placed carefully into gaps on the clustered tables.

Oghren appeared as though he had been taken straight to the halls of his Ancestors, eyes expanding like saucers as the desserts were placed on the table before him. Even Zevran managed to summon a smile at the ginger from his homeland; savouring the rush of memory that followed the first bite.

Up on the top table Alistair, who did not have a sweet tooth, was busy getting acquainted with the cheeseboard. Flora - who used to relish the rare occasion that she would get a sweet morsel at the Circle - found to her dismay that her tastes had changed with the growth of the babe. The sugar now tasted bland and oddly metallic in her mouth; despite this, she bit off the head of a marzipan rabbit and chewed it defiantly.

A plate newly set before her contained a number of small cheese-cakes, each one topped with a residue of strange, gold-coloured curls. Flora prodded at one little cake experimentally with her knife, then nudged her brother.

"Fergus, what are these things?"

Fergus swallowed a mouthful of wine-soaked pear and swivelled his head in the direction of her pointed knife.

"Oh, those are Orlesian fancies. A favourite from Val Royeaux. Cook probably wants to prove to the grand duc that he can make them as well as any pâtissier."

"What's the yellow stuff on top?"

"Gold leaf, pup."

Flora asked him to repeat his response, unsure if she had heard him correctly. When Fergus confirmed that the gold-coloured curls were indeed made from gold; she gaped at him incredulously.

"Made from METAL?"

"Very thin pieces of metal, but – yes."

Flora fell silent for a moment, her brow furrowed.

"No one who eats metal can make fun of me for chewing on wooden things anymore," she said at
last. "Huh."

A few minutes later, Alistair finished demolishing a piece of strong Marcher cheddar and glanced sideways at his wife. The next moment, his eyebrows shot into his hairline in a combination of surprise and puzzlement.

"Darling, what are you doing?"

Flora had fought off Finian to commandeer the entire platter of Orlesian cheese-cakes. She was surreptitiously and determinedly scraping the gold leaf from each one; creating a little pile of metallic shavings at the side of the plate.

Seeing the vertical motion of Alistair's eyebrows, Flora put down her knife and leaned over to explain into his ear.

"I'm going to donate this precious gold to the Gwaren Restoration Committee," she whispered, earnestly. "Instead of into my stomach, it can go into the fund for a new fishing wharf."

Instead of laughing, Alistair gazed at her for several long moments. Inch by inch, the puzzled grin contracted into a tender smile; his eyes softening like bruised apples. Reaching down to snare her fingers, the king bowed his head to his new queen.

"My – sweet - hearted - girl," he breathed, interspersing his words with kisses pressed to her cheeks, her forehead, her nose. "I don't know about gold leaf, but anything you want for Gwaren - you'll have it. I swear to you, my love. You have my full support."

The delighted Flora kissed him back hard on the mouth, full of gratitude. Alistair's hand went to caress her hip even as his lips parted hers with lazy languor; his tongue already intimate with the curve of her mouth.

"Honestly!" Finian hissed from Flora's right, sounding eerily like the lay-sister Leliana. "If you want dessert, Floss, try eating the rest of those dissected cheesecakes!"

Chapter End Notes

OOC Author Note: It's like a who's who of Thedas! Hehe.

Flo is right, the scars being in the shape of a Chantry sunburst is just pure coincidence, lol. There's not much on the characteristics of the wider Trevelyan family on the DA wikia, apart from the fact that they are very religious – so I just went with that, hehe.

When I was younger, our grandmother took me and my sister to a fancy restaurant and the desserts were covered in gold leaf in the shape of leaves! I remember thinking how ridiculously opulent it was to EAT gold (even though it's not actually worth a lot in gold leaf form, you can buy like 10 sheets of it on Amazon for a fiver haha)… so I wanted to include a little reference to it, haha.
To everybody's relief, the speeches were few and short. There was nobody present who could speak at length on the lives of either bride or groom – Alistair had spent much of the past ten years in a monastery, while Flora had been isolated in Herring and then the Circle respectively. Instead, Eamon spoke on briefly on how the legacy of Maric was forged anew in his like-faced son; with strong emphasis on Alistair as a warrior-king who – like his father - had fought to defend Ferelden from the enemy (here, the Orlesians muttered amongst themselves, not liking the implicit comparison of themselves to the Darkspawn.)

Leonas then gave an equally brief but earnest speech on Flora's summoning of the armies and of her symbolic leadership of the first truly united Fereldan force in the nation's history. It was a calculated ploy designed to remind the assembled Theodesian leaders that the girl sat beside the king may have been slight in build and youthful in years, but she had brought together a force of ten thousand soldiers in less than a year – and could do so again, if the need arose.

Not listening to the effusive praise being heaped upon her, Flora grasped Alistair's hand as he rested it on her bare, leather-strapped knee; sliding her thumb back and forth over the twisted strands of the wedding ring. It sat snug on his fourth finger, just below the callused knuckle; bright and burnished even in the shadow beneath the table.

"Do you remember where I first told you the fish-rope story?" she whispered, taking advantage of the general hubbub as the servants came in to clear away the dessert platters.

"Of course, my love," Alistair murmured back, swivelling on the throne to angle himself towards her. "We were camping just north of Lothering, on our way to Redcliffe. You'd had a nightmare – it was one of the first times you'd seen the Archdemon in your dreams- "

"The first time," Flora corrected, resting her fingers atop Alistair's and wondering at the contrast in size between their hands.

"The first time," Alistair repeated, turning his hand over so that they were palm to scarred palm. "My poor darling. You got so hot and worked up in your sleep that I was terrified you were being possessed – I was already nervy about sharing a tent alone with a girl – and so I woke you up."

"You shook me until my teeth rattled like fishhooks in a bait-bucket," Flora added, eyeing him beadily. "I bit my tongue."

"I thought that some Fade demon was trying to take you from me, and I – I couldn't lose my sister-warden too, not after all we'd lost at Ostagar."

"Anyway, to cheer me up, you told me the story of the brother and sister transforming themselves into fish to escape the nets, tying their tails together with a rope so that- "

"Not even the tide could part them," Flora finished, solemnly. "And then I said that we brother- and sister-warden had an invisible fish-rope that would always connect us, even through the Veil."

Alistair nodded, the green flecks in his hazel eyes suddenly standing out clear and bright. A tear ran down his cheek, vanishing into the neatly trimmed hair covering his jaw. Flora reached to intercept the second tear with a finger, smiling up at him.
"Stop, or I'll cry too," she whispered, earnestly. "And Leliana has only given me three permitted facial expressions for the day: bored, superior, and FERELDAN DEFIANCE!"

Alistair laughed out loud, the tears drying up.

"Go on then, baby, show me Fereldan defiance."

Flora focused on one of the Vael sons, lifting her chin and letting her cold grey eyes bore into him with such ferocity that the unfortunate heir dropped his knife and wondered in alarm what he had done. To assuage the young man's panic, Flora then flashed him a broad and toothy smile; which was equally disconcerting for its rarity. By the time that he had been both glowered and grinned at in rapid succession, the red-headed Vael heir was quaking in his seat.

As the evening drew on, the feast continued; with only a brief pause before more food was brought out on platters. However, the guests seemed more interested in watching the entertainment whilst simultaneously sampling the Denerim speciality of wild honey mead.

A group of girls – typically Fereldan in appearance with pale, freckled skin, pink cheeks and ruddy hair - performed a series of native dances for those assembled. Flora recognised several of the dances as originating from her own beloved northern coast, and had to restrain herself from joining in. She had always enjoyed dancing, and it had been many months since she had last had the opportunity to dance to music from her home.

The next moment Flora reminded herself sternly how ridiculous she would look with her swollen belly beside this slim bevy of beauties. Sulkily, she slumped down a fraction in her seat and then yelped as the carved bird's beak at the base of the throne promptly poked her in the spine.

Alistair, meanwhile, was watching the dancers with an air of studied politeness. Startling at his wife's yelp, he reached out a concerned hand towards her arm.

"Sweetheart?"

"It's this stupid bird," Flora complained, casting a baleful eye at the ornately carved throne. "Ouch."

Alistair shot a quick glance down at their guests. With the formalities over, there was a far more relaxed atmosphere within the great hall. Many were watching the dancers, others busily fitting as much food into their mouths as possible. Quite a few younger sons were focused on getting drunk – one inebriated Vael was mimicking the prancing of the dancers from the side-lines, until he received a swift cuff from his father. Meanwhile, Oghren was taking full advantage of the honey mead on tap; it seemed that his weeks of sobriety had not managed to resist such free flowing alcohol. Wynne was talking to Zevran, the senior enchanter under instructions from Leliana to keep the elf away from Claudio Valisti.

Several of those seated at the top table had broken off to speak with the guests below. Finian was chattering away to Saemus Dumar, the two having met on several prior occasions. Eamon had made a beeline for Saemus' father, keen to discuss the Fereldan refugee situation.

"Come and sit on my knee, Lo," Alistair instructed, leaning back against his larger throne and parting his legs obligingly. "You are my new bride, after all."

Flora obediently manoeuvred between the thrones to perch on his strong thigh, settling back against his chest. Alistair wrapped an arm around her shoulders and she turned her head to kiss him on the
bearded cheek.

"There's only so much adherence to protocol they should expect from us," he murmured in her ear, softly. "After all, they did willingly put a stable-boy and a fisherman's daughter on the throne."

Flora glanced about her, suddenly feeling the heat of a hundred eyes on her back. At first she thought that the attention was due to her position on Alistair's lap – but then realised that the stares were swivelling between them and Loghain. The disgraced general was methodically making his way up to the top table, with only a slight limp betraying the false limb.

Loghain's betrayal of Cailan was now infamous across Thedas, and there was no guest present who was not aware of the treachery displayed at Ostagar. There were many who believed that he should have been executed for such abandonment of his king – and son-in-law – while others secretly admired his blatant attempt to usurp power for himself. The story of Loghain's futile, desperate last attempt to stop the Archdemon had spread across Thedas after the Blight ended, which did repair his reputation somewhat. However, the majority of guests eyed the new Warden with expressions ranging from mild suspicion to open hostility.

"Traitor!"

The cry came up from the Marcher group, thin and slurred with ale. It was repeated by several more voices, though barely discernible beneath the music. To Loghain's credit he only paused for a moment before continuing up to the top table; his expression carefully neutral.

Flora nudged Alistair gently in the ribs; he gave her a slight nod in response and cleared his throat. Leliana had prepared them for this possibility, and the opportunity that it presented.

We can't let it be believed across Thedas that there's a division between Ferelden's Wardens and Ferelden's crown. We need to present a united front.

"Come and sit with us, Loghain," said Alistair after a moment, nodding to Flora's empty throne.

Loghain, the corner of his mouth curving upwards at the irony, took a seat and immediately grimaced as the bird poked its beak through a gap in his Warden-garb.

"They've brought out the old thrones from storage," he commented in the usual dry, northern tones. "Rowan used to complain nonstop about that bloody bird. I thought she'd had its beak filed off; clearly I was mistaken."

Alistair and Flora both gazed at him with equal solemnity: Alistair's eyes laced with a greater degree of suspicion. Loghain stared back at them for a moment, then picked up a tankard and raised it to them both with a wry smile.

"Here's to your marriage and a healthy babe," he said, and there was no disingenuousness in his tone. "I hope for both of your sakes that it's a happier union than that of my daughter and Cailan. Alistair, did you spend last night down the Pearl in the company of ladies with dubious virtue?"

"Uh," said Alistair, slightly taken aback. "In a brothel? No. No, I went to see Flora, and then Teagan, Finian and I played Wicked Grace until Finn fell asleep in his cards."

"Then your marriage is off to a better start than your predecessors,'" Loghain replied, taking a long swig of the tankard that he'd used to toast them.

"Loghain Mac Tir," Flora said, not quite ready to use Duncan's title of Warden-Commander with this new incumbent.
"Florence Chastity Popelyn Ragemhilda Cousland," he replied, then let out a small snort. "What a mouthful. If you're thinking about shortening your name, I'd drop the second part. It's quite clearly not applicable."

Alistair almost laughed, then abruptly arrested the chuckle in his throat, eyeing Loghain beadily. Flora swivelled her gaze towards the group of Warden recruits clustered in a crowd of silver and navy stripes at the end of a lower table. Her eye was drawn particularly to a scruffy man with pale hair, who looked strangely familiar. He appeared to be in a drinking contest with a squat, capable looking female dwarf who had short, dark hair and distinct black patterns inked across her face. Nearby, a blonde female elf crossed her arms over her chest and rolled her eyes with a supercilious expression remarkably similar to that of Morrigan.

"You've found some new recruits?"

"Aye, we've assembled a… motley crew," Loghain replied, forgetting about the bird's beak and leaning back against the throne. "Ah, this bloody chair – I'll introduce you to them tomorrow. Anyway, Flora – your bard wrote to me saying that you had a new potential recruit? I've brought down some vials of Darkspawn blood."

Flora shivered reflexively, remembering her own Joining. She still lit a candle for Daveth and Jory without fail each time she did one of her sessions of remembrance in the Chantry.

"I do have a potential recruit," she said, forcing the memory back into the rear of her skull. "It's…"

She glanced down at the tables in search of Oghren. The dwarf was contorted beneath one of the vast barrel-stands at the side of the room, the tap fully open and a stream of golden mead pouring directly into his mouth.

"It's…a SURPRISE," Flora finished, as Loghain narrowed his eyes at her.

"It's a 'surprise'?'" the northerner repeated, flatly. "A surprise."

"Yes, a surprise," retorted Alistair, immediately coming to his best friend's defence. "You know, like when you're at Ostagar and you're expecting the Royal Army to back you up and then surprise! they're not coming!"

"Oooh…"

Flora's mouth made a little o, her eyes expanding like silver saucers. Loghain let out a long, faintly exasperated exhalation, eyeing both of them with an air of resignation.

"Alright then, your majesties," he murmured, bowing his head once more. "I eagerly anticipate the revealing of your 'surprise' recruit tomorrow morning. And Alistair?"

The king eyed his former arch-nemesis, beadily. "Yes?"

"Congratulations. Your bride's a beauty."

With a grunt of effort, Loghain manoeuvred his wooden leg out from beneath the table and rose to his feet; tramping back down to where Leonie Caron and the rest of the recruits were sitting. After being witnessed in what appeared to be civil conversation with the king and queen; there were no more cries of traitor! accompanying Loghain to his seat.

Alistair anchored his arm more tightly around Flora's waist as she shifted on his thigh. Glancing at her face, he noticed her biting anxiously at her lower lip and reached up; rubbing his thumb over the
full, wide softness of her Cousland mouth.

"My love?"

"I hope Oghren's Joining goes well tomorrow," she whispered, Daveth's bulging-eyed face rising to the forefront of her memory once again. "Alistair, what if – what if- "

"He'll be fine," Alistair replied, firmly. "I've seen the dwarf down a bottle of fire-whiskey in less time than it took to uncork it. He's got a stomach lined with iron."

"You think so?"

"Of course, sweetheart." There was so much confidence in Alistair's reply that Flora found herself reassured; she leaned her head against his shoulder and he pressed a kiss to her cloud of dark red hair.

When the Fereldan girls had finished their set of native dances, they withdrew – blushing with delight - to loud applause and slightly drunken cheers. Silver coins in small lace pouches were tossed towards them, which they stopped to collect with squeals of delight.

Meanwhile, Eamon had returned to the top table smiling, having secured a lucrative lumber deal with the Trevelyans. He took his seat beside Alistair, refilling the king's tankard with ale and the queen's smaller cup with apple-water.

"Eamon," Alistair murmured, leaning towards his chancellor while keeping a tight grip on his wife. "Who's going to be the Chantry sister in with me and Flo tonight?"

"Do you really want to know?" the arl replied, taking a long gulp from his own tankard.

"Not the member of the Landsmeet,"Alistair said, hastily. "Just the sister. It's not going to be Grand Cleric Elemena is it?"

"No," said Eamon, a wry smile curling behind his silver beard. "The Grand Cleric would sadly be useless for this particular purpose; she's deaf as a post."

The implication of this comment saw Alistair go a fraction paler. The king reached for his tankard and downed it with a haste that Oghren would have admired. Flora, who was utterly nonchalant about their upcoming audience, sipped at her apple-water and eyed her husband with mild trepidation.

Just then, there was a ripple of surprise and anticipation through the audience; who were growing merrier and less bothered about old rivalries as the strong Denerim mead took its effect.

The cause of their delight soon became apparent. The delegation from Rivain had brought along a group of native dancers, a sextet of handsome women with dark hair in oiled curls. Their noses and ears were decorated with gold, and their bodies were covered by very little. They began to dance to the languid piping of the accompanying musicians; wrists twirling and golden brackets rattling.

"Maker's Breath!" hissed Alistair, rapidly averting his eyes to the ceiling. "Eamon, I thought this was going to be a family friendly evening."

Eamon was openly laughing while trying not to look too closely, knowing that Isolde would be glaring at him from where she was sitting with Bann Reginalda and Leonas' daughter, Habren.

"I knew that they were bringing entertainment, I didn't realise quite what sort it would be."
"But I'm a married man, now," replied Alistair, in the tone of a particularly prudish Chantry sister. "I shouldn't be witnessing ladies in states of... undress!"

Eamon snorted, and then received a dagger-like stare from Isolde. Paling, the arl excused himself and went to appease his wife.

Flora, conversely, was eyeing the golden piercings speckled across the women’s bodies. Her own body had not tolerated any piercing while under the jurisdiction of the spirits – the holes would simply close back up – but she was fascinated to learn how many parts of the human body could be punctured.

"Like what you see, carina?" purred a familiar voice from over her right shoulder. Zevran had slunk his way up to the top table and was now lounging in Fergus' chair; eyes not moving from the dancers' undulating bodies.

Flora reached out and touched the elf’s right ear, where a golden hoop identical to the one he had given her dangled.

"I knew you could have holes put in your ears," she breathed, fascinated. "I didn't realise you could get one in your nose. Or your tongue."

"No, I don't imagine there's much of that going on in Herring," Zevran murmured, dark eyes twinkling. "Look, that one has a chain through her belly button."

"Ooooh! Do you think that hurt?!"

"Not as much as the piercing sported by the lovely lady on the far right." The elf gave her a little nudge, snickering.

Flora followed his finger and her eyebrows rapidly shot into her hairline. She elbowed Alistair – who had been gazing determinedly at his wife's swollen stomach for the duration of the dance – and gestured for him to look. He did so, and then let out a strangled squawk.

"Maker's Breath," Alistair croaked, ducking back down like an arrow had been shot at his head. "Well, that is definitely out of the question, Lo. The baby needs to feed off those! And stop making me look at other naked ladies. I only want to look at you!"

Flora and Zevran cackled in unison, the elf reaching out to run his slender fingers affectionately down Flora's bare arm.

"Piercings aside, I think you would look delicious in the Rivaini style of dress," he purred, watching Alistair's face closely.

Flora shot him a slightly incredulous look, head swivelling between the taut, glistening muscle of the dancers’ exposed stomachs, and her own bloated belly.

"Delicious? I'd look ridiculous," she said, plaintively. "Oghren said I was the size of a pony earlier. He wasn't wrong!"

"You're the most beautiful creature on Thedas, Lo," Alistair replied, immediate and earnest. "The dwarf was probably half-intoxicated."

Delighted, Flora put her arms around her husband's neck and kissed him on the cheek.

"Once my body gets back to normal," she whispered in Alistair's ear, absentmindedly rubbing the fur
of his collar between her fingers. "I'll wear anything you want. Even a Rivaini belly-dancer outfit."

Alistair, who had been in the middle of gulping down his fourth flagon of mead, spluttered and spilt the remainder down the front of his leather tunic. Fortunately, it was dark enough that the stain was only visible at a close distance.

"Flora," he groaned, replacing the tankard on the table with an unsteady hand. "You can't say things like that while sitting half-naked on my knee."

"What did she say?" demanded the elf, who had been distracted by a servant dropping a tray of empty tankards. "What did she say?"

Fortunately, the divisive Rivaini dancers soon made their exit, undulating across the flagstones. Half of the Landsmeet had emptied their pockets; many of the guests still seemed speechless. The highly religious Vael clan had their hands over their eyes, under strict instruction from their patriarch.

Next came to the forefront a nervous looking young man with Marcher colouring and unkempt straw-like hair. He wore the colours of House Trevelyan but lacked the luxuriant trimmings of the bann’s immediate family – this was perhaps some minor relative. The gangly youth cleared his throat; a distinct tremor in his voice as he directed his words to the ceiling of the great hall.

"This dance is dedicated to Florence the Fair," he announced, with equal parts nervousness and pride. "It is a dance from my home village, called The Fish Dance."

An intrigued Flora swivelled herself to face the audience; shuffling forwards as far as she could go on Alistair's knee and leaning her elbows on the table. Fergus, who had taken Finian's seat on seeing that the elf had sprawled himself across his own, looked genuinely disconcerted.

"The fish dance," the teyrn repeated, incredulously. "I've never heard of such a custom. What do you think-"

A lively jig sprung up from the minstrels in the corner as eight men positioned themselves in geometric formation on the flagstones. With a single cohesive shout, they produced a fish in their right hand and held it high in the air.

"Hey, hey!"

With a resounding slap against the plump, scaled bodies of the fish; the men then threw them into the air and caught the descending fish of their neighbour.

"Hey, hey!"

Finian, whose Orlesian-trained etiquette was not able to cope with the strain of appearing neutral when faced with the fish dance, nearly fell off the lower bench in hysteric; eye patch sliding out of place. Leliana –the true master of Orlesian etiquette - smiled with polite interest, while muttering under her breath to Wynne. Up at the top table Zevran was oddly enchanted; his eyes glued to the leather-clad posteriors of the Marcher men.

Flora, still perched on Alistair's knee, eyed the unfortunate fish as they were slapped thoroughly before being thrown into the air. Despite the fact that she had been personally responsible for the deaths of thousands of fish during her tenure at Herring; at least their deaths had been meaningful – rather than for comedic antics.

"Is this the sort of thing they do in Herring, pup?" Fergus asked her, his eyebrows fully elevated.
Flora wrinkled her nose, trying to envision her taciturn father and his brethren throwing the day's catch through the air while prancing merrily around on the rocky beach.

"No," she said after a moment, solemnly. "No, it is not."

Chapter End Notes

OOC Author Note: Lol Flora was fully about to tell Loghain that Oghren was the proposed Warden candidate… then she sees him passed out drunk on the floor and is like ABORT MISSION "IT'S A SURPRISE!" instead, hehehe.

This was a fun chapter to write! Poor Alistair is taking being a married man very seriously when it comes to looking at half-naked dancers, hahaha. We'll have to see how well his resolve fares when Isabela swings back into town, lol. The fish dance is inspired by my memories of doing Welsh dancing when I was younger – there was one dance called jac-y-do (jackdaw), and another called ceiliog rhedyn (grasshopper), and another called robin ddiog (lazy robin). SO WHY NOT FISH? Hahahaha
The men from the Marches continued to jig around in the centre of the great hall, tossing the fish between them while slapping their leather-clad thighs, heartily. Despite her inherent disapproval of the fish being wasted instead of consumed, Flora still approved of the hail to her Herring upbringing. We're surrounded by the colours and emblems of the Couslands, she thought to herself as she slithered off Alistair's knee, rising to her feet as the music came to a halt and the dancers bowed deeply. Yet there's nothing of Herring here, save for myself. And Herring is what made me, not Highever.

The chattering around the hall faded away as the guests broke off their conversations and stared at the queen as she made her way down the steps, padding barefoot over the flagstones towards the dancers. The Marcher youths – who were indeed minor members of their house, brought along to squire for more important Trevelyans – were frozen in place, wide-eyed.

Flora halted before them and smiled, her pale gaze moving from one to the other in turn.

"Thank you for showing me your fish dance," she said, soft and earnest. "I enjoyed it a lot. Is it a local custom from your home?"

One of the youths mouthed for a moment, trying frantically to grasp at the words like a slippery bar of animal-fat soap. The rest of the great hall had fallen silent, watching the exchange between queen and awestruck entertainers.

"Yes, m-m-ma'am – your majesty," stammered the tallest youth, who had ginger curls falling to his collar. "It's from our home village, Monteith. Near Ostwick."

"Is that on the coast?"

"No, my lady – on Lake Osterling. Deepest body o' water in the Marches."

This was enough to fascinate Flora, her eyes expanding like saucers.

"The deepest – oh! Do you – do you fish in it?"

"Aye, ma'am."

"Tell me what kind of fish live in the deepest lake in the Marches!"

Flora stayed with the awestruck youths for the next half-candle, withdrawing to the chairs at the side of the room and listening avidly. They were hesitant at first, mumbling only brief responses to her prompted questions. However – once they had overcome their fear of her haughty, cool-eyed beauty – they realised that her interest in their pastime was genuine. Soon after, their answers became longer and more enthused, faces flushed and gestures animated. Flora was so fascinated that she barely registered the end of the organised entertainment; couples taking to the open space between the tables to dance.

The Fereldan musicians, eager to re-stake their claim, struck up a series of familiar folk dances. Many lords led their ladies out to dance – and vice versa. The courteous Fergus rose and went to Leliana,
offering her his hand gallantly. The bard accepted with decorous gratitude, stepping out onto the flagstones alongside the teyrn. Fergus could feel the eyes of several dozen men burning into his tunic; the lovely Leliana had captured the slightly inebriated attentions of several minor banns over the course of the evening.

Eamon also rose to his feet and went to join Isolde after she shot him a pointed look - though he only led his wife onto the floor after a slower number had begun. They were joined by Finian and Wynne; the latter following the former's lead with surprising agility and grace considering her advanced years. The senior enchanter soon proved herself to be an elegant dance partner, with a knowledge of step and rhythm that impressed even the Orlesian-trained Finian.

Loghain was as likely to join in the dancing as he was to declare allegiance to Orlais and the Empress Celene. He sat beside Leonie Caron – who at least was tapping her toe to the beat of the music – and inspected the bottom of his tankard with a slightly irate expression. Zevran leaned against a pillar at the side of the room, flirting casually with one of the Rivaini dancers. Despite the elf's apparent dedication to the ebon-haired beauty before him, his gaze kept flitting about the chamber; continuously on the lookout for threats.

The elf was not the only one keeping an eye out for potential trouble. Alistair was still seated on the throne at the top table, his powerful frame leaning forward with knees wide apart; gaze focused keen and hawk-like on his former sister-warden and new wife. Flora was still seated amongst the men of the Marches, listening enthralled to their tales of deep-lake fishing. Despite knowing that no person in the room save for the soldiers (Zevran and Leliana too, undoubtedly) were armed; Alistair could not help but see the vulnerability of Flora's slender, naked back, the delicate line of her neck exposed as she pulled her hair thoughtlessly over her shoulder. The swell of her stomach, full of a babe already starting to outgrow the petite frame of it's mother, only seemed to make her an easier target.

Unable to stop these intrusive thoughts, Alistair scowled to himself; wondering if he should send a pair of Royal Guard to stand nearby, ready to intervene if necessary.

"Relax, son. She's the Hero of Ferelden, ender of the Fifth Blight. There's not a man in the room who wishes her harm."

The voice belonged to Teagan, who had noticed Alistair's deep-set glower and taken it upon himself to sit in Eamon's vacated chair. Alistair blinked, startled, turning his head to gaze at the man whom he viewed as an uncle.

"Plus, she's with child. No man would dare risk his place with the Maker by bringing harm to an unborn babe."

"Thomas Howe did," muttered Alistair, not entirely reassured by Teagan's comment. The bann gave a slight nod of acknowledgement, his green Guerrin eyes settling on Alistair's anxious profile.

"Aye lad, but his was a personal grudge. There's no one here that claims similar against the lass."

"What about the other Howe brother?" countered the king, swiftly. "Nathaniel. He's still out there, somewhere."

"But not in here," murmured the bann, placing a comforting hand on Alistair's leather clad elbow. "Try and relax. She's fine."

Alistair nodded, then took another long gulp of ale; making a conscious effort to calm himself.

"You're right, uncle. Who's that?"
Despite his uncle's earnest attempts to reassure his nerves, the king could not help but bristle as a bearded man clad in mustard yellow approached Flora with a confident stride. The noble appeared to be in his early thirties, one signet-ringed hand rising to push auburn hair away from his smiling face. As he bowed deeply before the new queen of Ferelden, Alistair recognised the handsome features as belonging to Arl Myrddin; a young, outspoken member of the Landsmeet.

"That's Myrddin, of the southern Bannorn," Teagan explained, simultaneous to Alistair's realisation. "He opposed Loghain from the beginning; you can trust him."

Alistair narrowed his eyes, leaning forward slightly.

"I know him," he said, a note of outrage creeping into his tone. "He - he fancies Flo!"

Teagan coughed, directing his gaze up to the ceiling.

"There are many who harbour such feelings for your wife, Alistair," he said, deliberately emphasising the last few words to help embed Flora as such in his own mind. "She's kind, brave and beautiful. Most of the Landsmeet would have married her if she'd not been – you know. Bound to you."

"Myrddin wrote her a ridiculous love letter when she was staying at Revanloch. She had no idea what it said; I had to read it for her," Alistair complained, clearly not having listened to a word. "What does he want now?"

It soon became apparent what the young, confident arl wanted. With a smile spread across his bearded face, Arl Myrddin made a gesture towards the dance floor; then raised his eyebrows towards Flora, one hand held out. Flora gazed back at him, her own brow furrowed, then returned his offer with a polite smile and a small shake of the head.

After a few more unsuccessful attempts to cajole her into a dance, the handsome arl bent to kiss her hand and made a dignified retreat. Flora returned her attention to the fishermen from the opposite coast of the Waking Sea.

"I was going to ask Lo to dance," Alistair hissed in outrage to his uncle, fingers clamped around the neck of his goblet as though ready to hurl it across the room at Arl Myrddin's ginger head. "I was just waiting for the right song."

A short time later, Flora was still listening, fascinated, to the men of the Marches. They were in the middle of describing one particularly strange catch – a tentacled creature with the face of a man – when they came to a simultaneous halt; clambering to their feet with heads bowed. Flora glanced curiously over her shoulder, only to see Alistair approaching at rapid pace over the flagstones. Those on the dance-floor drew to the side to let him pass, sneaking quick glances at Ferelden's new king as he strode determinedly towards his wife.

Flora smiled reflexively on seeing her best friend approach. The candlelight caught the gold of the crown, the bronze of his hair and warmed the olive tones of Alistair's skin; gleaming like something taken fresh from the forge. His kind hazel eyes – which balanced the natural arrogance of his Marician face – were focused on her, bruised with affection.

"My love," he murmured, and then held out his hand beseeching. "Will you dance with me?"

Although Flora felt a small twinge of nervousness – so many people! so many judgemental eyes on her unwieldy body! – she would never deny Alistair anything before such a crucial audience. She beamed up at him, reaching out to twine her fingers with his.
As Flora rose, Alistair drew her tenderly against his chest, steering her in a gentle meander out onto the flagstones. The space between the tables cleared; guests hastily making room for the newlywed royal couple. The musicians, after a pointed glare from Leliana, segued into a sweet, melancholic ballad with a strange and shifting melody; written in the familiar cadence of the northern coast.

"Thank you, Lo."

Flora gazed up at her former brother-warden, bemused. He was holding her gently by the waist as they rotated on the flagstones, the movement slow and intimate.

"Eh?"

"I remember seeing Eamon dance with Isolde when they got married," Alistair replied softly, the haze of reminiscence clinging to the words. "I was helping the kitchen staff clear away empty tankards. The music started and he led her out into the middle of the room - I'd never seen the arl look so proud in his life."

Flora reached up, broaching the foot of space in their heights to touch her husband's bearded jaw.

"I know our wedding day has turned into a bit of a spectacle," Alistair muttered, a slight flush rising to his cheeks as he turned her with exceptional care. "But I... I wanted to dance with you, just once. Because I am the proudest man in Thedas, with you at my side."

As Flora came around to face him once more she beamed, at once made shy and delighted by his comment. Alistair gazed down at her for several moments, intense and purposeful; and then smiled back, the grin lighting up his face like sunrise breaking over the city walls.

As the king of Ferelden manoeuvred his new queen carefully around the flagstones, both seemed unaware of the eyes of Thedas fixated on them. Despite the ever-present undercurrent of factional division, old tensions and national rivalries; the assembled guests could not help but feel benevolent towards the handsome young Theirin and his full-bellied bride. The cool disdain that Flora had worn earlier (one of Leliana's permitted expressions) had melted away in the warmth of her husband's naked adoration; she basked in his gaze like a crimson-furred cat, arching herself towards his touch.

At the side of the room, Zevran leaned against a stone bust and ran his fingers compulsively over the hilt of his dagger.

"They look very well together, don't they?"

Leliana smiled at him from the other side of the bust, the bard's mouth curling upwards lazily. Despite having spent the past hour dancing with a selection of Thedas' most powerful men and women, she was still wholly composed; not a single hair out of place.

"Eh, amor?"

"Our two Wardens. Former Wardens. They are well-matched."

Leliana canted her head towards where Alistair had drawn Flora against his chest, swaying gently from foot to foot like a fishing boat moored in shallow waters. As they watched, the king pressed a tender kiss to the top of his queen's head.

"He looks a grown man already," agreed Zevran, eyes sliding rapidly away towards the trestle tables. "And her beauty will only grow as she leaves behind adolescence and... becomes a woman."

Leliana reached out and placed her fingers gently on the elf's elbow, her limpid eyes bright with
"Are you alright, mon chéri?"

The elf paused a moment before replying, his expression caught somewhere in the no man's land between regret and reminiscence.

"Following mi florita was the first choice I ever made of my own free will," he said, softly. "Ironic, that I now find myself a self-made prisoner; trapped by my own sentiment."

Out on the centre of the flagstones, Flora tilted her face expectantly up towards Alistair. In response he obediently bent his head towards her, letting her whisper something into his ear. A few moments later he laughed out loud, one hand dropping to caress his wife's bare back.

"She was always meant for him, wasn't she?" Zevran continued quietly, a note of resignation in his words. "There would never have been any chance for me."

Leliana did not reply immediately, since it was most likely true. The bard had known Alistair and Flora almost the longest of all the companions – second only to Morrigan. The perceptive woman had picked up almost immediately on the magnetic undercurrent between brother and sister warden; long before they themselves did.

"Oui: like iron to a lodestone," she agreed, eventually.

Zevran inclined his head with a rueful smile, and made to set towards the ale-barrels.

"Zevran!"

The elf looked over his shoulder at her, white-blond head turning leonine and elegant.

"There are many types of love," the bard murmured, quiet and meaningful. "But each type is precious."

He nodded, gave an odd half-smile, and disappeared into a crowd of whispering Nevarrans.

Once the sweet, simple melody came to an end Flora put her arms about Alistair's neck and embraced him, curling her fingers into the fur sewn around his collar. Alistair rested his hands on her hips, fingers moving compulsively over the form-fitting leather. There was a sinking feeling in his stomach; he had caught sight of Eamon's pointed stare across the flagstones.

"I think the time has come for us to be temporarily parted, my love," he murmured into Flora's ear, hoping that his words were not wavering. "I'll... see you in the bedchamber. Along with our audience, of course."

Flora was not fooled by the light-heartedness in Alistair's tone, and she shot him an anxious little glance from beneath her eyelashes.

"It'll be alright," she whispered, seeing Leliana approach with a determined expression. "See you in a bit."

There was a brief moment of uncertainty in the great hall as the newlyweds were led towards separate archways. The ending of the wedding day was common tradition across Thedas – the placing of a virginal bride in her marital bed, the escorting of the groom into the bedchamber – but since this bride was heavily weighed down with her husband's child, the ritual seemed a little redundant.
However, the atmosphere had changed by the time that Alistair and Flora reached their separate exits; he accompanied by the men of the King's Council and she by Leliana and several noblewomen. Despite the queen quite clearly *not* being a virgin, it was still an impending *consummation*; and thus some of the traditional bawdiness was expected.

Alistair, his teeth gritted, was escorted from the chamber with comments such as *enjoy your ride on the crimson mare!* and *best wishes for your stay in Highever!* echoing behind him. As the king left, he took hold of a fortifying bottle of Antivan brandy, not bothering with the accompanying tankard.

Flora – whose status as a Hero of Ferelden granted her some additional measure of respect beyond that of generic royal bride – was spared a plethora of over-familiar remarks. This was also due in no small part to Fergus' narrowed grey-blue stare sweeping across the assembled guests; silently warning them off making overly lewd comments on the act itself. Instead, the audience offered merely some lascivious advice to the bride as she passed between their ranks.

"*Lie back and think of Ferelden, your majesty!*"

"*I hear the Theirins are well-hung, my lady. Care to confirm or deny?*"

The confused Flora was unsure how to respond and so simply ignored them, lifting her chin and allowing Leliana to lead her from the great hall. They were accompanied by several noblewomen, including Isolde Guerrin, Bann Reginalda and Habren Bryland; the latter two chattering in low, excited tones.

They travelled along one of the wide stone passages that ran down the side of the great hall, a lofty corridor with great spiked-iron rings blazing with candlelight high overhead. The Royal Guard flanking the corridor passed their pikes from hand to hand in respect; eyes lowered in deference to their new, young queen.

The noise of the revellers gradually faded away, absorbed by the thick stone walls of the castle. Clutching Leliana's dry, scented palm Flora padded dutifully in her wake; trying not to limp too extensively. The long day had taken its toll on her strapped knee, and it was voicing its protest through a combination of twinges and sharp, jabbing pains.

Once they had reached the great stained glass Calenhad window, Leliana noticed that her accomplice was lagging behind. The bard paused for a moment, moonlight filtering through the crystallised glass and casting her face in a wash of colour. Flora came to a halt, her flushed cheeks puffed out with effort. Behind her, Bann Reginalda, Isolde and Habren Bryland also stopped in a rustle of velvet and ruffled silk.

"You've done very well today, *ma petite,*" Leliana murmured, her voice soft and affectionate. "Not much longer now."

Conscious of Flora's sore knee, the bard slowed her pace a fraction. She took the stone staircase leading up to the Royal Corridor one red-carpeted step at a time, letting Flora have a rest halfway up.

"I always felt sorry for the poor deer," Reginalda murmured, squinting her lined, clever eyes up at the hunted *halla* tapestry that hung at the end of the royal passageway. "Why don't you ask Alistair to replace it with something a bit more *cheerful*, my dear?"

Flora followed the bann's stare up at the moth-eaten tapestry, her gaze moving from the snarling Mabari to the terrified, cringing *halla*.

"*Hm,*" she replied, vaguely. "*Maybe.*"
"One would never find such crude displays of art in Orlais," Isolde retorted, unable to stop herself from showing off her knowledge. "At Redcliffe Castle, we have a beautiful pair of stained-glass windows imported from Val Royeaux, depicting a black and a white swan facing each other."

"Did they survive the carnage caused by your son's demonic possession?" Habren Bryland asked sweetly, her dark eyes flashing.

Isolde let out a little huff of displeasure, a faint flush blossoming on her cheeks.

"Redcliffe Castle looked beautiful when it was decorated for Satinalia," Flora offered, feeling sorry for Arl Eamon's wife. "Will you help to decorate the Royal Palace for Satinalia this year?"

Isolde blinked and then stammered a quick, pleased assent, the flush on her cheeks deepening.

Leliana squeezed Flora's palm briefly, leading her down the wide corridor past the laurel-painted doorway leading to the Cousland quarters. Guilluame, the chief steward, was waiting patiently beside the thick, studded oak doors that made entrance into the Royal bedchamber. On seeing Flora, he bowed very low; twirling the ends of his oiled moustache.

"Congratulations, your majesty," he murmured, returning upright with a wry smile. "It is good to see you take your rightful place at the king's side."

Flora gave a little nod, wondering if their audience already lay in wait behind the sealed oak doors.

"The king will be along in a half-candle," Leliana informed the steward briskly, conscious of the waning minutes. "Is all prepared within?"

"Yes, my lady" confirmed Guilluame, with a small inclination of his bearded chin. "All is laid out and set up according to the traditional guidelines."

Chapter End Notes

OOC Author Note: Lol it seems so disrespectful to shout crude remarks at the bride and groom – but it was totally expected at a Medieval wedding, lol. The only vestiges of that lewdness found in today's weddings is probably the rude stories in a best man's speech, haha.

I just imagine Flora getting this love letter from the admiring Arl Myrddin (who's a minor NPC from the DA tabletop RPG) – she can't read his writing and has no idea what it says, so poor old Alistair has to translate it for her, raging inwardly all the while, lol. LITERACY PRACTICE!

Sooowoooooo next chapter – THE WEDDING NIGHT! Finally! Hahahaha, poor old Alistair – I'm not sure taking the entire bottle of Antivan brandy was a good idea…

Oh, btw a lodestone is a naturally magnetised piece of stone, lol
The guards hastened to open the doors, and Leliana promptly led the way into the Royal Bedchamber. There were no other people present within the stark, rustic space, yet clearly the servants had been busy – like the entrance and great halls, the room had been embellished with additional decoration. Unlike those previous chambers, there were no Cousland and Theirin emblems plastered about the walls; these augmentations were for a older, more primitive purpose.

Hazelnuts strung onto threads had been hung at the windows and above the door frame; bushels of young green corn stalks stood in bronze containers at the corners of the room. Long, perfumed branches of freshly-harvested hazel had been placed on top of the mantelpiece and on the window bench. Pine cones had been scattered amidst the animal furs lying across the bed, and sprigs of mistletoe strewn over the cushions.

Flora came to an astonished halt, her eyes moving about the chamber. She was so distracted by the vegetative decoration that she barely paid heed to the privacy screen, made from delicate, translucent vellum stretched across a willow frame; and the two wooden chairs placed discretely at its side.

"It looks like a garden in here," Flora breathed, lifting the crown from her head and grimacing as several long strands of hair rose with it, tangled within the intricate curls of gold. Habren Bryland stepped forward, rather shyly, and helped Flora to disengage her hair from the diadem.

"They're fertility symbols," replied Leliana briskly, closing the door in an overeager guard's face and rummaging about in her sleeves. Then, when Flora shot Leliana a slightly bemused look – one hand on her full stomach - the bard let out a little chuckle.

"It's traditional, ma cherie. Anyway, think of the future children that you and Alistair will be producing!"


Bann Reginalda – who had deliberately pursued a lifestyle that would result in no heirs – snorted, rummaging in her pocket to retrieve a vial of glimmering water.

"Let the lass concentrate on the babe in her belly," she commented wryly, uncorking the sacred tincture and heading over to the bed. "She's got decades to worry about producing a litter of Theirin pups."

"A litter?" repeated Flora, her eyes wide. "How many in a litter?"

"Six to eight?"

"Gah!"

Meanwhile, Isolde was taking advantage of this rare access to the Royal Bedchamber to scan her surroundings; taking careful note of every decorative detail. Although privately she thought Fereldan design to be crude and primitive compared to her native Orlais; she still desired to be abreast of the Royal taste in fashion. Her pale blue eyes noted the bear skins spread over the bed, the maroon and white patterned blankets and the tan murals daubed across the walls, appraising and analysing.
As Bann Reginalda sprinkled the blessed Chantry water across the marital bed, humming a tuneless rendition of *Bones in the Sand*; Leliana withdrew a thin, wickedly sharp blade and advanced towards Flora.

"Hold your hair atop your head, keep still," she began, eyeing the dark leather clinging to the queen's skin. "And *don't breathe*. This blade is sharper than Wynne's tongue."

Flora obediently took a gulp of air and held it, twisting up her mass of hair into a thick bundle and holding it above her ears. Leliana crouched beside her and began, very carefully, to slice the leather from around her hips. The blade cut through the tiny stitches like butter, and – piece by piece- the Alamarri wedding gown fell away in swathes of dark calfskin. The bodice came away last and Flora inhaled slightly in relief, standing naked and barefoot amidst a pool of cut leather. It was a testament to Leliana's skill that she had not left a single nick on Flora's skin, despite the tenacious adherence of gown to flesh.

"It's almost a shame that the dress is ruined now," commented Reginalda, capping the holy water briskly and tucking it away. "You looked like something from an old legend clad in it, Florence."

"Weren't you embarrassed about – about how *revealing* it was, in front of all those people?" Habren asked, curious. Leonas' daughter was also astonished at Flora's utter nonchalance at being unclothed in front of three noblewomen who were relative strangers. Flora's ambivalence was a legacy of cramped quarters and communal dormitories; privacy of one's body was an unknown concept in both Herring and the Circle.

"Eh. No, not really."

Flora gave a little Herring shrug, shaking her head as she wandered across to the mantelpiece; her hair falling in a tangled mass of dark red to her hips. She picked up a hazelnut and pressed it against the stone edge of the mantel to crack it, popping the raw fruit into her mouth with a slightly mindless expression.

*Ma crevette,* don't eat too much, or you'll *bloat,*" instructed Leliana, disposing of the scraps of leather by booting them swiftly underneath the bed.

Unsure if she could resist the temptation to eat every *fertility-boosting* food item in the room, Flora turned away and padded barefoot across the flagstones. Isolde and Habren were tucking what appeared to be silver Chantry symbols between the blankets of the bed. Once this was done, Habren leaned across the cushions and tied the leather strap that had hand-fasted the royal union in an elaborate bow around the bed-post.

Whilst the noblewomen were busying themselves, Flora sat down on the cushions of the bench beneath the recently-widened window, peering down at the moonlit estuary below. The Denerim main canal seemed far more crowded than usual, with several dozen tall ships anchored at its docks. Clearly, many of the wedding guests had taken advantage of the favourable summer climate to sail from their native lands to the shores of Ferelden. The city itself still blazed with torchlight despite the lateness of the hour, and Flora imagined that the taverns were doing a roaring trade. She was suddenly glad that she and Alistair had shared their wedding day so openly with the public – Denerim was in sore need of reason to celebrate after the distress and fear of the past year.

"Usually, lass, we ladies would be mentally preparing you for the *delights* of marital conjugation with your new husband," Reginalda commented dryly, taking a long swig of whiskey from a hip flask as she stepped back from the bed. "You know; traumatising the blushing bride with a few horror stories. But a little bird tells me that you and Alistair are… *well acquainted* with one another."
This was a delicate way of stating the fact that the entire Landsmeet and most of the city were aware that the young Theirin and Cousland were like a pair of insatiable little rabbits when it came to the bedchamber. Leliana, who read the latent meaning of the bann's comment, let out a feminine snort of affirmation. Flora, who had no idea what the bann was talking about – she certainly had no idea what conjugation meant - smiled vaguely and hoped that this was response enough.

"Flora! Over here," commanded Leliana, whose nerves were beginning to wear thin from the sheer pressure of overseeing the bride from dawn to dusk. "Ma belle fleur. One more outfit change for the day, and then it will all be over."

Over for you, Flora thought, eyeing the two chairs and privacy screen set to one side of the bed as she passed by. The baby gave an insistent kick to her kidney and she flinched, trying to appease it with a pat.

"Your bridal nightgown!" declared Leliana triumphantly; holding up what appeared to be a mass of sheer, beribboned material, festooned with gauzy flowers and an excess of frills. A slightly alarmed Flora came to a halt before the lay sister, her expression wary.

"I… thought I'd just wear my usual night things," she said, letting Leliana wrap the gauzy nightgown around her shoulders. "You know, the striped pyjamas. Or the tunic with the Mabari stitched on the front."

"On your wedding night?" demanded Leliana, loosely knotting strands of pink ribbon into a bow to close the front of the gown. "Non!"

Flora eyed herself in the long mirror beside the hearth, immediately hating every silky, frilly beribboned inch. Even she would not dare to venture down the corridor on a nocturnal wander clad in this skimpy offering. It was transparent enough to show her swollen breasts, plump belly and the cleft of her legs; even the leather strap around her knee was visible. She felt more naked than if she were actually naked, like a prize pig dressed incongruously in pink ruffles.

"Congratulations, lay-sister," commented Reginalda dryly, as Leliana raked brutal fingers through a yelping Flora's hair to remove a day's worth of tangles. "You've found the only gown in Thedas more revealing than the one the lass got married in."

"Is this type of thing what the Alamari brides would have worn?" Flora croaked, grimacing as the pearl-edged collar was pulled tight around her neck.

"Non, they would have gone naked," replied Leliana, giving up on the fingers and going to find a hairbrush. By the time that she had turned back to Flora, the new queen wore nothing but her bare skin and a mulish expression; the ruffled silk pooled at her feet.

"Then I'm going to go naked too," Flora declared, face alight with the Herring stubbornness that manifested on carefully selected occasions. "I'm an Alamari bride today. You can have that frilly thing as a present."

Leliana eyed the young Cousland, recognised the stoic rigidity in Flora's pale stare; and did not bother to argue.

"Fine," the lay sister replied, wielding the hairbrush like a weapon. "Such a beautiful gown should be worn by one who truly appreciates it. Quick, quick – into bed! I can hear the menfolk approaching."

"Oh no! Not the menfolk," commented Reginalda, amused that Leliana had uttered the warning in
the same panicked tones as she would warn of the approach of the Darkspawn. "Oh dear."

Sure enough, the sounds of a raucous group came echoing down the corridor. There was laughter and much clinking of tankards, accompanied by the heavy shuffle of leather boots against stone.

The new queen of Ferelden ambled across the flagstones and clambered into bed, dislodging several pine cones and Chantry symbols as she pulled back the blankets. Leliana swooped to replace the fallen items, while Isolde and Habren darted about to hastily extinguish the candlesticks. Soon, the only light in the chamber came from the great hearth; spilling in mellow ochre waves across the bearskin rug and casting the marital bed in a warm, inviting glow.

Sitting in the midst of the vast mattress, Flora tugged the furs up over her bare thighs. As voices sounded from outside the door, she let her hair fall loose; leaning back against the cushions and lifting her chin in the direction of the room's arched entrance.

Deep breath, chin up, eyes straight.

The men of the Landsmeet spilled into the room like a pack of Mabari, laughing and jesting amongst themselves. They brought with them a miasma of ale, joviality and relief – the day had gone well, and Ferelden had made a strong impression in the eyes of their foreign guests. Regional accents were emerging more strongly in the wake of the free-flowing honey mead; backs were being clapped and gleeful anecdotes from the day exchanged. Several dogs tumbled in with them, barking excitedly as they picked up on the rambunctiousness of their masters.

"Where's the bride?" demanded the Arl of the Western Hills, a drunken slur to his words. "We've got a man here more than ready to warm his bride in the marital bed."

"The Queen of Ferelden is here," Leliana replied imperiously, drawing to the side of the room with the other women. "And she awaits her husband."

The men of the Landsmeet came to a halt in a crowd of leather, fur and Mabari hounds; gazing at the great four poster bed that dominated the chamber. As Leliana had announced, the queen was indeed awaiting her husband. She was leaning back against the cushions, a fur draped casually across her bare thighs. Her dark red hair, in stark contrast to the creamy pallor of her skin, fell over her shoulders; like tendrils of the fire had crawled out of the hearth. She was utterly unbothered about her nakedness: bare breasted and swollen-bellied. She raised her solemn face, the wide Cousland mouth curled in its customary, sulky pout. The maroon kaddis mark was still painted beneath her gold-flecked eye; her pale gaze moving thoughtfully from one face to the next. There was something strangely provocative in the contrast between the haughty refinement of the queen's face, and the lush wantonness of her exposed body.

"Maker's Breath." One bann's incredulous voice rose up from near the back of the crowd. "Look at that."

"That – that'sh my wife!"

Supported by an apologetic Teagan, Alistair elbowed his way through the men of the Landsmeet; letting the empty bottle of Antivan brandy drop to the flagstones. Finian appeared behind him, halfway between giggling and frenetic apology, mouthing something incomprehensible to his little sister.

Thunderclouds began to settle over Leliana's face as she realised that Alistair had decided to self-medicate his nervousness with copious amounts of alcohol.
"The mosht beautiful girl in … hic! Thedas," Alistair declared, looking around in confusion for the bottle before taking an unsteady step forwards. "Isn't she, uncle?"

The king hiccupped, swaying slightly on his feet as he came to a pause.

"Aye, lad," croaked Teagan, trying to direct the neck of a water-pouch to his nephew's mouth. "Take a swig of this."

Flora stared at Alistair, wide-eyed and astonished. Fergus rounded the edge of the crowd, approaching the bed and crouching down to whisper into her ear.

"Sorry, Floss – I tried to slow him down, but he necked the entire bottle in about six gulps. Nervous, poor sod."

"Flo! FLORA," said Alistair, loudly; the words running together like drunken patrons stumbling home from the tavern. "It'sh a good thing you're already… hic! Naked. Otherwise they'd be ripping off scraps of your dress and shellin- selling them off. Meant to be lucky. It'sh another weird noble tradition!"

Alistair took a long gulp of water after Teagan's insistent prompt, a trickle running down into his closely cropped beard. Flora smiled up at him, slightly apprehensively. The king stared back at her, his gaze heated and desirous. When he spoke next, the lust coated his words like honey, thick, wild and sweet.

"Maker'sh Breath, but you're gorgeoush," he mumbled, reaching up haphazardly for his crown and setting it precariously atop the mantel. "That face… that body! I'll be there in a jusht a moment, baby."

Heedless of the crowd still in the chamber, Alistair began to unbutton his leather tunic with clumsy fingers, tugging impatiently at the defiant buttons. Flora watched him with a combination of fascination and trepidation as Leonas Bryland hastily gestured for Habren to leave the room. His daughter did so with great reluctance, craning her neck for a glimpse of the king's muscled torso and broad shoulders, the olive skin marred with the occasional cruel reminder of battle.

"I'm ready to con- conshummate my marriage," Alistair declared proudly to the fish painted above the mantle-piece, clumsily removing one boot and then the other. "Are you ready, lovely Lo?"

"Yee-ees," replied Flora, somewhat dubiously.

Fergus grimaced, watching the king clumsily unbutton his breeches on the third attempt. He shot an anxious glance at Teagan, who stepped forward and placed a cautionary hand on Alistair's elbow.

"Your enthusiasm is admirable, son, just… take care with her, aye? She's with babe."

Alistair nodded like a Mabari at Teagan's gentle reminder, his eyes softening.

"The mother… the mother of my child," he repeated, breeches now thrust halfway down his thighs. "I'm the luckiesht man in Thedash."

The audience were now rapidly vacating the chamber, Leliana hissing angrily in Finian's ear. Two servants, struggling to keep a straight face, entered just as Alistair successfully managed to drop his breeches about his ankles. They manoeuvred the privacy screen into place before the bed; moments later, the two chairs were positioned on the other side.

Flora eyed the setup for a moment – the vellum screen was entirely translucent, and would offer no
real concealment. The next moment, she was distracted as Alistair forgot that his breeches were still about his ankles; taking an eager step forward. He crashed face first onto the blankets and furs with a muffled grunt.

She reached out to caress the back of his head, gently stroking the rumpled bronze hair that curled at the nape of his neck. He let out a soft, indistinct sound of pleasure at the touch of her fingers, the muscles in his broad shoulders flexing as he pushed himself blearily upwards; face thrusting towards her own. She ducked her head to let their mouths brush together in a soft, exploratory kiss. The brandy was sweet and tart on Alistair's tongue; his breath warmed by the liquor as it whispered across her face.

The sound of the door opening softly interrupted their kiss, and both of them drew apart to listen. Flora heard two sets of footsteps enter – an elderly woman's shuffle, followed by a man's heavier booted stride. A moment later, there came almost simultaneous wooden squeaks as the two chairs were sat upon.

Flora sat up against the cushions, peering through the vellum screen. She could see two seated figures silhouetted against the light from the hearth; and realised that her own outline would be equally visible.

*It must be some Chantry priestess and the noble from the Landsmeet. I wonder if I should wave to them?*

*Probably not.*

*Come on, Flora, you have a job to do. You and Alistair.*

Flora leaned back against the cushions and glanced sideways at her husband. To her alarm, Alistair was slumped face down amidst the furs; naked, golden and magnificent as a dozing lion. Her alarm was augmented as he let out a sound that was suspiciously like a *snore*.

"Alistair," she hissed, hoping that her voice wasn't carrying to their keen-eared audience. "Alistair. Wake up!"

The only response was another snore, even louder. Flora gaped down at Alistair's broad shoulders, too stunned to even admire the taut muscle dormant beneath the battle-marked olive flesh. Immediately, her practical northerner's brain began to sort through the options available to her.

*Roll him over and... improvise?*

Knowing that Alistair loved being awoken by his best friend clambering atop him, Flora gave his hip an experimental, hopeful nudge. The king lay there like deadweight, pressing down into the mattress against the furs and blankets. It soon became apparent that she would not be able to turn him face-upwards.

*Fine. What about creating the sound effects of me and Alistair making love on my own?*

From her seated position Flora gave a little experimental bounce on the bed, but the resultant creak was anaemic and unsatisfactory.

"Oooh," she said, feeling ridiculous. "Mm. Yes."

"Are... are you alright, your majesty?"

The tentative male voice came drifting around the thin vellum screen; to Flora's relief, it was familiar
but not overly so. Racking her memory for a moment, she successfully matched the voice to a face.

*Arl Myrr-Murff- the one who asked me to dance earlier.*

*At least it's not Eamon!*

"I'm fine," Flora replied, leaning back against the cushions. Bringing one hand to her mouth, she chewed glumly on her thumbnail, wondering what to do.

Beside her, Alistair gave a little yawn and rolled over like a warm, sleepy Mabari; one arm groping blindly for his wife. His large, calloused palm landed on her thigh and Flora leaned over, patting his bearded cheek gently with her fingers.

"Mnh," the king grunted, opening one bleary eye to squint at her. "My- my lovely Lo. Why'sh there two of you? Did I marry you both? Bigamy'sh illegal in Ferelden… hic!"

"It's not Arl Eamon watching us," Flora whispered, in the hope that this would calm Alistair's nerves. "Or Bann Teagan."

Alistair blinked at her, a faint spark of clarity igniting in the midst of his misty, mead-infused stare.

"Wha – what d'you mean it'sh not Eamon? Who is it? Leonas?"


"Muffy?"

"I don't know his name," she mumbled in an attempt to be discreet, aware that the arl and anonymous Chantry priestess were seated only yards away on the other side of the translucent vellum.

Alistair's wide, olive brow creased as his brandy-soaked brain laboriously went through the members of the Fereldan Landsmeet. He proceeded to whisper his guesses into Flora's ear, breath hot and sweetened by honey mead.

"Bann Mathuin?"

"No."

"Lady Morag?"

She grunted in the negative. Alistair frowned for a moment, and then his eyes widened imperceptibly in the fire-lit shadows; the green flecks standing out like shards of sea glass.

"Not Arl Myrddin!"

"Mm."

A fraction of clarity returned to Alistair's gaze as he stared at her; his thoughts writ raw across his face.

"I'm glad you're awake," she whispered solemnly, seizing the opportunity. "I thought I'd have to make noises and pretend you were- "

Before Flora could finish her sentence his mouth was crashing onto hers, the sweet-sharp scent of Antivan brandy tart on his lips. With soft yet inexorable insistence his tongue worked its way into
Flora's own mouth, drawing an involuntary squeak from her throat. The kiss was no less potent for its lack of refinement; it was hungry, possessive and demanded the immediate yielding of her mouth to his. She readily surrendered, arching herself towards him with both relief and desire.

Alistair pulled back suddenly to take a long draw of air, a ruddy flush rising to the handsome, ascetic olive cheekbones. Flora snuck a quick glance downwards and was gratified to see that which had previously lain heavy and dormant against his thigh was now standing proudly erect in its nest of soft, bronze curls.

"Take – take off your clothes, baby," Alistair whispered, stifling a hiccup. "I want to see that beautiful body of yours."

Flora eyed him – she was sprawled before him entirely naked – then decided to play along, squirming around in the furs for a moment.

"Alright," she breathed, letting her fingers brush over her bare thigh for emphasis. "They're… all off. My clothes."

Alistair stared down at her, mouth slightly open; the flush creeping down his throat and across the broad, golden-furred spread of his chest. His eyes were heavy-lidded with lust, pupils blown wide and dark; focused on her like the Mabari staring down the hunted halla on the tapestry. His gaze meandered from her face, to her throat, to the mound of her breast; curved and pale as a goose egg.

Dropping further, his stare took in the swell of her stomach and then the cleft at the top of her thighs; an involuntary sound escaping his throat. Mesmerised, Alistair reflexively reached down to take himself in hand, sliding a loose fist in a languid, practised rhythm as he stared down unashamedly at her body.

Flora gazed up at him with benevolence at first, pleased that he seemed equally enraptured with her childbearing body as he had been with its slender equivalent. However, as the expression on his face became slightly dazed – the stare a fraction cross-eyed – she felt increasingly less magnanimous. She watched the king pull mindlessly at himself in an alcohol-mired trance, as though she were some erotic painting in an Antivan brothel as opposed to a living, breathing girl lying before him. Flora scowled to herself, peering ill-temperedly up at the ceiling.

The next time that she looked across at Alistair, he was flat on his back and snoring once again. Flora stared at him for a moment, feeling a slightly hysterical laugh rise in her throat.

Don't laugh, Flora! This isn't supposed to be funny.

Instead of a laugh, a tear emerged from the corner of her eye. Flora blinked in astonishment, her mouth falling open as she felt a second tear follow the first. Reaching up, she touched exploratory fingertips to her cheeks; they came away wet and Flora inhaled unsteadily.

Come on, she thought sternly to herself. This is ridiculous.

Flora rolled over onto her side, one hand on the swell of her belly; facing away from Alistair so that she could hide her face in the bearskin. The thick fur brushed against her skin and she sneezed, wiping her nose on the back of her arm.

We haven't consummated anything, she thought to herself, feeling a sudden twist of alarm. What does that mean in a noble marriage? Does it mean the marriage isn't legal? Is the baby a bastard again?

The thought of the day's endless fuss, ceremony and ritual ultimately proving futile was enough to
send more tears spilling over Flora's eyelashes. She put her hands over her face, pressing her thumbs hard into the corners of her eyes.

*I don't want to go through all that again!*

The baby decided that this would be an excellent moment to harass its young mother, and sent a small foot directly into her kidneys.

It was a combination of Flora's resultant yelp and her absence from his chest that woke Alistair; his arms reaching blindly into the empty space of the mattress before his eyes had even opened. When it became clear that his new wife was not in her usual place curled against his side, he let out a muffled grunt of confusion, rubbing a sleepy hand over his face.

"Lo?"

The firelight from the hearth cast a flickering, burnished glow across the bed, the inconstant light creating a mottled patchwork of shadow and warmth. Alistair blinked into the gloom, realising that his best friend was huddled amidst the blankets on the dark side of the bed; the scar left by the Archdemon's soul glinting silvery between her shoulders. Her hair was a tangle of dark red seaweed spread across the blankets; she was hunched around her unwieldy stomach like a hermit crab.

Wriggling across the crumpled blankets, Alistair pressed his lips between her shoulder blades, directly over the pale etching of the Archdemon.

"Sweetheart?"

When Flora gave a sniff instead of replying, he leaned over on an elbow and gently angled her face towards him. She had her eyes tightly closed, the corners of her mouth turned down. With a sinking suspicion in the pit of his stomach, Alistair reached out and brushed his thumb gently against her lashes. His fears were confirmed when it came away wet and he inhaled in dismay; drawing her immediately against his chest.

"My love," he murmured in her ear, seeking out her fingers and wrapping them tightly in his own. "Why are you crying? My own… hic! sweet wife. Tell me what's wrong and I'll fix it."

Seeing no point in trying to obscure the cause of her dejection, Flora whispered the truth back to him.

"I'm not your wife yet," she breathed back, miserably. "Not really."

"What do you mean? Of course you are, darling."

Flora peered up through the shadows; thinking on how handsome Alistair's bronzed features appeared in the firelight even when creased in confusion.

"All the ridiculous things we had to do today," she said, softly. "All the fuss, all the rituals and traditions and processing around. None of it matters, compared to *this*. *This* is what makes us married. Me and you, together."

She reached up to brush his cheek with the back of her fingers, light and sad.

Sobering rapidly, Alistair stared down at her, understanding at last.

"You and I, together," he repeated, in a quiet and wondering voice. "You're right, Flo. And this – *this* has more meaning than *anything* we did in the Chantry."
Flora gazed up at him, tentative hope dawning on her tear-stained face. Alistair reached down to return the gesture, stroking his thumb down the line of her jaw.

"Ah, why was I even worried about this?" he murmured, eyes warm and bruised with tenderness. "It's the best bit about the whole day. No Chantry rituals, no crowns, no thrones – just you, and I, together. The two of us in bed, this is what… what counts."

"And that's not too hard, is it?" she replied, a note of anxiety in the words.

"No, baby," the king said throatily, staring down at her with desire kindling in the depths of his hazel gaze. "The opposite. It's very easy to love you."

Flora smiled up at him, and he covered her lips with a kiss that stole the air from her lungs and left her gasping. When Alistair broke the kiss, he moved his mouth to her ear; teasing its pink outer shell with the tip of his tongue.

"So, you want me to make you my wife now?" he breathed, letting his callused thumb meander over her lip, down her throat and along the line of her collarbone.

She nodded, mutedly. Alistair smiled once more, his teeth white against the fire-lit darkness. Suddenly Flora understood Maric Theirin's nickname of the Lion of the East; the old king's predatory, proud leonine features had manifested strongest in his second son.

Without warning, Alistair rolled on top of her; careful to keep his weight suspended on knees and strong arms. Still, he was close enough for the muscled bulk to press her down into the mattress; downy golden chest hair brushing against her naked breast as he bowed his head to nuzzle her neck. He smelt warm, and masculine, and his breath still carried the spiced edge of the Antivan brandy.

Flora reached up to anchor her arms about the strong breadth of his shoulders as his lips plastered a ragged line of kisses from her ear to the base of her throat. Suddenly wanting more than just his mouth, she arched herself upwards; shamelessly nudging her body against his with a little keen of need.

This small sound thoroughly undermined the self-control that Alistair had been so determined to maintain. Abandoning his restraint, he began to suckle at her neck, keeping himself propped up on one arm while the other hand shamelessly groped her breasts and between her legs, kneading and stroking with clumsy desire. Flora returned his ardour with equal fervency, reaching down to clutch at his taut buttock as she fixed her teeth around his earlobe. He was sweaty now, the muscles in his back covered with a fine film of perspiration as they flexed and contracted. As always, the raw strength contained within the bulk of her best friend's body sent a jolt of arousal straight to her core.

Impulsively, Flora dug her short fingernails into his shoulder blades and dragged them downwards; eliciting such a groan as she had never heard from him before.

Without warning, Alistair shifted his hips upwards and slid fully into her, meeting no resistance from her ready flesh. Flora curved herself towards him, relishing the sense of satiation that only this could provide. His hips began to piston back and forth, perspiration dripping from his chest onto her breasts as he rocked into her with hoarse grunts of satisfaction. His face was raw with pleasure; brow creased and eyes half-closed, lips drawn back over his teeth as he moaned.

It took only a handful of thrusts before she was crying out his name with each full sheath of sword into scabbard. This seemed to spur Alistair's efforts on more vigorously, strangled gasps escaping his throat as he panted above her. The bed gave rhythmic creaks of protest about them; the centuries-old wooden posts suffering beneath the young king's ardour.
"My wife," he managed to croak between incoherent gasps, face hazy with pleasure. "Mine. Say it, baby."

He pulled her thighs up about his hips, gripping her in place while grinding in more slowly. Flora whimpered, weak and delirious before him; ropes of hair plastered to her damp breasts. The sound went straight to Alistair's root and he had to grit his teeth, sweat sliding down his stomach to dampen the curls nestled at the apex of his thighs.

Yet he was determined to see to his bride's pleasure first, reaching down to stroke her roughly with a thumb while continuing the slow, deep thrusts.

"Say it, Flora."

"Yours," she managed to gasp out, her voice strangled. "I'm yours."

As a reward, Alistair's teasing, callused thumb now drove her towards climax; circling with relentless focus on what he knew to be her most sensitive point. During their month long hiatus at South Reach, he had become intimate with the architecture of his best friend's body, determined to improve upon the clumsy adolescent rutting that they had engaged in within Brecilian. He had also gained an invaluable education in pleasuring a woman from the Rivaini pirate during the memorable hours he had spent with her and Flora in the Pearl. Once Alistair had overcome his initial shyness, Isabela had found him to be an enthusiastic and ardent pupil.

Now the king ruthlessly exercised every inch of that precious knowledge, maintaining his own rhythm while moving his thumb in increasingly tight circles. It did not take long - Flora was an easy girl both to please and to pleasure – and soon she was curving like a bow towards him.

He put his mouth to her ear; breathing crude compliments that made her insides squirm with arousal, using coarse gutter language that she hadn't even realised he knew.

"Come on, baby," he prompted thickly at last, the words barely escaping his lust-constricted throat. "Come for your husband."

Obediently she came undone beneath him, hips shuddering and mouth opening wide; a cry slipping out like an ecstatic prayer. It was loud enough that the still-coherent part of Alistair's mind hoped very much that Flora's brothers in the adjacent chamber had made good use of their wax earplugs.

Once he was content that she had been well-satisfied, the king released the final bounds of restraint; lifting Flora's hips and thrusting hard and erratic between her slick thighs. One of her small feet was knocking against his thigh and he grabbed it, sucking her toes lewdly into his mouth.

After spending himself with a hoarse, shuddering groan, he hunched over her with heaving shoulders, trying to catch his breath. Flora closed her eyes for a moment, dropping her head back against the cushions. Her heart was racing and she took several deep, long breaths to try and slow it; conscious of the fidgeting infant in her belly.

When she opened her eyes once more, Alistair was gazing down at her with naked adoration; the green flecks in his irises standing out stark against the tender hazel background. Flora lifted her arm and touched the side of his flushed face, her finger tracing the line of his damp beard. Mairyn's Star and the wedding band sat below glinted in the firelight; bright, metallic points amidst the shadow.

"I love you," she said impulsively, solemn and earnest.

Alistair withdrew from her with a half-gasp, leaning forward to press a clumsy kiss to her lips before
whispering the words back to her. Their parting bodies made an audibly wet noise as he shifted sideways onto the mattress, skin slippery with rapidly cooling sweat. Flora could feel her hair hanging in wet ropes – not merely damp, but *saturated* – about her shoulders.

"My darling wife," Alistair murmured, sleepily rearranging the cushions behind his head before settling back against them. "Come here, Lo."

He lifted an arm, and Flora rolled against his side; resting her head in the crook of his shoulder. Their hands reflexively reached for each other, fingers curling tightly together in their old ritual. Neither spared a glance for the vellum screen or the figures silhouetted against the hearth.

For several moments they rested quietly, his free hand stroking absentmindedly over her hair.

"You were right, my love," Alistair murmured eventually, just as Flora was beginning to slide down the gentle slope towards sleep.

"Eeeh?"

"This was the bit that mattered. My sweet girl."

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**Chapter End Notes**

OOC Author Note: Oh woooow this is a long chapter! I was originally going to split it up into two parts, but I actually think it works better as one long chapter. At first, the figures behind the screen feature prominently (Arl Myrddin is the chap who asked Flora to dance last chapter) – reflecting how both Alistair and Flora are thinking about them – but when they actually get it on, they’re so preoccupied with each other that they barely notice their audience.

Alistair only calls Flora "Flora" in two circumstances – when he wants her to take something seriously, and in the bedroom, lol. Anyway, this was a super fun chapter to write! I did feel quite sorry for Flo at first, but Alistair redeemed himself well towards the end. They are a lot better at doing it now than they were in the original story, hahaha.
Crows and Camomile Tea

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter 66: Crowns and Camomile Tea

As though to make up for his earlier lethargy; Alistair seemed determined to make the most of the rest of their wedding night. This suited Flora perfectly well, since the humours of her body were too imbalanced for a restful sleep. Just after the twelve-bells change in watch, the king had his queen on all fours like a Mabari; defiant in his love of the position that foreigners derisively described as primitive and typically Fereldan.

The deepest part of the night settled like a soft, muted cloak over the turrets and towers of the Royal Palace. Guards and retainers stood vigil outside the quarters of their respective liege-lords; yawning servants removed the last of the food and detritus from the great hall. Candlelight blazed from the turret windows of the castle library, where scribes were working diligently to chronicle every detail of the day's ceremonies. Leliana, conversely, was fast asleep – the bard was exhausted from masterminding the crucial minutiae of the day's events; once the adrenaline had finally drained, she was catatonic within minutes.

Meanwhile, in a shadowed corner of the Landsmeet chamber, the Fereldan dancing girl with the long, fox-fur coloured hair moaned into the darkness; a third climax coaxed from her parted lips by the charming blond elf. She didn't know why the Antivan had singled her out for his attention – especially with those half-naked Rivaini dancers also competing for his wickedly dancing eye – but she certainly wasn't going to complain.

Dawn brought a peach-coloured sunrise laced with deep pink cloud; mellow light spilling like brandy over the mead-sodden streets of Denerim. Nobody in the city wanted to wake up – their heads still thrummed from the excesses of the previous night – and so shutters stayed firmly sealed and the streets were eerily quiet. The seagulls swooped in annoyed perplexion over the deserted fish-market, and stray cats delighted in their extended dominion over the cobblestoned alleyways.

As the occupants of Denerim Castle also continued to slumber, up in the Royal bedchamber a sweaty Flora peered down at her snoring husband. She was straddling her best friend's hips, having just ridden him as best she could with a twenty-six week old babe in the belly. Unfortunately, Alistair was not able to appreciate her proud afterglow, since he had fallen into a dead sleep about thirty seconds after spending himself.

Flora was feeling a tad fidgety – she had been put off her own climax after feeling the baby give a vigorous wriggle – and so clambered awkwardly off Alistair's broad thighs. The inside of her mouth felt dry; she recalled the flagon of apple-water sitting on the dresser. Fortunately, the vellum screen caught the corner of her eye and she stopped herself from wandering naked across the flagstones.

Of course: we're not alone. I forgot.

Looking about the tangled furs and blankets on the bed, she spotted the same ugly mustard-yellow dressing robe that she had worn the previous night. Grateful that Leliana had sent it down – the coarse wool garment reminded her of Herring – Flora pulled it on over her shoulders and fastened
the chunky wooden buttons at the front.

Yawning, she clambered out of bed and ventured barefoot around the transparent vellum screen; grimacing at the coldness of the flagstones. The servants had been in already – new cedar logs had been piled into the hearth, and fresh rushes strewn across the floor.

A Chantry mother, plump and shrivelled like a well-aged apple, was half-falling asleep on one of the chairs; her grey curls slipping out from beneath her tall hat. Her maroon and ivory robes were crumpled from a long night of sitting in one spot. Flora recognised the lined face and sought to match it with a name; finally identifying the elderly priestess as Mother Telatia from Revanloch monastery.

The old woman put a tired hand to her face and yawned deeply. Although she had not technically been required to stay for the duration of the night, to do so had become an unspoken tradition over the Ages. Telatia would not let herself be the one to break established protocol; even if it meant that she was nearly falling from her chair with weariness.

Beside her, Arl Myrddin sat on his own chair; looking distinctly worse for wear. A fresh growth of stubble grew past the boundary of his auburn beard, and dark shadows lined the undersides of his eyes. The top buttons of his tunic had been loosened, and dried perspiration had caked in the creases of his brow. There were at least half a dozen empty tankards clustered about his booted feet.

Flora felt irrationally guilty as she eyed arl and aged Chantry Mother; who both appeared exhausted – and in Myrddin's case, hung-over.

"Don't get up," she said hastily, seeing both start to rise on seeing her. "Honestly, it's fine. Did you have to stay all night?"

Arl Myrddin began to speak - let out a hoarse croak instead – then coughed and started again.

"The council require detailed proof that the marriage has been consummated," he mumbled, a flush creeping up from his loosened collar. "And the scribes should like to record it in the annals."

For perhaps the hundredth time Flora thought how peculiar the nobility were; with their traditions and rituals and obsession with posterity. She eyed the hand-written notes that rested on the arl's lap, and had to bite back a snort.

"Oh. Alright, then."

"Did you want to read them? Check for any mistakes?"

"I can't read them," Flora replied, watching the arl go a deep shade of purple. "Or, at least, not well."

"Should – should I – do you want me to- to read?"

"No, don't worry," she said kindly, wanting to spare him any further embarrassment. "I'm sure that my brother Finian will tell me everything in graphic detail later. He likes to make fun of me."

Arl Myrddin nodded and then coughed; glancing up at her before dropping his gaze hastily to his feet.

"If it's alright, your majesty – I might go and write these up more neatly to make them – ah - presentable for the Landsmeet."

Flora looked down at the sheets of parchment – smudged with what appeared to be sweat – and gave a little, wide-eyed nod. Myrddin practically fled the room, colliding with the door in his haste.
Just then, the Chantry Mother gave a little *harrumph* and almost fell off the chair; clutching the wooden arms and sitting bolt-upright. Flora squatted beside her, putting a tentative hand on the old woman's arm.

"You can go too, if you like," she whispered, earnestly.

"I wouldn't *dream* of it!" retorted the old woman, revealing a glint of steeliness beneath the faded exterior. "My duty is to remain here until the Chancellor of Ferelden relieves me."

"Oh," replied the new queen, slightly bemused. "Alright."

The priestess fixed Flora with a beady look, reaching up to fix the angle of her Chantry hat with a papery hand that shook with age.

"Would you like a cup of tea, then?" Flora offered impulsively instead, eyes sliding over to the large copper kettle beside the hearth.

There was a pause; the priestess clearly dubious about the protocol of accepting a drink from the king's new bride. Flora took the hesitation as assent and propelled herself to her feet, padding across to retrieve the kettle.

"I make a good cup of tea," she said over her shoulder, adding water to the kettle. "I had to make them all the time for the older apprentices when I was in the Circle. If the tea was too strong – or gone cold – they threatened to turn me into a worm."

Kettle now filled, Flora used the iron hook to hang it carefully within the hearth; feeling a pulse of regret that she could no longer simply reach above the flames with a golden sheath enveloping her hand.

As she sat on the low footstool beside the hearth waiting for the water to boil, two servants came in to remove the vellum privacy screen. Flora watched them in slight trepidation, unable to remember what state of dress she had left Alistair in – she did not want to accidentally traumatise the elderly priestess.

Fortunately, Alistair had rolled over in Flora's absence; a bearskin draped over his waist. Flora gazed at him for a moment, admiring the long-limbed bulk of her new husband as he lay tangled amidst the blankets. The golden hair, no longer tamed by water or the weight of the crown, stood up in tousled peaks atop his head.

"Haven't you seen enough of him already?" enquired the priestess testily, who was too venerable to care much for royal rank. "Three times is a little *excessive*, even for a wedding night."

Flora was used to crotchety old women – they grew in Herring as freely as barnacles, and the Circle did not lack for them either. She cackled, leaning forward on the stool and carefully lifting the kettle lid to check the water. It was not quite boiling but she took it off the hook anyway, not wanting to scald the herbs.

"*Four* times," she corrected solemnly, carrying the kettle over to the table and placing it down before heading over to the midwife's neatly labelled jars of herbal teas. "Would you like – ah - ging - *gignar-* ginger… or c-c- *camel-bile*?"

"What you did between- " the Chantry priestess consulted her own copy of handwritten notes "- the second and third bell was *not* a form of Chantry-approved congress. For future reference, no children will result from *that* sort of union. And I'll have *camomile*."
Flora snickered, placing several pinchfuls of dried camomile leaves into the infuser before twisting it shut and lowering it into the water.

"Oh, dear," she said mildly, setting the cup down and placing a hand on her stomach as the baby settled down for a nap. "Never mind."

While waiting for the herbs to diffuse, Flora wandered over to the edge of the bed and sat down, reaching out to smooth her palm across Alistair's rumpled head. He mumbled something incoherent in his sleep, yawning into the blankets.

"Anyway, I could never get tired of looking at him," she continued fondly, touching the strong, bearded line of his jaw. "He's the most handsomest man in Thedas."

*Most handsomest?* the priestess mouthed incredulously to herself. However, since she was aware of Flora's lack of formal education, she made no comment.

Flora propelled herself off the bed and went to retrieve the tea, removing the diffuser and inhaling the strong, sweet scent of camomile. Careful not to let it spill, she carried it across to the priestess and handed it to her.

"Thank you, child."

Flora gave a little Herring grunt in response, stifling a yawn. The palace was unusually quiet – it seemed as though everyone was having a lie-in after the excesses of the night before – and she decided to return to the familiar warmth of Alistair's arms.

The priestess shot her a slightly suspicious look over the steaming tea.

"You're not planning on any more… *activities*, are you? I've run out of room on my parchment."

"No," replied Flora, unable to suppress the next yawn. "I'm just going to sleep a bit longer."

She unbuttoned the ugly mustard-colouring dressing robe and let it drop to the flagstones, pulling back the furs and clambering into bed beside Alistair. The king grunted, subconsciously drawing his new wife into his arms and curling his body about her like a protective shell. Now that the baby had settled down for a nap, Flora too was able to drift off into her own peculiar type of dreamless slumber; the dawn-lit chamber fading away in small, shadowed increments.

Alistair woke an hour later to sunlight spilling across the flagstones and the sound of quiet conversation in the corridor. He glanced down at Flora, who was fast asleep in his arms, and grinned reflexively. A moment later he twitched as he caught sight of an elderly priestess sitting in a chair at the foot of the bed. She was eyeing him with disconcerting focus, the silver accents on her tall Chantry hat glinting in the morning sun.

"Ah," he said, checking to make sure that the fur was safely across his groin. "Morning, mother."

"Good morning, your majesty," replied the Chantry Mother evenly, hands still wrapped around her empty tea cup.

"There… *was* a screen between us last night, wasn't there?" a nervous Alistair sought to confirm, exhaling in relief when the elderly sister gave a nod.
A bell rang in the courtyard outside to mark the ninth hour. Most occupants of the palace were now awake after sleeping off the excesses of the Royal wedding. The sound of distant activity rose up to filter in through the cracked-open window; servants conversing excitedly to one another as they shared fragments of gossip from the previous night. Two retainers belonging to rival Marcher clans had got into a fight; one of the young Pentaghast cousins had drunk too much and spewed the contents of his stomach in the middle of the entrance hall. The youngest Vael prince had been caught in bed with two Rivaini dancers, embarrassing his Chantry-fearing father so much that the man swore to send his son off to a monastery the very day that they returned to Starkhaven.

Despite the inhabitants of the palace slowly settling into their daytime rhythm around the Royal Bedchamber, Alistair was reluctant to wake his softly snoring wife. Flora was curled beneath the crook of his arm, hair entirely obscuring her features and one foot sticking out from beneath the blankets. He reached down to move the thick, rope-like strands of red away from her face, leaning over to kiss the centre of her smooth forehead.

Just then, the doors into the corridor opened and the steward gave a decorous cough.

"The Chancellor of Ferelden and the Bann of Rainesfere, your majesty."

Alistair hastily drew the fur over his naked wife, sitting up against the cushions as both Guerrin brothers entered. Eamon's smile was triumphant, while Teagan's bore a faint edge of drollness.

"Sleep well, Alistair?" the bann enquired lightly, then laughed out loud as Alistair narrowed his eyes.

"Thank you for your service, madam."

The elderly priestess gave a sleepy grunt in response, handing over her own handwritten notes to the arl. These – in conjunction with those of Myrddin – would be noted and stored in the archives for posterity. Alistair eyed the neatly scribed writing with slight trepidation; unsure whether or not he wanted to read a transcript of his own wedding night.

"Well done for yesterday, son," Eamon began, smiling at Alistair as the king rubbed a hand over his bleary eyes and yawned. "It couldn't have gone better. Both you and Florence made Ferelden truly proud."

"Thank the Maker you only have one coronation day," Alistair replied, drily. "When's the next big formal occasion? Not for many months, I hope."

"Not until the blessing ceremony for the babe," confirmed the Chancellor, to Alistair's immeasurable relief. "So several months away yet."

Meanwhile Teagan had busied himself pouring some fresh ale for his yawning nephew; flashing Alistair a smile as he handed over the flagon.

"So, how does it feel to wake up a married man?"

Alistair couldn't stop a rather mindless grin from spreading over his face as he looked first at the golden band on his ring finger, then at the girl curled against his side, snoring open-mouthed in her sleep.

"I feel like the luckiest man in Thedas," he replied, blunt and honest. "I can't quite believe Flo is my wife now."
Teagan laughed, casting a wry glance towards the sheaf of notes in Eamon's hand. "Even after twelve hours of ceremony and two eye-witness accounts?"

As Alistair flushed slightly at the mention of the consummation, Flora yawned widely at his side, stretching her sleep-drowsy limbs. Pushing herself up against the cushions, she clutched the blanket to her breasts with a casual hand and eyed their early morning visitors blearily.

"Morning, Arl Eamon. Morning, Bann Teagan."

She bade Alistair good morning by planting a kiss on his bristled cheek. Eamon greeted her kindly in return while Teagan muttered something incoherent and directed his eyes to the ceiling. Viewing the object of his affection languid and tousle-haired in bed did not exactly douse the flame of his reluctant desire.

The king put an arm around Flora's shoulders and directed his next question to Eamon.

"So, what's the plan for today?"

"You'll be breaking your fast in private," Eamon began, stepping to one side as a pair of servants manhandled in a copper bathtub. "Then, I believe you have some business with Mac Tir."

Flora gave a little shiver of anxiety, recalling Oghren's intention to join the Wardens. As promised, Loghain had brought some of the required lyrium-infused Darkspawn blood; she hoped that the dwarf was not too horrendously hung-over after the excesses of the previous night.

_Unless alcohol helps to reduce the effects of the taint, in which case I'm going to force-feed him whiskey._

She and Alistair had explained as much as they themselves understood of the Joining to the dwarf – the risk, the shortened lifespan, the infertility – but their companion had been stubbornly insistent.

Alistair felt Flora shiver and tightened his arm around her, dropping a kiss to her bare shoulder.

"He'll be fine," the king tried to assure her. "The dwarf has got a lead-lined stomach, remember?"

As Flora brought her fingernails anxiously to her mouth, Eamon continued on with the day's plans.

"Then, Alistair, we've a trade discussion with the Marcher lords which should take up most of the afternoon. Your evening is your own."

Alistair exhaled in slight relief – at least the day did not seem to contain any ten hour meetings. He glanced sideways at Flora, who was trying to subtly manoeuvre herself into the mustard yellow dressing gown without exposing too much skin.

"Lo, did you mention something about your Gwaren committee being today?"

Flora nodded, having successfully negotiated her way into the lurid garment.

"Mm," she replied, swinging her legs out of bed and hauling herself upright. "It's in the afternoon. I'm going to see if the lady Anora wants to come with me. Is she still staying in the Mac Tir quarters?"

Eamon gave a small nod of confirmation.

"Aye, she's refusing to come out. Hasn't left the rooms in over a month."
Flora grimaced, scratching at the back of her head.

"Maybe she'll want to hear about the new fishing wharf we're going to build in Gwaren," she said at last, hopefully. "I think if she apologises to the people in person, they might forgive her."

"Or they'll Lynch her," murmured Teagan under his breath. "There's a lot of anger still between Gwaren and the Mac Tirs."

Alistair pushed back the furs and clambered out of bed, wandering naked over to the dresser to inspect the fresh growth of hair across his cheeks.

"Isn't he manly?" an admiring Flora whispered to Teagan, who nearly spat out his mouthful of ale.

After deciding that a shave was not required, the king turned to his wife and fixed her with a stern eye. She was now pulling at a loose strand of wool on the sleeve of the lurid, dressing robe; he could see the curve of her naked collarbone, pale and vulnerable.

"Who's going with you to the committee meeting, sweetheart?"

Although it went without saying that a dozen Royal Guard would accompany the new queen, Alistair was not satisfied with mere soldiers – only one of their familiar companions, or Flora's own brothers would sate his worries.

"Finian," Flora said, recalling her brother's offer the previous day. "I think Wynne is coming as well."

"What about Zev? Leliana?"

She gave an unhelpful Herring grunt and shrugged, seeing how far she could tug the strand of wool from her sleeve. Alistair resolved silently to seek out one of their dagger-wielding companions before the morning was through. Wynne was more than competent and Finian would defend his sister to the death; but the two assassins in their company had an eye for trouble and could often spot a threat before it manifested.

Another pair of servants entered with fire-warmed linen drying cloths and a tray of soaps; placing them where the bathtub rested next to the gently smouldering hearth. Eamon spoke up as he and his brother prepared to take their leave.

"Florence, it would be beneficial if you could come into the trade discussions once the Gwaren committee is finished. I believe your presence will help us negotiate some more favourable terms."

"Eh?" replied Flora, who was now frantically trying to stop the entire sleeve from unravelling. "It will?"


*Or put a frown on that comely face,* he thought to himself, following Eamon to the door.

Neither king nor queen required any assistance with bathing, though a pair of attendants came in shortly afterwards, bringing clean clothing, honey mead and various items of food for breakfast. Alistair bathed first and then sat naked and dripping on the stool beside Flora as she sat in the tub; crumbs of fresh-baked bread falling into the water while he ate and chattered away.

Flora gave the occasional reply, content to let her best friend dominate the conversation as he talked through the particulars of the upcoming meeting. She was rubbing soap into her hair, while listening
to Alistair as he decided out loud what avenues of trade to pursue. Talking through the various options helped to clarify them in the king's mind; giving him confidence when talking about them before the council later.

Knowing that they would not be alone until later that evening, both former Wardens relished this hour of relative privacy. Flora sat on the bearskin before the hearth and bit into a raw turnip; Alistair knelt behind her, rubbing her wet hair vigorously with the heated linen cloth. They were now discussing the events of the previous day; neither of them wanting to dwell on their friend's upcoming Joining.

The king's eye fell on his bride's narrow shoulders, the *Peraquialus* freckles obliterated by the white, multi-arcing scar.

"I'm still outraged at that blasted Tevinter magister wanting to inspect you," Alistair repeated for the third time that morning, renewed outrage flooding his face. "When you go to the Gwaren meeting, take the road over the traders' bridge rather than through the noble district. Pavus is staying there and I don't want him even looking at you through the windows."

"I don't know why he's so interested in them," Flora said in perplexion, voice muffled behind the mass of damp hair as she peered down at her white-mottled palms. "They're just marks. There's nothing different about them from this, or this- "

She twisted around as far as her stomach would allow, touching the faded scars across Alistair's torso that predated her entry into his life. Her fingertips meandered across a pale line that divided his collarbone in two; then over a white scar so near to his heart that it made her feel faintly nauseous. The thought of her best friend in pain – pain that she could no longer take away with a well-timed exhalation – was a horrific one.

Impulsively, Flora reached up and put her arms about Alistair's neck. Letting go of the damp linen cloth, he embraced her in return; sliding his palm up and down her bare back.

"Promise me you'll never get hurt again," she breathed in his ear, fingers curling into the taut muscle of his shoulders. "That you'll stay safe."

Alistair picked up on the anxiety in her voice and stopped himself from joking that any would-be assailants would have to get through the incessantly-present Royal Guard first. Instead he kissed the top of Flora's head, inhaling the clean, fresh smell of soap from her damp hair.

"I promise, my love. But you have to swear the same to me! Even the thought of you being in pain drives me mad, Flo."

Both of them looked down reflexively at Flora's swollen stomach, sitting high and round as a melon. Flora swallowed; she had already spent several restless nights worrying about the pain that was sure to result from the delivery of their child. She could not help but remember the woman in South Reach who had been in labour for twelve agonising hours before the babe was cut bloody and screaming from her belly.

"I think pain is going to be slightly inevitable for me," she whispered, forcing herself to smile and shrug. "I hope it's quick, at least."

The dark and unspeakable fear rose in Alistair's mind once more, like some menacing, long-toothed
creature of the deep. His own mother had died in childbirth, as had Zevran's. Isolde Guerrin had
caught childbed fever after a difficult labour with Connor. Eamon had almost resigned himself to the
death of his wife before she made a miraculous recovery.

Submerging the fear fiercely, Alistair tightened his grip on his nervous wife and sought out her
fingers with his free hand; roping them together.

"You're going to be fine, Lo," he told her, brightly. "I won't move from your side."

To Flora's relief, there was no expectation that she should begin to garb herself in long, ornate gowns
in the style of the previous queen. Two trunks of new clothing had been delivered to the Royal
Bedchamber – she suspected that they had been sent by Leliana – but fortunately, these contained
only a scant handful of muslin-wrapped dresses. One trunk was full of tunics in shades of Highever
navy, Theirin scarlet and Mac Eanraig hunter's green. They were woven from the softest lambs' wool
and edged with golden thread; a finer class of garment than the incarnations she had worn
previously. The other trunk was full of leather breeches and fur-trimmed bodices; designed to
complement the style of Alistair's kingly garb.

Having had enough of leather and fur after yesterday's coronation – and feeling the heat of the
Solace sun streaming through the windows - Flora chose a tunic in rich Highever blue. With some
help from Alistair, she wrestled on a pair of formfitting calfskin breeches; the king then retrieved her
faithful boots from beneath the bed.

"I don't have to wear the hat from yesterday, do I?" Flora asked as Alistair adjusted the angle of the
spiked golden band atop his own head. "It weighed a ton."

The king grinned to himself, fastening the last button on his high-necked leather tunic.

"No, my love, you don't have to wear that 'hat'. Guillaume said he would be bringing something up
from the treasury for you to wear in the daytime."

Flora let out a small grunt, scratching her nose. She almost voiced her thoughts out loud - that she
didn't particularly like hats, wasn't used to wearing anything on her head, had never even worn a
helm in battle - then heard her Herring-dad's voice echo sternly in her ear.

It's just something on your head, girl. Don't make such a fuss.

Aware that Alistair was watching her – and not wanting him to feel guilty for causing the need for
her to wear a crown in the first place – Flora smiled widely at her husband.

"You look so handsome," she said, earnestly. "I could eat you."

Alistair's eyes lit up and he took an eager step towards her - only for a knock to sound on the door.
Chief steward Guillaume made his entrance a moment later, clutching a polished walnut case
portentously.

"Your majesties," he said, dipping into a practised bow. "I trust you slept well?"

Trying not to snicker at the steward's deadpan tone, Flora finished lacing up the front of the tunic,
tying a neat sailor's knot between her breasts. Alistair coughed, predicting that this teasing question
would emerge from a number of mouths over the course of the morning. Still, he answered it with a
neutral, straight-faced politeness.

"Well enough, thank you."
Flora turned to the mirror, tying the front strands of her hair at the nape of her neck; leaving the rest of the damp mass hanging loose in the hope that it would dry quicker. Guillaume crossed the flagstones and came to a halt before her, opening the walnut case with eyes lowered decorously.

"Alistair requested that we find something lightweight for you, something that had not been worn by Anora," the steward murmured, the Nevarran edge to his accent still sharp even after decades spent in Denerim. "Here: Andraste's Garland. It hasn't been worn by an incumbent queen since the Storm Age."

The crown itself reminded Flora a little of the Cousland laurel – they were both delicately hewn from strands of old gold, prime examples of Fereldan craftsmanship. Yet, where the Cousland coronet consisted of uniformly-shaped laurel leaves spaced at regular intervals; Andraste's Garland had a far more organic, natural feel. Slender veins of gold, twisted to represent curling vines, wove their way around delicately crafted emulations of Andraste's Grace, a flower native to Ferelden. Tiny pearls nestled at the centre of each bloom, their iridescent sheen reflecting the light from each exquisitely sculpted petal.

A moment later and Alistair was standing at Flora's side, lifting the coronet carefully from its plush velvet setting. Using their reflections in the tall mirror to guide him, he placed Andraste's Garland gently onto Flora's head.

"My queen," he said proudly, admiring the sheen of the old gold against the dark red hair. "Maker's Breath, I'm so glad you're doing this with me."

It was clear that this incorporated the crown, the throne, the palace and a lifetime's worth of duty. For a moment, Flora gazed at her own reflection and wondered on how much had changed in the span of a year.

Last summer I was the resident Circle embarrassment, a failing apprentice who spent more time cleaning corridors than in the classroom; teased for my lowborn accent as well as my lack of skill. The senior enchanters had no idea what my name was – and even the other apprentices just called me 'the Vase'. Nice to look at, containing nothing of value.

Change can come as swift and dramatic as a storm on the Waking Sea, which can reshape miles of coastline over the course of one furious night.

Flora smiled up at her best friend's reflected face; his handsome brow nearly a foot above her own.

"It's an honour to stand at your side," she replied, quietly. Alistair bowed his head over her shoulder, brushing a feathery kiss to the side of her neck.

"Right," he said after a moment, their eyes meeting once more in the mirror. "Shall we... get on with it, then? I have a feeling that the Wardens are waiting for us."

Flora felt her stomach give a little roll of dread, but nodded determinedly. "Yes. Let's go."

Chapter End Notes

OOC Author Note:
The reference to humours at the start of the chapter refers to a common Medieval theory of health – where the body contains four humours (or liquids – black bile, yellow bile, blood and phlegm) – and if they were balanced, you were healthy, and if they were imbalanced, there was something wrong!

Mac Eanraig is Flora's maternal name – Eleanor Cousland was from the Mac Eanraig family! Ferelden is such a blend of Medieval England and Scotland (I even think it's leaning more towards Scotland, based on the Landsmeet system, Celtic-y heritage and the nomenclature of the families). Oh and in Britain we spell 'chamomile' as 'camomile', lol. I think it's like the only example of differences in spelling where we actually take away a letter instead of adding in a random vowel, hehe.
Alistair and Flora made their way down the Royal corridor, the guards shifting their pikes from hand to hand in a quick left-right salutation as they passed. Servants kept a respectful distance, bowing their heads and drawing back against the walls to give the king and queen ample room. The palace was the quietest that it had been all week – many of the wedding guests were still either slumbering or breaking their fast within their chambers. Every window that could be unfastened was opened wide to let out the miasma of cedar smoke mingled with honey mead. A stiff sea breeze blew its way down the myriad halls and corridors of Denerim Castle, carrying with it the insistent cries of the gulls.

Once they came to the staircase beside the hunted halla portrait, Alistair reached out to anchor his wife's hand in his own. They descended the steps in unison, then kept their fingers twined together as they advanced over the minstrels' gallery.

"Oghren will be fine," Alistair said suddenly out loud, his voice echoing off a nearby suit of armour. "He's a dwarf, they're impervious to practically everything."

"What is imp- imper- improv- "

"Immune," he clarified, helpfully. "He'll take it no worse than fire-whiskey. And remember, dwarves have lived near the Darkspawn for generations. Oghren's been in the Deep Roads more often than both of us. He's probably got a strong resistance to the taint already."

Flora nodded, craving every small piece of reassurance that Alistair could offer. Although Oghren had been the one who initiated the idea of becoming a Warden, she could not help but feel some responsibility for their dwarven companion's choice. Daveth's choking, bulging-eyed face rose to the forefront of her mind and she forced it brutally back into the depths of her subconscious.

*I prayed to your memory – as I did for all my dead - a few days ago. I don't want to think about your Joining when my friend is about to undertake his own.*

Fortunately, they had just reached the impressive Calenhad window; a sight which always succeeded in drawing Flora's attention. The Solace sun – as yet uncloaked by cloud – shone through the fragments of stained glass, casting a kaleidoscope of colourful patterns on the flagstones.

"This window is like magic," she said out loud as they came to a halt before it. "I don't understand how they put colours in glass."

Pressing a finger against the crimson of Calenhad Theirin's tartan kilt, Flora gazed in fascination at her red-lit nail.

"It's very nice," Alistair said dutifully, eyeing his Alamarri ancestor's outfit. "Do you think I should take up wearing a kilt?"

"Ha! Yes! Like the Vile princes of Starkhaven!"

Alistair thought about correcting her, then snickered inwardly and decided not to.

"What did you think of that poem the youngest one was reciting to you at the feast?" he asked, a
half-laugh emerging from his throat. "Sebastian. 'Hair red as the sunset in Solace'."

"I hate poetry," Flora replied, with Herring bluntness. "Why can't they just write their meaning plainly?"

"Oi! Have you two been spendin’ the morning shagging, or what?"

The familiar brogue rang out behind them, and made both Alistair and Flora jump.

Oghren was standing in the corridor, broad arms folded across his chest and an expectant expression writ over his face. Despite the excesses of the previous night, the dwarf appeared both alert and bright-eyed. His ginger moustache and beard had been carefully trimmed, and he had even made an attempt to flatten down his wiry hair with water.

"Thought I'd come and get yeh personally," he said, with bravado. "Make sure yeh weren't thinkin' of skipping out on my big moment."

"Of course not!" Flora hastened to reassure him, wide-eyed.

"We wouldn't miss it," Alistair added, wryly. "Is the – ah - ceremony being held in the Landsmeet chamber?"

This was a guess based on precedent; Loghain's Joining had taken place in the ancient stone meeting hall at the crumbling heart of the palace.

"Aye. Everyone's waitin’ on yeh."

"We're LATE?" the ever-punctual Flora demanded in tones of horror. "Oh, no!"

King and dwarf watched in some bemusement as their former Warden-Commander charged off down the corridor, at remarkable speed considering the fullness of her belly.

"Well, despite havin' a bun in the oven," said Oghren, at a loss for anything else to say. "She's still got a great arse."

"Mm."

Preoccupied with gaping after the rapidly diminishing Flora, Alistair absentmindedly agreed with the dwarf before realising what he had said.

"Hey! That's my wife you're talking about. The Hero of Ferelden. Ender of the Fifth Blight. Slayer of the Archdemon! You're not allowed to comment on her - her- her posterior!"

"Nice and perky."

"Oghren!"

"Eh, take it as a compliment, lad."

At a more sedentary pace, king and dwarf followed Flora out into the entrance hall. The decorations for the wedding – draped laurel and Highever banners – were being taken down; servants teetering on high ladders to reach the lofty rafters. Several dozen wedding guests were making a slow exit, retainers swarming around them like workers about a queen bee. Most of the visiting dignitaries – save for the Marcher lords engaging in trade talks – would be sailing from Denerim that day; taking advantage of the favourable tide and eastern winds.
Flora was heading determinedly down the centre of the hall, towards the vast wooden doors denoting the entrance to the Landsmeet chamber. Many of the wedding guests recognised the newlywed queen, either hailing her or dipping into respectful bows.

"Your Majesty!"

"Queen Florence!"

Seeing that she was clearly in a hurry, nobody made any attempt to waylay her.

Flora was so preoccupied with the thought of being late that she was not disconcerted by either their choice of address, or their attention. The Royal Guard flanking the Landsmeet entrance shifted their pikes in acknowledgement of her arrival.

Alistair caught her up with his lengthier stride just as she came to a halt; Oghren arriving a few paces behind.

"Sweetheart, you're faster than a Fereldan Forder!"

Flora let out a little grunt, shifting impatiently from foot to foot as the guards pushed open the doors into the Landsmeet chamber.

The ancient assembly hall opened up before them, smelling of mildew and old stone; the tiered wooden benches rising on both sides of the room. Within the crumbling walls of the Landsmeet chamber, some of the most notable events in Ferelden's history had taken place. Beneath these vaulted eaves, five hundred years prior, Calenhad had formally united the nation beneath the banner of Theirin. During the Steel Age, when the Avvar invaded Ferelden under the great warlord Balak, the lords of the bannorn oversaw the defence of Denerim from this chamber's lofty balcony. The wooden benches were scarred with derisive sword-thrusts from when the Orlesians swarmed the palace at the apex of the Blessed Age. Most recently within these historic walls, the lady Cousland had usurped the pretender Mac Tir from power after revealing her three great armies decamped on the plains below.

*I remember when Alistair and I did it in here,* Flora thought vaguely to herself, betraying a woeful ignorance of much of the room's historic past. *Just on that bench over there.*

She turned to Alistair and was about to ask whether he too remembered, when she noticed his expression. Her husband's face was wreathed in the steely, tight-lipped neutrality that he reserved specially for Loghain Mac Tir. The two men had been on civil terms for several months – mostly due to Loghain saving Flora's life on two separate occasions – but there was still a distinct chilliness to the king's demeanour whenever he came face to face with the former general. Loghain was standing in the centre of the room alongside his co-commander, the Orlesian Leonie Caron; both clad in full Grey Warden regalia. Before them stood a gaggle of new recruits, whom Flora recognised from the wedding. A female dwarf with black, geometric tattoos inked across her face was murmuring quietly to a blonde elven mage, whose long hair was bound up in an intricate series of braids. Beside them, another blond mage – but male, and human – was lounging on a lower bench with an amused expression.

Loghain canted his head measuredly towards Alistair, who tightened his lips instead of offering a response. Unbothered by the cool reception, the new Warden's gaze moved across to Flora. Swiftly, he appraised her from crown to belly - and the corner of his lip quirked upwards in reluctant approval.

"Recruits!" Leonie Caron's sharp, accented voice rang out across the chamber. "Salute in the
presence of former Warden-Commander Cousland, vanquisher of the Fifth Blight, and Warden Alistair Theirin, second in command!"

The recruits obediently saluted and bowed; their curious glances settling on Ferelden's king and queen as they raised their heads. Flora, meanwhile, let her gaze fall on the blond mage standing at the end of the row.

"I know you!" she exclaimed, as he grinned and nodded to confirm her recognition. "We were in the Circle together. Angus? Adders?"

"Anders," corrected the mage, with an indolent smile. "Though I might change my name to Adder, if I thought being named after a snake would strike fear into the hearts of the Darkspawn. Anyway, I'm surprised that you recall me, your majesty. Most of my Circle years were spent being locked up by our Templar protectors."

"No, I do remember you," Flora said, recalling a chance meeting that they'd had on the tower roof. Anders had snuck up there to gauge the possibility of escape; while she was preoccupied with trying to catch a glimpse of the sea.

"And I remember you," he replied, letting out a dark cackle of amusement. "Quite an elevation, to go from cleaning corridors to wearing crowns in the span of a year."

"Well, the Maker moves in mysterious ways," Loghain interrupted bluntly, and Flora shot him a grateful glance. "Now, let's meet this potential recruit. Step forward, dwarf, and explain why you want to join this esteemed Order.

Loghain Mac Tir knew well enough who Oghren was – he remembered him lying prostrate beneath a vat of honey mead the previous night – but desired to hear the dwarf express himself in his own words.

The dwarf stepped forwards and lifted his chin, and Flora found herself biting her lip anxiously. She need not have worried: when the dwarf spoke, the words emerged clear and confident.

"In Orzammar, I did nothin' but drink for nigh on ten years. I was the one parents'd use as a cautionary tale for their little ones. 'Study your craft well, or you'll end up a waster like Oghren!'. I didn't see no purpose in anythin'. Then I met these two, here - "

He gestured roughly over his shoulder towards where Flora and Alistair stood, a rueful smile curling over his face.

"Pair o' clueless numpties, the both of 'em- plannin' to go down into the Deep Roads! Well, I felt so sorry for the misguided pair that I kindly volunteered to assist – they'd be dead meat without me - "

"Ahem," a slightly indignant Alistair protested; then was elbowed by Flora, who was enchanted by the dwarf's revisionist history.

" – and after we were down there… Well. I decided to stick around, knew they'd need my help. Was the first time I'd followed anythin' other than the scent of the bottle in years. And – somewhere along the way – I found a new purpose."

"Which is?" enquired Loghain, steadily.

"To stop the Darkspawn," Oghren replied, his voice equally even. "To crush them in their holes, destroy their nests, drive 'em deeper underground so they never think to show their stinkin' faces again. We dwarves are their oldest enemy, after all."
The female dwarf – with the black facial tattoos – lifted her chin slightly in acknowledgement of the truth in this.

"But you still drink, dwarf," Leonie Caron interjected, her Orlesian tones oddly incongruous within this stone-walled heart of Fereldan politics.

"Aye, and I always will," replied Oghren, cheerfully. "But it ain't my purpose no more. It ain't the reason I get up in the mornin'."

To her dismay, Flora realised that tears were welling up in the corners of her eyes. She sniffled quietly under her breath, wiping her nose surreptitiously with her sleeve.

Leonie Caron and Loghain glanced at one another, and the former gave a slight nod.

"Step forward, dwarf," she instructed, raising her voice so that it rang up to the vaulted ceiling.

The other recruits immediately stiffened, aware of the significance of the upcoming minutes. From the alertness of their demeanour, they had clearly witnessed Joinings that had gone terribly wrong, in addition to those which had succeeded.

Loghain retrieved the silver chalice from where it had been resting on a nearby bench. It was not the one that Flora remembered from her own Joining – clearly, that had been lost at Ostagar – but it was similar in craftsmanship. The liquid inside made a distinct viscous slop as it was moved, and Oghren licked his lips in readiness.

Flora felt her heartbeat escalate within her chest, so loud that she worried that it would be audible. Her fingers stretched out reflexively, only to meet Alistair's hand already reaching for hers. Their fingers wrapped together in their own little ritual, his thumb moving over her knuckles in reassuring circles.

He'll be fine, Flora thought fiercely to herself. He'll be fine.

"Join us, brother – join us in the shadows," Leonie declared, with the ringing confidence of one who had uttered these lines many times in the past. "Join us as we stand, vigilant. Join us, as we carry the duty that cannot be forsworn. And should you perish, know that your sacrifice shall not be forgotten, and that one day, we shall join you."

Loghain stepped forward, extending the silver chalice to the dwarf. Oghren reached out and took it in both hands, licking his lips in preparation. He was not ignorant of the contents – after all, he had once accompanied Sten, Flora and Riordan to retrieve some Darkspawn blood for Loghain's own Joining – but showed no hesitation in raising the chalice to his lips.

Flora felt Alistair's grip clench on hers and she squeezed his fingers tightly back, her stomach curdling as though it had been her taking a sip of the tainted blood.

The dwarf took a long gulp, tilting his head back as though imbibing a tankard of Orzammar's finest brew. Moments later, he gave a long burp; wiping his mouth with the back of his arm.

"Oi," he protested, immediately. "Is this the watered-down version for kiddies? Bring out the strong stuff!"

Loghain muttered something under his breath, while Leonie quickly recovered from her astonishment.

"Welcome to the Order, brother-warden," she announced, stepping forward to take the chalice. "We
welcome you as a new recruit."

"Thanks, your commander-ness," replied Oghren, casting an appraising eye over the suspicious tattooed dwarf and supercilious blonde elf. "I quite fancy the idea of gettin' to know my new sister-wardens. After all, it worked out well for old King Alistair, here."

"Congratulations, Oghren," Alistair offered, grinning across at their old companion. "The Darkspawn will be quaking in their nests when they learn that you've joined the Wardens."

Flora was still clutching Alistair's hand, light-headed with relief. A moment later, she realised that she was also light-headed in general - in this final term of carrying the babe, spells of dizziness had begun to overtake the bouts of nausea. The edges of her vision had begun to darken, shadows prickling in the corners of her eyes.

"I need to sit down," she whispered to Alistair. He immediately guided her over to sit on one of the benches; keeping a tight, steadying grip on her elbow. Crouching before her, he reached up to take her face between his palms.

"Deep breaths, sweetheart."

She nodded, forcing herself to inhale slowly rather than to gulp down great mouthfuls of air.

"We have a healer," offered Loghain, gesturing the blond mage forward. "Assist her, Anders."

Flora opened her mouth to say that she did not require assistance, and then saw the anxiety in Alistair's face. More to reassure her husband rather than from necessity, she gave a little nod. Anders came sauntering forwards, leaning his staff against the bench before taking a seat next to her.

"Alistair, we've discovered a Darkspawn nest near Amaranthine," Loghain muttered, and Alistair rose to his feet; gesturing for them to move towards the balcony.

"I don't want her worrying," Flora heard her best friend say quietly. "Tell me over here."

She wanted to stand up and insist that she was fine, that she wanted to know about the Darkspawn nest too – after all, she had once, briefly, been Warden-Commander – but when Flora made to stand, the shadows encroached rapidly at the corner of her vision once again.

"Hey," the mage beside her protested, eyebrows shooting upwards. "You stay sat down."

Flora obediently returned to the bench, feeling a distinct prickle of frustration. Anders cast an appraising eye over her stomach, assessing the fullness of the curve.

"That's going to be one big baby," he said, after a moment.

Flora grunted; she was grimly aware of the size of the child. They sat quietly for several moments, listening to Oghren boasting of his past exploits to the female recruits. A dozen yards away, Alistair stood with Leonie Caron and Loghain, immersed in quiet, earnest conversation.

"I bet life's a lot easier now that you aren't a mage. Less people chasing you down, eh?"

Flora startled slightly at Anders' comment, turning to peer at him. He was smiling, but there was a slight rawness to the faded blue eyes that spoke volumes.

"It's different," she replied after a moment, thinking. "Not easier. I miss my spirits every day."

"Of course, you were a spirit healer, weren't you? Somehow, I have a feeling that's going to get lost
in the historical narrative."

Anders smirked as Flora shot him an astonished glance. For a moment it was as though they were two mage apprentices again, sitting atop the Circle tower roof while he confessed his desire to escape.

"What do you mean?"

"Ah, I'd bet you a hundred gold that by the next Age, the scribes will have recast you as a noble warrior, and nobody will be around to correct them."

"But that's not true!" Flora protested, horrified at the thought of her spirits' sacrifice being so deliberately forgotten. "I am- I was a spirit healer. That's the only reason I was even able to defeat the Archdemon, with the help of my spirits."

"Well, nobody likes giving mages credit for anything," replied Anders, with a little snort. "Or spirits, for that matter."

Flora felt silent, her brow furrowed. Alistair, Loghain and Leonie Caron were still at the far end of the chamber, silhouetted against the summery light streaming in from the Alamarri balcony.

Absentmindedly Anders raised his hand and focused, letting wisps of golden healing energy rise upwards from his palm. Flora turned her head as though in a dream, her eyes widening as the ethereal miasma rose from the mage's fingertips, gilded and intangible. She reached out to touch it with her own useless fingers, feeling the achingly familiar effervescence of the arcane rippling over her skin.

_Not yours. Never yours, again._

The grief was so strong that it was a physical pain, a thrust to the gut like the kick of a horse's hoof. Flora doubled over as though somebody had swung their fist into her stomach. Beside her, Anders' face contracted in horror. He first assumed that something had happened with the babe, then made the connection between his own casual action and her subsequent agonised reaction.

"Ah, Maker- sorry - "

Flora got up quickly, _too_ quickly for somebody with a babe pressing against the vessels of her body. The world contracted about her in a mass of black shadows but she kept walking forwards, forcing herself to focus on the great wooden doors. She made it to the doorway, stumbling inelegantly out into the entrance hall and leaving the Landsmeet chamber – and the manifested magic - behind her.

Chapter End Notes

_OOC Author Note: Aah, poor Flo! It's the first time that she's come into contact with healing magic – which she used to conjure so effortlessly – since she had her connection with the Fade severed. Typical her though, lol, to enter this chamber steeped in Ferelden's history… and be like HEY REMEMBER WE SHAGGED IN HERE? Hahaha

The bit that Oghren says – about the dwarves being the Darkspawn's oldest enemies –_
was actually taken from the speech that Flora gave to the deshyr in Orzammar when winning their help.

I don't often copy dialogue directly from the game, but I loved the Joining speech bit so much I had to include it!
The problem with the Royal Palace was that - essentially - it was public domain. The size of a village, and with the population to match; it was a hive of constant activity. Very few spaces within the castle could be classed as quiet, and even fewer as private. Fortunately, the entrance hall was quieter than it had been earlier, many guests having already departed. Reason fought emotion for dominance in Flora's mind; she knew that she could not break down in such a public space, and yet she had to relieve herself of the immense pressure building within her. The sight – the touch – of the healing magic had brought back a storm-surge of grief and frustration that had lain dormant for weeks.

Flora came to a halt in the centre of the entrance hall, head swivelling as she tried to think of some quiet place that she could unleash her tears. The servants would be cleaning the Royal bedchamber; the Chantry would be occupied with morning prayers; the towers and battlements were patrolled by guards.

"Lady Cousland – sorry – your majesty?"

The voice was tentative and familiar. Flora turned around to see a middle aged man, dressed in much-patched clothing and sporting a hopeful expression. As she turned around, he whipped his cap from his head and bowed; deep and respectful. After a moment, she placed his face – it was the mayor of Gwaren, leader of the teyrnir's fledgling restoration committee.

"Ma'am, I just wanted to tell you that we've moved our meeting location," he mumbled, eyes fixed on the moth-eaten blue carpet. "We thought it didn't seem proper for the queen of Ferelden to come to a grubby warehouse. So we've hired a room in the Gnawed Noble, just off the marketplace."

Flora blinked at him, slightly dazed, the grief vibrating along her bones like a mage's errant spell. The mayor peered at her pale, solemn face, and doubt flickered in his eyes.

"Unless… you've changed your mind about supporting us?" he asked, a note of trepidation creeping into the words. "Does the king – does the king not approve? It's not Gwaren's fault that our teyrn betrayed the throne."

Pull yourself together, Flora, she thought to herself, fiercely. This man represents people who have lost everything- their home, family, children, livelihoods. Put your own grief back where it belongs and deal with it later.

Flora inhaled, stepping forward to put an instinctive hand of reassurance on the mayor's elbow. Mairyn's Star glinted on her finger, sitting above the twisted golden rope of the wedding band.

Call on your Herring grit.

"Of course I've not changed my mind," she replied, earnestly. "Thank you for telling me about the meeting place. I'll be there, I promise. I'm bringing Finian - my brother – he's agreed to help out with anything that the Gwaren restoration committee needs."

"As have I."

To Create Life, Without Magic
The mayor's eyes slid past Flora then widened; the man dropped into his second bow in the same span of minutes.

"King Alistair!"

Flora swivelled round to see her best friend come to a halt on the flagstones, his hazel eyes resting brief and concerned on her face before turning to the mayor of Gwaren. The mayor rose tentatively, fingers trembling as he clutched his cap to his chest.

"The queen will tell me what you need," Alistair said steadily, his voice firm and full of assurance. "It's vital that we build up our southern economy again, and we need our refugees re-homed. I'm sorry for the troubles that you've been through during the Blight."

The mayor bowed once more, mumbling his gratitude.

"Thank you, your majesty! Majesties."

The Gwaren native retreated backwards, face flushed with hope; offering several more bows on his way to the door. They watched him disappear between the great stone Mabari that guarded the entrance; a brief shaft of sunlight penetrating the gloom as the door opened.

The next moment Alistair turned to face his wife, lifting her chin with a thumb and peering down into her eyes. Although Flora had successfully arrested the tears before they could escape, he could interpret the minute changes in her face better than anyone else. They had spent nine months sleeping with their heads on the same pillow; Alistair could read her solemn grey eyes like the fisherman Pel could read the sky above the sea.

He looked down at her now and saw the sadness just barely suppressed, the grief provoked by touching the creation energy - which had once flowed so freely from her own fingers. The fleck of gold floating on her pale iris gleamed as though newly polished.

Flora hoped furiously that he would not ask her what was wrong – something guaranteed to release the flood-barriers and send gallons of saltwater down her cheeks. Fortunately, Alistair had already deciphered the cause of her misery from speaking with Anders, and instead bowed his head to kiss her very gently on the forehead.

"Sweetheart," he breathed, letting his thumb meander over the line of her jaw. "I'm sorry. Why didn't you come to me, my love?"

"You were speaking with Loghain and... and Lion," Flora replied, mangling Leonie's Orlesian cognomen. "About important things. I didn't want to interrupt you."

"Always interrupt me," Alistair retorted fiercely, his eyes bright. "I mean it, Flora. I don't give a shit what it is – a council meeting, a Landsmeet session – you come to me."

Flora peered up at him and the king softened his tone, sliding his fingers into her hair and thumbing the shell-like curve of her ear.

"You're my priority, you and the baby," he murmured, tender and earnest. "Let me comfort you, like I vowed to do before the Maker yesterday. My own sweet wife."

She nodded mutedly, standing on her toes and craning her neck to kiss him on the cheek. Alistair wound his fingers into hers, giving her hand a squeeze.

"I've got a wedding present for you," he said, softly. "I was going to show you this evening, but I
think I'll show you now, instead. Let's say farewell to Oghren."

The Grey Wardens of Ferelden took their leave shortly afterwards; gathered on the gravel forecourt before the Royal Palace as stable boys ran to retrieve their mounts. Oghren – who was grinning from ear to ear – could barely wait to get on the road.

"All this sittin' about in a palace has got my feet itchy," he said to Alistair, shielding his eyes against the sun. "Can't wait to swing my axe into some stinkin' walking corpses."

"Kill some Darkspawn for me," Alistair replied with a wry and slightly wistful grin. "And I hope you have a safe journey to Vigil's Keep."

This second part was directed in neutral terms up to where Loghain was already mounted; his dark Mac Tir eyes scrutinising their route on the map.

"Aye. I'll write when we learn more about the Darkspawn nest," the Warden replied, with a small grunt. "Please pass on my… regards to Anora."

Alistair nodded, grimacing. It was common knowledge around the palace that Anora – who still refused to leave her quarters – had also refused the opportunity to see her father, despite their meeting being permitted by the King's Council.

A stable boy led up the short, stocky pony that Oghren had been using for the past few weeks. The dwarf gave the pony a quick scratch behind the ears, before reaching up to strap his battle-axe to its saddle. Oghren then turned to king and queen, who had been standing a short distance away on the gravel.

"Right," he said, jovially. "I'll see yeh both when I see yeh then, eh?"

"Will you come back to see the baby when it's born?" Flora asked, hopefully.

"Depends if I can get the time off," replied Oghren with a little cackle, then relented when she looked distraught. "Ah, don't go runnin' off bawling again, lassie. I'm sure your hubby could write me some royal dispensation, or somethin' o' the like."

"I want the baby to meet the bravest dwarf I've ever known," Flora continued, a touch melodramatically. Oghren gave a guffaw to hide the sudden gleam of emotion in his eyes.

"Well, I could never say no to a pretty face! Come'ere, give your old man a hug. I promise not to grope yeh this time."

Flora went to embrace him and the dwarf was as good as his word, patting her companionably on the small of her back.

"Make sure you take it easy over the next couple'o months, dolly," he told her, sternly. "Don't work too hard. If anyone deserves a holiday, it's you."

"What is 'holiday'?" asked Flora, obliviously.

Oghren snorted, shooting a pointed little glance up at Alistair as he withdrew.

"See yeh later, Prince Charmin'!"

Flora inhaled a gulp of air – it had been an emotional morning – and leaned against Alistair's side. He put an arm around her shoulders, keeping her steady beside him. Together, the two former Wardens
watched the new Fereldan Order proceed slowly down the main road; the tails of the horses whipping away the flies as they trod the gravel. The midday sun bore down overhead, shortening their shadows until they were lost within the mass of amputated trees, disappearing over the brow of the hill.

Flora gazed after her old companion for a moment, remembering when he had first approached them in Tapster’s Tavern, preferred drinking-house of the dwarfs of Orzammar. She’d had her hands cuffed – the locals were suspicious of mages – and Alistair was feeding her mouthfuls of stew, when a dwarf reeking of a brewery had crash-landed in the booth opposite them.

*I hear you're goin' down to the Deep Roads,* he'd said; the words slurring together half-formed. *You'll need an expert guide, and that's me. I'm comin' with yeh.*

"Right," said Alistair softly, once the horse bearing the scowling blond elf had vanished over the horizon. "Ready for your present?"

"Yes," Flora replied in a small voice, swallowing. "I'm ready."

Alistair led her back into the entrance hall, between the great stone Mabari guarding the doorway. Servants and nobles moved aside to make way for them; many still murmuring congratulations for their recent nuptials.

They headed down a wide stone passage that branched off the hall, lined on both sides with stone arches and freestanding candelabra. Flora recognised a corridor on the left that led towards the castle's Chantry; a twisting staircase on the right descended to the dungeons. Two ever-present Royal Guardsmen followed at a tactful distance, their booted footsteps echoing about the stone walls.

Alistair squeezed her palm tightly against his own, nudging her into yet another narrow passageway that sloped gently downwards. This corridor was lit by torches fixed at regular intervals on the walls; decorated with moth-eaten tapestries in faded shades of crimson and black.

Halfway down this narrow passageway Flora inhaled, nostrils flaring outwards as they detected a familiar salt-edged scent.

"Where-"

"Almost there," Alistair replied evasively, leading her towards a small wooden door at the end of the corridor.

As he nudged it open, Flora put her hand to her eyes to shade them from the sudden, startling sunlight. Still clutching Alistair's hand, she stepped through the doorway and looked around her in astonishment.

Rather than leading to yet another stone passageway, the door had led out into a small courtyard garden located within the interior of the castle. Ivy ran up the walls, climbing determinedly up towards the high, decorative windows – one of them Flora recognised as the great stained glass Calenhad that marked the entrance to the Royal wing.

The courtyard garden itself consisted of a sunny, cobbled square, bordered with grass on three sides. Earthen beds had already been built up; a wooden planter ran along one wall, near a cluster of empty ceramic pots in a variety of sizes. In one corner, a slender pear tree drooped over a small brick well. Diagonally opposite, a stone bench rested against the wall; carved with sculpted relief patterns. It was a little haven of quiet within the busy palace, accessible only through the wooden door by which they had entered.
Flora stared around for a moment, and then turned to Alistair with her brow furrowed.

"This is for you to use, if… if you want to," he said, slightly hesitant. "You can collect seeds and clippings from the northern coast – or anywhere we go on the progress – and then plant them here. Flowers, vegetables, herbs – anything you want."

Since Flora was still gazing at him, wide-eyed and speechless, Alistair ploughed on determinedly.

"I know you can't make things grow just by prodding them with your finger anymore," he continued quickly, not wanting to upset her. "But you can still make things grow. Create – create life without magic. By your own hand."

Flora's pale eyes gleamed suddenly, and Alistair grew alarmed that he had made a mistake.

"Or – if it's a bad idea, just say so," he assured her, hastily. "Honestly, Flo – if this isn't your idea of fun, just tell- "

His sentence was ended abruptly as the air was squeezed from his lungs; forced out by the desperate clutch of her arms as Flora embraced him. Even if she had desired to suppress this new surge of tears, it would have been utterly impossible to do so. Instead, she let out a muffled wail into his leather-clad chest, fingers groping blindly at his back.

Alistair clutched her equally hard in return, feeling the rounded swell of her stomach pressing against his abdomen. He bowed his head to tuck her into his chest; resting his chin neatly within the centre of the golden circlet.

"Ssh, baby- it's a present," he murmured into her hair, stroking his thumb in a line down the centre of her back. "You're not meant to cry when someone gives you a present, they're good things."

Flora tilted her head back and beamed up at him, eyes bright with unshed tears beneath the dampened lashes. Reaching out, she pushed her fingers beyond his hairline, smoothing the rumpled golden strands flat.

"Thank you," she croaked, her voice still a fraction unsteady. "I can't wait to grow things – to grow things with my own hand. But I haven't got you nothing – haven't got you anything in return."

Flora's face crumpled briefly in distress; hastily, Alistair drew her against him, turning her bodily so that her shoulder-blades were pressed to his chest. He inhaled the clean, soapy scent of his best friend's hair, murmuring in her ear.

"I'd give you the moon, my love. I'd give you everything in the sky if you asked for it."

Hm, thought Flora, leaning back against Alistair's strong chest and pondering. How can I repay you?

Chapter End Notes

OOC Author Note: Hmmmm I don't know, Flo, how could you POSSIBLY repay him? Lol.

Anyway, this was a fun chapter to write! I thought that a garden would be quite
therapeutic for Flora, since it involves the 'creation of life', and growing things – it's not healing magic, but there are some parallels there. Plus, her name literally means 'flower', so it's fitting, haha.
The newlyweds were alone in the queen's sunny courtyard garden; the Royal Guard waiting tactfully on the other side of a closed door. Alistair ducked to close the difference in their heights, pressing his lips beneath Flora's ear in a soft, lingering kiss. Flora shivered, leaning her head back against his chest to show him the full, pale length of her throat.

Such a blatant invitation clearly begged to be acted upon. The king's mouth brushed a leisurely meander over the bare skin; using tongue and lips to deliver lazy, languid kisses to her neck until she was flushed and trembling before him.

When Alistair eventually paused for breath, Flora swivelled in his arms to face him once again, her palms coming up to frame his bearded cheeks. Pulling his head down, she sought out his mouth impatiently; seeking to show her gratitude for his gift through the ardour of her lips. Alistair returned her desire readily, letting out a groan even as he reached down to caress the small of her back. As the kiss deepened, his confident fingers slid down further to spread over her rear; there was no trace left of the fumbling amateur from the Brecilian Forest.

Yet Flora was determined not to let him dictate the course of the next few minutes. Most of the time when they made love, her best friend was so focused on pleasing her that she barely got to touch him before they were actually engaged in the act of coupling. Unfortunately, her resolve almost vanished with the first touch of Alistair's tongue to her nipple. He had tugged impatiently at the laces of her tunic, pulling them until the navy folds loosened to reveal her bare breasts. A throaty sound of desire escaped his lips and he pressed his mouth to one ripe, creamy mound.

"Mm- baby-"

Only the feel of his arousal against her thigh – hard as iron beneath the supple leather of his breeches – brought Flora to her senses.

_You wanted to thank him. Don't get distracted!_

Anchoring her fingers to Alistair's breeches, Flora lowered herself to her knees; grateful that they were standing on a patch of grass. She reached up to remove the gilded flower crown from her head, placing it carefully to one side before lifting her soft, grey gaze to Alistair's face. Her husband's features were contorted with concern, affectionate hands reaching down to touch her cheeks and her shoulders with soft, tender caresses.

"My love," he breathed, anxiously. "Is that uncomfortable? You don't have to – you're _with child_ -"

Yet Alistair's concern was betrayed by his own arousal, which had begun to strain urgently against the leather of his breeches at the sight of his kneeling wife.

Flora dropped her gaze from his worried face, lifting a finger to prod tentatively at the complicated silver fastening of his belt.

"Please, I want to," she whispered, then pressed an impulsive kiss to the leather covering the throbbing flesh. "Let me?"

With a muffled groan at his own inability to resist, Alistair reached down to fumble quickly with the
belt; loosening his breeches enough to thrust them down his thighs. Flora beamed up at him in approval and wet her full, sulky Cousland lips in preparation.

As the midday bell rang to mark the gleaming Solace sun at its apex, the palace began to settle back into its normal daytime rhythms. The Pentaghast clan were the last guests to depart from the castle; dominating the entrance hall with their strongly-accented chatter as their sweating retainers hauled luggage onto waiting carts. Up in the high tower containing the palace archives, scribes with carefully neutral expressions transcribed the notes taken by both Arl Myrddin and Mother Telatia into official records. This dually-verified account of the consummation would act as legal proof of the marriage – and officially legitimise the unborn heir.

The main council chamber – with the great statues of Calenhad, Moira and Maric flanking the three walls – was in the process of being set up for the afternoon's trade meeting. Extra chairs and tables had been brought in from the great hall to accommodate the Marcher lords, although their own scribes and secretaries would need to stand. Eamon, as Chancellor, was overseeing the preparations; he was determined to re-open normal trade routes across the Waking Sea as soon as possible. The arl also expected that Alistair would take a more active role during this particular meeting. The new king had grown in confidence over the past six weeks; beginning to make some astute points and ask pertinent questions during council sessions.

Fifty yards to the west of the council chamber, the king himself was relying on the castle wall at his back to keep him upright. His knees were shuddering beneath him, sweat was dripping from his hair into his eyes and a protuberant brick was grazing his bare buttock; yet each of these discomforts went wholly ignored. Alistair was too focused on the shuddering waves radiating outwards from his core; each over-stimulated nerve running hot and liquid with pure, animal pleasure.

He had lost the ability to speak coherently sometime prior, and now only low, throaty moans escaped his dry lips; interrupted by the occasional grunt or instruction for his wife not to stop. His pleased groans, along with the soft wet sound of her lips, echoed about the walls of the small garden courtyard.

His determined new bride had no intention of stopping. She had found a position resting back on her heels that was comfortable, and had settled into a rhythm that Alistair seemed to be enjoying. One of his hands rested lightly on her head, fingers tangled in her hair; the other hand was braced against the wall.

_I'll never tire of looking at him_, Flora thought to herself, feeling a twist of mingled pride and desire as she let her eyes wander over her husband's body. _He's the best looking person I've ever seen._

She had already admired the strength of Alistair's broad, muscular thighs – it was impossible not to appreciate them from her current vantage point – and although he was still clad in his tunic, the thin garment could not disguise the tautness of his abdomen or the impressive breadth of his shoulders. His handsome, olive face was contorted with the effort of maintaining control; strong jaw clenched and noble brow furrowed. There was a great deal of power resident within her best friend's bulky frame, which made his ability to touch her with such gentle reverence even more remarkable.

Flora was so busy daydreaming that she failed to notice the sudden contortion of Alistair's face; a strangulated gasp of warning breaking free from his throat.

"Sweetheart, I- I'm – ah, Maker!"

He let out a helpless half-shout, fingers curling tight into her hair as his abdomen contracted. Flora – taken by surprise - almost tipped over backwards in shock, a startled expression on her face.
Alistair leaned against the stone with his vision contracted to small dots; every muscle in his body seemed to have liquefied. For several long moments, he inhaled ragged gasps of air with his head tilted back against the wall, staring unseeing up at the midday sun.

Forcing himself to regain some composure, the king reached down with an unsteady hand to stroke his queen's cheek. Having recovered from his unexpected climax, she smiled up at him; proud of her efforts and pleased that he'd enjoyed them.

"My love, let's get you upright. Your knee," Alistair murmured, conscious of the leather strapping around Flora's weak joint. "Come on, sweetheart, up we go."

He helped her to her feet, first bending down to brush the stray fragments of sun-baked grass from her leggings, and then to retrieve the gilded crown from where it sat incongruously on the gravel. Flora let him replace it carefully atop her head, flattening the rumpled strands of hair.

"Thank you for the garden," she repeated as they headed hand-in-hand towards the doorway.

"And thank you for – well. You know."

Flora smiled sideways at him, and Alistair let out a bark of laughter; squeezing her palm tightly against his own. He ducked his head to her ear, lowering his voice as they approached the guards waiting patiently on the other side of the door.

"I'll return the favour later, baby."

The king's council convened shortly afterwards in the meeting chamber, attended by representatives from Ostwick, Starkhaven and Kirkwall. Flora – whose Gwaren restoration committee meeting did not start until later in the afternoon – parted from her husband in the entrance hall; watching Alistair disappear behind the great oak doors with the inexplicable little twist of melancholy that she always felt when they were parted.

Flora stood for a moment on the moth-eaten blue carpet, yawning as servants and retainers moved at a respectable distance about her, their heads bowed. Now that the gilded crown rested on her dark red hair, this number included those who would previously have smiled and greeted her. After residing in the castle for several months, she recognised quite a few of its servants – he was the steward who often brought up food to break their fast, she cleaned the stained glass Calenhad window every week. Now that Flora had graduated from Lady Cousland to Queen of Ferelden, they appeared too hesitant to even acknowledge her.

Being queen is a little bit like being a mage in the army camp at Ostagar, Flora thought suddenly to herself. Nobody wants to look straight at me, they're all a little scared of me. The comparison was so ridiculous and yet so fitting, that she almost wanted to laugh. Flora had been intending to go straight up to the Mac Tir quarters to speak with Anora; but now she decided to deviate from her plan.

First, she returned to the Royal Bedchamber and – with some difficulty – managed to retrieve something which had been kicked underneath the bed by Leliana the previous night. Once she had a certain bundle of leather and fur tucked beneath her arm, Flora retraced her steps to the entrance hall. Turning on her heel, she then followed a route which had become familiar to her over the past few months – through a discreet wooden door beside a sculpture of a huntsman, along a wide corridor and down a mildewed staircase.
The rush of heated air that met her was in stark contest to the cool dampness of the rest of the castle. The kitchens of the Royal Palace were hollowed out from the bedrock that the great structure sat upon; made up of a series of interconnected stone archways and chambers, with holes cut out into the sea-cliff for ventilation. A small, subterranean stream ran through the centre of the kitchens; a happy accident of design which provided a constant supply of fresh water.

Flora knew the layout of the kitchens well – just as she had become familiar with the kitchens of both Redcliffe and South Reach castles. She passed turning spits and vast, bubbling iron cauldrons; ducking through a room with bushels of hanging herbs and along a corridor cluttered with iron cooking utensils. Making a quick detour into the vegetable pantry, she reached into a storage crate to retrieve a handful of carrots, wedging them down the front of her tunic.

A short time later, she reached her intended goal. The main preparation area of the kitchens was a vast, pillar-lined space, smoke-filled and sweltering from six open hearths. The odour of roasting meat was overwhelming, and Flora felt her stomach curdle in protest.

“Yes, I know you don’t like the smell,” she thought down to the fidgeting baby. “But you can deal with it for a while longer.”

Flora set eyes on the person she had been looking for – a stout, grizzle-haired Fereldan by the name of Albin. According to Guillaume, Albin had worked in the palace since he was a child; rising through the ranks from humble pot-boy to master of the castle kitchens. He ran his domain with the precision of a military officer – keeping order within the noisy, smoke-filled chaos.

Albin was standing beside one of the open hearths, conducting three different tasks simultaneously. One hand stirred a ladle through a thick, vegetable stew, the other brought a pinch of some unidentified spice to his nose; while his mouth loudly berated an underling for dropping a tray of marzipan fancies.

"Two hours, those took to make; two hours with my best almond butter imported from Anti – Andraste’s smouldering pyre!"

This exclamation was the result of the kitchen-master suddenly noticing Flora standing patiently amidst the culinary turmoil, the bright gold of the crown a metallic point within the smoke and heat. Albin immediately whipped off his cap and dropped, sweating, into a bow.

"The Queen!" he roared, still awkwardly bent at the portly waist. "Get in here, nugs! It's Queen Florence."

Kitchen staff immediately flooded in from all directions beneath the arches, pulling off caps with flour-covered fingers and dipping into bows. Excitable pot-boys nudged each other and whispered under their breath; while cooks tried to wipe their grubby hands on their skirts.

Flora, who had naively not expected activity to grind to a halt at her arrival, blinked for a moment, shifting the leather bundle higher on her hip.

"Your Majesty," murmured Albin, eyes respectfully lowered. "How may we help you?"

"I wanted to come and thank you for yesterday," replied Flora, earnestly. "For all the effort you went to in preparing the feast. You must have been working for days to make it all, and it was the best food I’ve ever tasted. Especially the sea-food."

This was not strictly true – nothing was better than her father’s smoked trout – but Flora pressed on, determinedly.
"And everybody was so impressed," she continued, as Albin raised his gaze to settle on her face. "All the foreign guests. They stuffed themselves like fat turkeys. My brother Finian's belt broke because he ate too much."

One of the pot-boys let out a giggle, and was promptly cuffed round the ear by a nearby elven butler.

"Anyway," Flora said, her pale eyes meeting Albin's curious stare. "Thank you so much for all your hard work. I wanted to give you this to divide up between you all – apparently, it's worth something?"

She gave a little shrug, handing over the bundle of leather to Albin. The kitchen-master unwrapped it, and his jaw dropped indecorously. The soft, rich darkness of the calfskin was immediately recognisable, trimmed with fur and supple to the touch. A ripple of recognition went about the crowd of servants, elbows nudging into ribs and whispers flying like birds.

"Your majesty, this is your wedding gown," Albin croaked, wide-eyed.

Flora nodded – she had gone up to the Royal Bedchamber to fetch it, crouching on hands and knees to claw it out from beneath the bed.

"Yes. People will buy bits of it, won't they? Alistair told me that it's tradition."

"Yes, ma'am – they certainly will. It's... a most generous gift."

Flora nodded and then remembered to smile; countering the natural solemnity of her face.

"Thank you so much for all your hard work," she repeated, in her soft, hoarse-edged northern accent. "Alistair and I both appreciate it, a lot."

"Your Majesty!" croaked Albin, bowing once more.

The rest of the kitchen staff followed his example, and Flora almost wanted to bow as well just to fit in. She managed to restrain herself, shifting her weight onto her stronger leg as her strapped knee gave a brief grumble of protest.

"Would somebody please show me the quickest way up to the Mac Tir quarters?"

Chapter End Notes

OOC Author Note: The cutting up and selling of bits of the bridal wedding gown is an old medieval tradition, too! I thought it would be a nice way for Flora to thank the kitchen staff for cooking up all those complicated sounded dishes from the feast, hehe.

So, next chapter, Flora is going up to see Anora – her teyrn's daughter counterpart (see the parallel in their names!) That's going to go well (not).
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

A short while later, an elven servant left Flora in a wide, sunlit corridor that she had never ventured down before. Astonished that there were still parts of the castle which remained unknown to her, Flora swivelled her head to take stock of her surroundings. This was clearly a newer wing of the castle – the stone bricks were more evenly cut, the mortar-paste between them showing less decay. Arrow slits were spaced at regular intervals, letting in beams of sunlight to illuminate the faded tapestries on the walls. Fresh rushes had been strewn over the flagstones, and the mildewed dampness of the rest of the old castle had yet to pervade this far.

At the far end of the corridor, a set of wooden doors were guarded by no less than half a dozen Royal Guard. As Flora approached, they shifted their pikes from hand to hand; the captain lifting his helm to address her.

"Queen Florence!"

Flora paused before replying, her eye caught by the wooden doors behind the armoured soldiers. Like the Cousland doorway – which was decorated with the Highever laurel – this entrance had once proudly borne the arms of the teyrn who had dwelt there. Now, the golden dragon had been unceremoniously daubed over with black paint; only the trace of a gilded snout and the tip of a tail were still visible.

"Is Lady Anora inside?" Flora asked, eyeing the obliterated dragon.

"Yes, madam. She hasn't left the quarters in months."

"Months?" asked Flora, rather stupidly. "Months?"

"Aye, majesty. After the Blight was ended, King Alistair gave her permission to walk the castle grounds – under guard – but she refused."

Perplexed, Flora bit at her fingernail. For a moment, she wondered if she should remove the crown and leave it with the soldiers before entering.

*Would she think I was gloating if I wore it?*

*If I take it off, is it obvious that I'm worried that she'd think I was gloating?*

When there was – naturally - no reply from her spirits, Flora let out a little sigh and decided not to overthink it, nodding for the guard to open the doors.

The obliterated Mac Tir dragon yielded to a chamber of approximately the same dimension as the Cousland quarters. The furnishings were velvet, albeit worn and faded, and the furniture was carved from solid Bannorn oak. A hearth smouldered away in one corner, smoke blackening the decorative tiles above. In its prime, it would have been a chamber fit for a teyrn; favouring rustic Fereldan design over fussy Orlesian glamour.

However, this was a room long past its zenith. The window was so smeared with grease and dust that it let in only filtered daylight; casting the chamber in an odd, almost underwater hue. The rushes on the flagstones had not been changed for weeks, and had disintegrated into brownish, wet clumps.
Trays containing empty bowls and mugs were scattered on every horizontal surface; growing mould and harbouring small colonies of spiders. A pile of blankets, creased and stained, lay at the foot of the bed.

Flora stopped abruptly in the entrance, her eyes widening in dismay. She swivelled her eyes to the captain, who hastened to explain.

"The prisoner sent away her maid, ma'am. When the servants came in to try and clean, she screamed at them until they left."

Just then, Anora herself appeared at the far side of the chamber, a bundle of silk and velvet gathered in her arms. She was clad in a nightgown, her blonde hair hanging in limp tendrils down her back. Despite the negligence of her external appearance, her pale blue eyes remained as sharp as ever.

"If that's my father, tell him that I don't want to see him- oh!"

The two teyrns' daughters stared at each other across the room; the former and current queen come face to face for the first time since Flora had come across Anora in Loghain's prison cell.

"You!" breathed Anora, drawing herself up to her full height. "Have you come here to gloat?"

In retrospect, Flora wished that she had taken off the crown. Instead, she beckoned for the guard to leave them alone; which they did with grimaces of unhappiness. Rather than shutting the door entirely, they left it on the jar.

"No," she replied evenly, avoiding the rotting rushes as she stepped forwards. "Why didn't you want to see your dad before he left? He's going to be away for months with the Wardens."

Anora let out an utterly humourless bark of laughter, striding barefoot across the grubby flagstones towards the hearth with the imperious glide of a queen.

"My father is a twice-over traitor. He betrayed my husband first, and now he's betrayed me. And before you ask — I know that you're not the sharpest dagger in the armoury — he's betrayed me by making his peace with you and Alistair. I heard that he even attended your wedding feast. Congratulations!"

Flora managed, with great effort, to stop herself from rolling her eyes at Anora's insult. She was well aware that she was not the most intellectual creature in Ferelden; had indeed made her peace with the fact years ago. As Fergus had once joked: out of the three Cousland children, he had inherited the brawn, Finian the brain and Flora the beauty.

"You could have made your peace with Alistair and I, too," the current queen said, her brow furrowing as she watched Anora shake out a gown of fuchsia velvet. "You still can. There's no need for you to stay in this room, Alistair doesn't think you're a threat anymore."

Anora let the velvet gown fall into the hearth, using a poker to push it into the heart of the fire. The flames hissed and spat, consuming the dress in seconds until naught but charred fragments of fabric were left in the grate.

"Oh, trust me. I've no plans of usurping you," she said, with bitterness infusing her words like vinegar. "The Mac Tir name is mud across Ferelden. And who would dare to depose a man with the likeness of Maric, married to the Hero of Ferelden? A beautiful young girl, fat with babe? Despite my current appearance, I'm not deluded."

Fat?! thought Flora indigantly, watching Anora burn the sky-blue gown she had worn on the first
day of the Landsmeet. As a bead of sweat ran down the former queen's forehead, Flora decided to change tactic.

"I'm going to the Gwaren restoration committee meeting this afternoon," she explained, gingerly avoiding a teacup that had grown its own colony. "Do you want to come with me? We're going to rebuild the southern port and start up the fishing businesses again. You know Gwaren better than me, and you've got a good head for e- ekno- ergonomics."

"Economics," hissed Anora as a great rush of sparks flew up the chimney. "You're right, I do have a great understanding of economics. And knowledge of government, and statecraft – I was the perfect ruler of this nation. In fact, I did rule this nation – ask anyone with a brain!"

"Then why did you let your dad take over after Cailan died?" Flora asked with Herring bluntness, starting to tire of the woman's rhetoric.

Anora stopped short, visibly flinching. Instead of throwing the final gown onto the flames, she clutched the soft green velvet and stroked it absentmindedly with elegant fingers; eyes fixed somewhere far away from her sordid, self-imposed confinement.

While Mac Tir's daughter brooded in silence, Flora could not stop herself from eyeing the mess in her immediate area. Years of chores in the Circle had instilled a desire to make things neat – an urge which had not vanished with Flora's steady escalation of station.

After surreptitiously kicking the rotten rushes into one corner, Flora squatted awkwardly down to gather the dirty silverware onto a single tray. Taking a torn fragment of curtain, she rose to her feet and began to wipe at the dust on the side of the doorframe.

Several minutes later, and the deposed queen quite visibly drew herself together; the hard armour falling back over her face like a dropped portcullis.

"I don't know why you bothered to come here," she spat, turning around to face Flora once again. "Did you just want to parade your stomach before me?"

"Wha – no! Of course not. I wanted to ask you to come with me to the Gwaren restoration committee meeting this afternoon!"

Struck by a sudden, vehement lash of anger, Anora let loose her father's temper. Swiping up a small, silver chalice with slender fingers, she hurled it across the room. It was most likely intended for the wall; but the former queen did not have great aim, and the chalice struck Flora on the corner of the temple. It was merely a glancing blow, but Flora's yelp and the clatter of metal caused the guards to come crowding in.

"The Maker has answered my prayers!" bellowed Anora defiantly from beside the hearth, her eyes flashing pale fire. "Now Alistair will definitely execute me. Please, brother-in-law, it will be no trouble – I welcome the void!"

The captain took one look at the startled Flora, who had put her fingers to her bloodied forehead, and inhaled unsteadily. Twisting his head, he barked an order to the soldiers clustered behind him.

"The prisoner has attacked the queen. Fetch the king!"

"Don't fetch the king," Flora said hastily, and since her word superseded the captain's, the soldiers stayed put. "She didn't attack me."

"But – your majesty – the king ought to be told!"
"I'll… tell him later."

Flora eyed her reflection in a soldier's polished breastplate; lifting up strands of hair to inspect the injury. It was only a half-inch long and already starting to clot, a neat little bump rising up on the side of her forehead.

_Not one of your most successful ideas, Flora. Idiot!_

Rather gloomily, she made her way back towards the entrance hall; her knee giving periodic twinges of protest at this extended wandering about the palace. The baby finally went to sleep inside her, and Flora rested a hand on her stomach, grateful for some respite from its fidgeting.

Finian and Zevran were waiting in the entrance hall, near the stone Mabari hounds guarding the door. The two men had their heads bowed over a sheaf of paper, their cackles audible even from the far end of the hall. When they saw Flora approach, Finian hailed her with a grin.

"Flora, _please_ don't tell me that you actually said 'Take me, my king!' at one point," he implored her, trying to keep a straight face. "Really?!"

Flora's face immediately flushed a colour that clashed with her hair, and Finian let out a muffled howl of laughter.

"How did _you_ get a copy of that?" she demanded, realising that Zevran was wielding the transcript of her wedding night.

"Your elven companion has a friend working in the palace archives," her brother continued, gleefully. "He made a copy."

"It makes for entertaining reading," Zevran added, flashing a very white-toothed grin at her. "I never realised that Alistair could be _quite_ so crude with his language in the bedchamber. I assume he didn't pick that up in the Chantry, but I heartily approve."

Flora made a little grab for the notes, only for Zevran to whisk them away with a titter of laughter; blowing her a kiss.

"_Mi florita_, don't tell me that you're getting _shy_ on me. Alright," he continued, relenting slightly. "I will just check to see if my wager was correct – I placed a bet of ten silver on a certain _position_ – and then you can have them, I swear-"

The elf's voice trailed off abruptly, his eyes narrowing. Flora blinked at Zevran, perplexed as to the sudden change in his expression. He stepped forwards, reaching out to move a thick rope of dark red hair to one side. One eyebrow rose as his pupils contracted; the corner of his lip curling slightly.

"What's this, _dulce_?" he asked, in a carefully measured tone. "More importantly: _who_ did this?"

He was staring at the cut on her forehead, which had clotted into a small, maroon smudge atop a pinkish bump. Finian, who had been distracted by a loose button on his riding glove, looked up in alarm.

"Floss!" he breathed, outraged. "Did – did someone _hit_ you?"

"Give me a name, _nena_," Zevran murmured quietly, smiling a dangerous promise even as his hand dropped to his belt.

"Nobody _hit_ me," Flora retorted, reaching down to remove the elf's fingers from where they were
curling around the hilt of a blade. "I went to see Anora and she thought I was trying to gloat, and threw a cup… in my general direction. But not at me. My head just got in the way, I think."

This did not make Zevran any calmer, his nostrils flaring. Finian let out a bark of incredulous laughter, throwing despairing hands into the air.

"Florence, you can't just go and see Anora Mac Tir on your own – she was your enemy during the Blight, remember? She could have done anything – stabbed you with silverware, pushed you into the hearth - "

"I don't think she would have done that," Flora replied, hastily. "I felt sorry for her. She's living in a – a pit of filth. Though… she doesn't pick up after herself, which isn't helping."

Finian groaned, bending his lofty head to inspect the cut closely.

"Still, you shouldn't have gone to see Anora on your own. I know you want her to be involved in this Gwaren committee, but – she's clearly still too angry to be reasoned with at the moment."

Flora grunted, acknowledging the truth in his remark. She turned to Zevran, reaching out to rest her fingers on the hilt of his dagger.

"Your sword stays in its sheath," she said, firmly. "No assassinating Lady Anora."

"Ah, you are too cruel, nena."

"Promise me! No assassinating!"

"On one condition," he purred, relenting. "That you say 'sword in sheath' one more time. It stirs a fire in me."

Flora stuck her tongue out at him and Zevran laughed, his eyes still focused like small, black darts on the cut beneath her hairline.

"Right, come on," Finian said with a sigh, nudging his sister towards the exit. "We don't want to be late for this meeting. Wynne is sorting out the horses."

As they headed towards the exit, Zevran fell into step beside Flora; bringing his lips close to her ear.

"Anora is safe from my blade, querida. But I warn you that her hours are numbered from the moment that Alistair sets eyes on that cut."

Flora exhaled, hunching her shoulders ill-temperedly.

"I know. I'll have to try and talk him out of it."

*After all, during the Blight, Lady Anora was just listening to her dad. Would I have done any different?*

Chapter End Notes

OOC Author Note: OOOook I love Anora so much as a character, and I have big plans
in store for her with this whole restoration of Gwaren! There's not much canon about what happens to Anora after Origins if she's deposed from the throne – so I've just come up with this head-canon that she's in self-imposed, Miss Havisham style isolation, all bitter and resentful. But that's not going to be permanent! She's a very intelligent and capable woman who deserves more than to be stuck in a room, burning all her old queenly gowns, haha.
The Queen's Business

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It was a bright and sunny day, which compensated somewhat for the fact that the coronation holiday was over and the residents of Denerim had to return to work. Still, the city folk were reluctant to take down the last vestiges of decoration, and so crimson ribbons and long strands of laurel were still draped over balconies and wound around lamp-posts. The city was settling back into its normal rhythms – the market was full of traders loudly advertising their wares while a procession of Chantry sisters made their way through the square with swinging incense censors. The canals were busy with mercantile boats and assorted shipping; an occasional noble barge negotiating gingerly through the trade vessels.

The queen's party made its way through the city with far less fuss than yesterday's wedding procession. Flora was perched on the front of Finian's saddle, with Zevran and Wynne riding abreast on either side. A dozen guardsmen accompanied them, their closed-face helmets and gleaming pikes marking them as members of the elite squadron whose job it was to protect the Royal family. In addition, several war-dogs from the palace kennels were chasing each other around the horses' hooves, their short, tawny fur marked with crimson kaddis. A Cousland retainer had been visiting the hounds for the past six weeks; inundating them with random items from Flora's wardrobe to train them in her scent. Saela- Fergus' own hound – was close to delivering her own pups; until they had been birthed and trained, the palace dogs would suffice.

Still, despite the city returning to some semblance of normality, its people were still delighted to see their young, plump-bellied queen out in public. Hails rang down from windows and buildings quickly emptied as their occupants flooded out onto the street; waving at the royal party as they rode past. Finian – who always enjoyed the attention – lifted a hand to wave back. Flora was grateful that she had a reputation for solemnity in public, since smiling continuously sounded exhausting. Instead, she bowed her head to acknowledge their cries; the gilded wreath of Andraste's Garland gleaming against her loose hair.

Once they arrived at the Gnawed Noble, the horses were taken away to be stabled. Six soldiers remained outside the tavern to guard the entrance, while the other half-dozen accompanied the Cousland siblings, Zevran and Wynne inside. The bowing tavern keeper directed them upstairs, explaining that the Gwaren restoration committee was meeting in the room at the far end of the corridor.

Sure enough, the residents of Gwaren were gathered around several tables in a large, airy chamber; tankards of cheap ale, sheaves of paper and ink-pens spread out before them. As Flora entered, there was a minor commotion as the room rose hastily to their feet, chairs scraping back and caps hastily doffed.

"Your majesty," the mayor of Gwaren breathed, directing his words to the floor as he bowed. "My lord Cousland. It's our honour to receive you."

Flora beamed at them; her smile widening when she saw that several cushions had been already added to her chair. The mayor of Gwaren's wife was seven months heavy with babe, and the man understood well the aches and pains that accompanied such a condition.

"Thank you," she replied, earnestly. "Would someone be able to make a copy of the discussions so I can pass it on to Alis- to the king?"
Finian spoke first, setting out the details of the offer that Fergus had come up with. Highever would provide Gwaren with whatever lumber was required for the rebuilding – including transportation and other associated materials. To recoup its costs, Highever would receive a preferential discount in future trade with its southern counterpart. As the newly invested Arl of Amaranthine, Finian also offered the loan of six trading vessels from his own port; at a cost which again would be recompensed through future trade.

These were extremely generous terms – especially since it could take years to regain any return on their investment – but both Cousland brothers were determined to support their younger sister's interest. The mayor barely needed to discuss the offer with his peers before accepting; disbelief and gratitude writ raw on his face.

As the new arl of Amaranthine spoke, Zevran leaned against the door frame and toyed with the handle of his blade; thoughts meandering between Claudio Valisti, Anora Mac Tir and a handful of other faces. Unlike Wynne, who had gratefully accepted a seat beside Finian, the elf preferred to remain standing. He had already scanned the bodies of those seated within the room to check that they carried no weapons – unlikely a possibility as that was – and his head tilted at every slight sound from the corridor outside. After confirming that the most recent footsteps belonged to a servant arriving to remove empty tankards, Zevran's gaze fell on Flora's face. She was listening earnestly, elbows on the table and mouth slightly open; looking as she once must have done in the classrooms of the Circle.

Once Finian had finished, it was the queen's turn to speak. Taking a deep breath – she had practised the particulars several times out loud in the bath that morning - Flora set out in meticulous detail how the king was intending to provision Gwaren.

"One thousand-weight of basalt stone," she began, without ceremony. "Fifty cart-loads of iron ore and slate. Grain and smoked meat sufficient to last five hundred people through the winter. Three hundred heads of assorted livestock. Five cart-loads of masonry tools. Thirty sacks of seeds. And you can keep all the carts and horses used to transport it down south."

The mayor was nodding like a puppet; several secretaries scribbling frantically away at their notes.

"And the repayment terms?"

"None, specifically. But Gwaren should aim to resume the fishing trade within three years," replied Flora, steadily. "And to re-open the port within five."

"Your majesty!" The mayor leapt to his feet and dropped into a bow once again, his face alight with relief and gratitude. "I hadn't thought – hadn't dared to hope – such generosity - "

He trailed off, wringing his cap in his hands.

Since Flora was leaving on royal progress with Alistair in the next few days, the mayor promised to stay in regular contact with her via letter. As they made to take their leave, the mayor led the committee in a round of cheers for their noble benefactors; who had stepped in to assist when no patron of their own teyrnir had come forward. Finian lifted a hand and gave a rakish grin, the eye-patch lending him a distinctly piratical air. Flora, who always grew self-conscious at praise, grimaced at her painful knee and wondered if she could persuade Finian to carry her back down the stairs.

"It's my honour to assist you," she said softly once the applause had finished; surreptitiously standing on one leg behind the table. "And you should raise a drink to yourselves, to celebrate your survivors' fortitude. In Herring, we call it having grit in your soul – you probably have a different term down south – but I admire it, very much. And I look forward to the day when we can lift a drink together
Make mine an apple-water, though. I never realised how bitter ale was until I wasn't able to distil it on my tongue any longer.

They left the tavern with the excited chatter of the restoration committee ringing in their ears. There was a brief delay as the soldiers went to fetch the horses; the others huddled beneath the entranceway for shelter from a light drizzle.

Puddles began to form across the flagstones as the rain worsened, and Zevran muttered a dark comment about summer in Ferelden! under his breath. Finian was hissing like a cat and trying to fit himself into the three inches worth of cover provided by the overhanging lip of the tavern roof.

Flora, a true northerner who barely noticed the rain, let the tip of her booted toe dip into a puddle and yawned. She felt a hand on her arm and smiled up at Wynne, who managed to look effortlessly elegant despite the rain.

"I assume you aren't going to be a queen who puts her feet up all day, then," the senior enchanter commented with a smile, her lovely, pale blue eyes shining through the rain. "It's gratifying to see."

Flora smiled back at her in slight confusion, having not heard of that particular idiom.

"Put my feet up where? On what?"

"It means to relax all day, eating bonbons and embroidering cushions. You'd be more than justified to do so, Florence. You've already done the nation a great service – you're entitled to some leisure time."

The Herring native's lip curled at such idleness, her brow furrowing. Wynne laughed at Flora's facial expression, shaking a wry head.

"I know it's not in your nature. Just – make sure you take the time to rest. The babe is big and clearly demands a lot of your energy."

As though on cue, the baby woke up and sent a foot swinging into Flora's kidney. She dropped a hand to her abdomen, tapping her fingers absentmindedly across the curve of her stomach. A few moments later, the baby nudged against her belly in response; and she gave it a little reassuring pat.

Wynne smiled to watch them, the lines at the corners of her eyes deepening with a slight wistfulness.

"It's nice to see you do that, child."

"Eh?"

"During the Blight, you barely looked at your own stomach, let alone caressed it. I know circumstances didn't allow for you to acknowledge the baby in public, but – it's good to see you doing so now."

Flora nodded; she had determinedly put her burgeoning stomach out of her head in the months leading up to the final battle. A metallic taste of guilt rose in the back of her throat and she dropped a second hand to cradle the swell of her belly.

"Sorry, little creature. I was protecting the country that you'll inherit one day. I hope you don't blame me for it in the future."
"In Herring, women work right up until they give birth," she said instead, determinedly swallowing the guilt and moving a piece of damp piece of hair from her face. "When I was little, I knew a woman named Knotty-"

"Knotty?"

"Yes, Knotty – and she was out gathering up lobster-pots when she went into labour. She gave birth on the sand on her own, cut the baby loose with her descaling knife, then put it inside her shirt and carried on collecting the lobsters. She's a Herring legend! My role model!"

As the Royal Guard came to a halt before them with horses in tow, Wynne's eyebrows shot into her silvery hairline.

"Well, I think Alistair might have something to say about that," she replied, with a slight laugh. "At least he's not foolish enough to suggest putting you in confinement, though I'm sure Eamon has proposed the idea."

"Aah! No! Never!"

They mounted up and began the slow ride back to the palace. The drizzle had driven most of Denerim's city folk inside, and the streets were far quieter than they had been on the journey down from the castle. Flora leaned back against Finian's chest, his cloak wrapped around her shoulders – at his insistence – and curled a strand of damp red hair around her finger.

Rain speckled the surface of the main canal as they rode alongside it, merchants and craftsmen clearing hastily out of the road as they saw the intimidating faces of the Royal Guard. At Alistair's insistence, the party were taking a slightly different route back up to the palace – he did not want them riding through the noble district, where both the grand-duc and the Tevinter magister were staying.

Flora was pleased at this alternate route since it took them down beside the estuary; where the tall ships were moored and the fishing wharfs stuck out into the milky green water. A cluster of little boats fought valiantly against the waning tide, bobbing over the gentle lap of waves towards the jetties.

Soon after the party turned to the west, away from the estuary; passing two large and decrepit warehouses on either side. They were clearly both out of use, their roofs collapsing and the glass in their windows broken. The rain was growing steadily heavier, fat drops saturating the horses' manes and bouncing off the cobbles as they plodded determinedly onwards. The Mabari hounds gleefully shook off much of the dampness, much to the annoyance of the splattered guardsmen.

From the front of the party Zevran let out a sudden squeal of distaste; putting his slender, tattooed fingers to his face.

"Egh! The smell!"

Sure enough, a distinct odour of foulness came wafting through the air towards them; a miasma of sewage, animal by-product and rotten food. Finian immediately pulled his cloak up over his sister's mouth and nose, his own eyes streaming.

"Ugh! Don't breathe it in, Floss; it'll make you ill. I forgot the main waste channel runs through here."

Flora's eyes swivelled to the side, curious. She could see the channel in question, running nearby at the base of the abandoned warehouses. The brownish waters mingled with another channel, which
diverted into a section of the city surrounded by a high wall. With a start, Flora identified the district as the Denerim alienage – she had not initially recognised it from this unfamiliar angle. Her brow furrowed, she turned sideways on the saddle to stare.

"Finian?"

"All my curls have fallen flat in this deluge! I bet it's sunny in Val Royeaux."

"Finian!"

"What is it, petal?"

Flora pointed, her finger tracing the line of the channel.

"The waste channel runs through the alienage?"

"No, of course not. It runs off at an angle, there. See?"

Flora narrowed her eyes, clutching the horse's mane for stability as she swivelled to take in the full view. Zevran, who had been listening, drew his horse up alongside them and extended an illustrative finger.

"There's the main water supply for the alienage, carina."

Flora followed the line of his arm, spotting a narrow canal running through an iron grating embedded low in the wall of the alienage. Her brow furrowed, and she lifted her own finger to point once more.

"But it mixes with the waste water, just up there. Look, look at the current."

Finian squinted through the rain, his brow furrowing.

"Oh – right. I never noticed that."

Her brother, who had never stepped foot inside an alienage in his life, gave a little perplexed shrug and sat back in the saddle.

Flora, on the other hand, remembered well the conditions within the sad territory of the city elves. In the weeks running up to the final battle, she had sat for hours within the alienage offering healing without charge to its unfortunate residents. She recalled the misery and squalor, the dirt and the disease; the fetid canals of tainted water running miserably alongside their vhenadahl prayer-tree.

Quietly, Flora filed away the waste-water channel as something to be dealt with tomorrow; a steely resolution settling over her face.

_As a healer, I could only deal with the effects of this situation. That would be the limit of my power. But as a queen, I can do something about the cause of it._

Out of the corner of her eye, Flora caught sight of Zevran watching her, closely. She smiled at him, and he blew her a slightly wistful kiss.
OOC Author Note: OK, this chapter might not be the most exciting chapter in the world (I'm saving all the combat, fighty stuff for the upcoming progress), but it's important for Flora's character development. Flo's been on a bit of a self-discovery journey – i.e. what is she going to do, now that she can't heal – and this is an important part of it. She's got her Gwaren restoration project to help the refugees – and now, she's thinking about ways to help the city elves in the alienage. Zevran, who is sensitive to the plight of those less fortunate, has picked up on this too!

Ooh as a quick note, "confinement" is the effective imprisonment of pregnant noblewomen in Medieval times – at about eight months pregnant, they'd be shut up in their bedroom, with shutters over the windows, the fire piled with wood to make the room sweltering hot… it was meant to be beneficial, lol. This was at a time when 'educated' society believed men to be the ultimate medical authority, since only they could go to university and train to be physicians. And naturally it was the physician's idea to confine the woman, haha. In poorer societies (like Herring), this would be unheard of – especially since most peasant cottages had literally one room for the whole family (plus animals).

In my story, nobody has bothered even suggesting confinement to Flora, lol. They already know what her answer would be!
An hour later, they arrived back at the Royal Palace, horses and riders both thoroughly bedraggled. As per usual, the Fereldan summer day had turned into a deluge. Stable-boys, squawking quietly at the rain, ran out to take the horses; in silent competition as to who would take the Cousland horse.

Finian slithered onto the gravel with a crunch, and then reached up lanky arms to help his sister down.

"I'm about ready for a hot bath," he declared, brushing a wet palm over the top of his flattened curls. "A hot bath, and an Antivan brandy. Anybody fancy joining me for the latter?"

Wynne, who had been going to spend the rest of the afternoon responding to correspondence, decided that Irving's letter could wait a little longer. She accepted the invitation with a gracious nod, smiling at the tallest Cousland as he grinned. Zevran also accepted Finian's invitation with a smile; never passing up an invitation to partake in his home nation's native drink.

"Mi sirenta, are you coming?"

Flora shook her head, squeezing the rain from the bottom of her tunic.

"I'm going to the trade meeting with the Marcher lords," she replied as they entered the palace, reaching out reflexively to touch the Mabari statue's paw. "I'm surprised you have any Antivan brandy left, I thought Alistair drunk it all on our wedding night."

Finian giggled, shooting her a wicked look from his sole remaining eye.

"Well, it didn't stop him from consummating the marriage, did it?"

"It nearly did! He fell asleep twice!"

Flora shook droplets of water from her boots, watching her brother and companions head off towards the Cousland quarters. Her knee was throbbing and she realised that the strapping around the weak joint had come loose. Unfortunately, it was now impossible for her to tighten it herself due to the bulge at her midriff – which seemed to have grown several inches overnight.

Sighing inwardly, Flora resigned herself to the fact that she would now be limping around until she could find someone to tighten it. She made her way laboriously across the entrance hall and beneath the vast archway that led to the eastern wing of the palace, where the great meeting chambers were located.

By the time that she had reached the doorway leading to the largest meeting hall, beads of sweat had broken out on her forehead; mingling with the rain. This was a result of the effort it took to drag along her uncooperative limb, which was protesting both at the day's excessive exertions, and the added weight of her stomach.

Not wanting to limp into the room, Flora begged the assistance of one of the guards standing at the door; rolling up the leg of her breeches and using her most beseeching expression. The guard handed his pike to his partner and knelt, neutral-faced and professional, retying the strap until it was snug around her swollen joint.
Flora tested the strength of her leg – much improved – then reached up to straighten *Andraste's Garland* atop her rain-soaked hair.

"Alright," she said to the guards, who were waiting to let her into the room. "I'm ready."

Within the audience chamber, the meeting had just entered its fourth hour. The participants had just had a short recess to confer with secretaries and take some refreshment; now, as the sun gradually slid towards the horizon, talks resumed in earnest. Alistair sat at the head of the table, leaning forward and listening keenly, with Eamon seated at his left. The members of the king's council – the throne's half-dozen closest advisers – were clustered nearby, sheaves of paper and maps strewn haphazardly before them.

The three Marcher lords, Dumar, Trevelyan and Vael, were seated opposite, clad in their respective colours. Each liege lord was determined to gain a favourable trade settlement for their own city – Ferelden was the main source of wool and iron ore in the south – and likewise was not afraid to out-bid his neighbour to secure the most beneficial deal.

The doors opened, and the steward let his voice ring out across the stone-pillared chamber as he announced the new arrival.

"Her Majesty, Queen Florence."

Those present within the chamber immediately rose to their feet with a great scraping of chairs; heads swivelling towards the entrance. Alistair grinned reflexively – he had not been able to fully focus on the trade negotiations with his young, fat-bellied wife down in the depths of the city – and pushed his chair back, striding around the table towards her.

The Queen of Ferelden was no longer dressed in the fur-trimmed leather garb of an Alamarri warrior-princess; but her presence was not diminished for her more prosaic attire. Her hair was damp and loose, hanging in tousled, dark red tendrils down to her waist. Her solemn, grey eyes - placed wide in their grave and lovely setting - swept across the room until they settled on the face of the tallest man in the room.

As Alistair came to a halt before her, Flora smiled shyly up at him; he took her hand and kissed her fingers, entwining them within his own.

"Come and sit with me, my love," he instructed, bowing to add a surreptitious whisper in her ear as he led her behind the chairs.

"Can you pinch me if I fall asleep? We've been discussing sheep for four hours."

Flora didn't laugh; she was genuinely worried that she might fall asleep herself.

Fergus, who was seated beside Eamon, flashed his sister a smile and she returned it, successfully stifling a yawn.

Once Flora had taken the empty seat to Alistair's right, the king perked up, tapping the end of his inkpen on the table. He was not the only one infused with new energy at the presence of the queen. Viscount Dumar sat up a fraction straighter; Bann Trevelyan sucked in an inch of his gut; and even the happily married Prince Vael reached up to straighten his necklace of Chantry amulets.

"So, gentlemen," the sharp-eyed Eamon spoke up, having also noticed this sudden flurry of activity from the Marcher delegations. "Whose port will serve as the main entry-point for Fereldan goods into the Marches?"

The Bann Trevelyan, without batting an eyelid, doubled his previous offer. This nearly made Prince
Vael fall off his seat, but the leader of Starkhaven immediately matched Trevelyan's offer, with the additional lure of low import taxes.

Flora gazed at them both, having absolutely no idea what either man was talking about. She was brooding on the waste channel running into the alienage's main water supply; immediately making the connection between the tainted water and the prevalence of disease within the crumbling walls of the city elves' home.

Absently, she let her gold-flecked gaze sweep over the balding Viscount Dumar. The leader of Kirkwall swallowed – he was sure to get into trouble with the Chantry for over-committing the city's finances – but gamely put an equally generous offer forward.

Ultimately, it was Bann Trevelyan who emerged the winner. Secretaries duly wrote up the contracts and brought them forward for him to ratify with his seal. With a triumphant smile, the bann stamped down his insignia and leaned back in his chair, fingers steepled beneath his chin.

"Ostwick will be delighted to strengthen our trade links with Ferelden," he said, smugly. "I look forward to a long and mutually fruitful relationship between our families."

Alistair let out a low exhalation of relief, delighted that the meeting was finally over. Once the Marcher lords had gathered their retainers and taken their leave, he wrapped an arm around a yawning Flora's shoulders and kissed her on the cheek.

"Thank you for coming," Eamon said to Flora, smiling at her as he rose to his feet. "As I suspected, it did make a difference in the negotiations, having a hero of the realm present."

Teagan laughed, shooting a wry look down at his elder brother.

"And it helps that the hero of the realm is also a comely lass," he added, stretching limbs stiff from sitting in the same chair for hours. "The meeting might have been over in an hour if you'd been there from the beginning, Flora."

Flora shot Teagan a slightly anxious glance – unsure whether he was reprimanding her - and the bann let out a reassuring chuckle.

"I'm only jesting, poppet. You'll have to let us know how your Gwaren committee went over dinner."

Dinner was served in the great hall, which had been almost entirely returned to normal after the previous day's festivities. The only vestiges of the wedding celebration were the strands of laurel draped from hanging candelabras, too high to be retrieved easily.

Rather than use the top table, with its one-sided chair placement and grandiose thrones; they sat gathered around one of the lower tables. As well as the members of the king's council, Leliana had emerged from the Chantry to join them. She had spent much of the day kneeling in prayer, giving thanks to the Maker for yesterday's success.

Flora, sitting at Alistair's right, was struggling not to fall asleep. She had barely said two words throughout the first course of vegetable stew; content to listen to the lively conversation between Fergus and Teagan. They were engaged in friendly banter on which horses were the most reliable in battle – the teyrn had just jovially accused the bann of a lack of patriotism for his preference of Marcher steeds.
Beside her, Alistair was forking up mouthfuls of stew and occasionally contributing to the discussion – he had worked in a stable and had good knowledge of horses. One of his hands rested on Flora's thigh beneath the table, his thumb running back and forth absentmindedly across the calfskin breeches.

As the second course – roasted beef with broad beans – was delivered by taciturn servants, Eamon filled in Leliana on the outcome of the meeting with the Marcher lords. With each day that passed, he grew more impressed with the bard's astute understanding of political machinations – the arl was certain that she had a great career in some capacity ahead of her; and he was determined that this talent should be reserved to benefit Ferelden as opposed to Orlais.

"Flo, look at that!"

Flora blinked – she had been about to fall asleep in her bowl of half-eaten vegetable stew – and focused on Alistair's pointed finger. Instead of a plate of roasted beef, she had been presented with a dish full of cut-up raw turnip, potato and cauliflower. Each piece was carved into the shape of a flower – the distinctive, elongated petals of Andraste's Grace.

"How charming!" cooed Leliana from further down the table, her pale blue eyes shining in delight. "What a creative idea. In Val Royeaux, our pastry-chefs often carve animals and flowers from fruit. I once knew a duchess who presented an entire menagerie of creatures at her spring banquet."

Flora knew that the carved flowers were a silent thank-you from the kitchen staff, for the morning's gift of the wedding dress; but was too sleepy to explain such to the others. Instead, she ate each flower one at a time, listening to Leliana tell increasingly outrageous stories from the same duchess' banquet.

"And then the bard took off his mask and revealed himself to be her husband! Such a scandal, it's still being talked about to this day."

By the time that the final course was being brought out, the mead-flagon was making its fourth trip around the table. Alistair – slightly self-conscious after over-indulging on the wedding night – refrained from partaking in the sweet, honeyed liquor. Leonas also waved the flagon past; the army were practising formations on the Alamarri plains early the next morning and he desired an unclouded head.

When a dozing Flora nearly fell off her chair; Alistair reached sideways and lifted her bodily onto his knee.

"Come here, sweetheart."

The king wrapped an arm around her waist and drew her head against his shoulder, simultaneously forking a fruit-pastry into his mouth. Flora, who was exhausted, fell asleep within moments, her fingers anchoring themselves in the soft leather of his tunic.

"Eamon, have the details of the progress been finalised yet?" Alistair asked, brushing several crumbs of pastry from Flora's hair.

"Aye, son," the arl replied, having just finished planning the route with Teagan that morning. "It's a circular route; should take about seven weeks in total. You'll travel south on the West Road past South Reach, down as far as Lothering to check on the rebuilding efforts there. Then it'll be west across to Lake Calenhad."

"We'll be following the River Dane," interjected Teagan, taking a long swig of ale. "North to the
Circle and West Hill. Then east along the northern coast – via Herring – and Highever. There'll be a stop in Amaranthine too, before returning to Denerim.

It was a testament to the depth of Flora's slumber that not even the mention of her beloved hometown could provoke a reaction. Alistair pressed his lips to her cheek affectionately, brushing the hair away from her ear.

"Seven weeks," he repeated, attempting the calculations in his head. "How many months will that be for Flo?"

"Just over eight months," Leliana replied, having already worked it out. "But the roads are well maintained – those damaged during the Blight have been repaired over the past few weeks – and your pace will be slow."

"I could always have her in Highever with me while you're travelling," Fergus offered, already knowing what the answer would be.

Alistair gave a quick, flat shake of the head; his jaw stiffening as his arm tightened around his snoring wife's waist.

"I won't be parted from her, especially not with another Howe on the loose. If we need to cut the progress short, we'll just pick it up again after she has the baby. Who's coming?"


Alistair nodded, his brow furrowed in thought.

"Well, that all sounds fine. I'm going to take Flo upstairs now, she's knackered."

Flora woke up as she was being carried en route to the Royal bedchamber; suspended in Alistair's arms with her head resting against his shoulder. They were nearing the Calenhad stained glass window, and the sound of the king's footsteps echoed loud on the flagstones. The carpets and rugs had been taken up for their annual repairing; fresh rushes were strewn in their place.

Her best friend was humming a familiar tune under his breath. Flora listened for a few moments and then nudged her face into his shoulder.

"Ah, I know that," she mumbled, rubbing her fingers into her eyes. "That's *Bones in the Sand!*"

Alistair grinned and gave a nod of confirmation, shifting her up higher against his chest.

"It's actually quite a nice little tune," he admitted, cheerfully. "Almost as catchy as *Two Ten Tonne Kegs.*"

"You never said that after the many times I've sung it on our travels!" Flora retorted, slightly indignant.

Alistair laughed, not willing to explain to Flora that her tuneless, ear-bleeding rendition sounded nothing like the authentic song. Ducking, he nuzzled his face against her hairline to kiss her forehead; then stopped abruptly in the centre of the hallway. The humour crashed out of his face, to be replaced with a quiet, alert focus.

Without a word, Alistair lowered her carefully to the flagstones. Flora peered up at him in confusion, tilting her head as he reached out to brush the hair away from her face.
Oh, I forgot to tell him!

Oh, dear.

Alistair's gaze fell on the scab to the right of Flora's temple, a half-inch long cut surrounded by a soft, purple bruise. It had been hidden by her hair during both the meeting and the dinner; but now was uncovered in all its dubious glory. The king inhaled unsteadily, his brow creasing into deep lines of dismay.

"My love," he murmured, the concern raw in his words. "What happened?"

Flora grimaced, shifting her body onto her strong leg while weighing up her options; aware that Anora Mac Tir's future depended on how she phrased her next few sentences.

"I went to see Anora," she started carefully, then flinched as Alistair drew in a sharp, shocked breath.

"Anora? Anora did this?"

"No! Well, yes, but – she threw something and my head – got in the way- "

"Anora Mac Tir?"

"Yes, but it was an accident!"

Alistair exhaled for several long moments, a myriad of emotions passing over his face. Finally, a cold and uncharacteristic anger settled on his handsome features; the usual warmth and humour entirely absent from the hazel eyes.

"Right."

He turned abruptly on his heel and began to stride down the corridor the way that they had come; in the direction of the newest wing of the palace, and the Mac Tir quarters.

Chapter End Notes

OOC Author Note: Uh oh, lol! It's interesting that Flora doesn't even attempt to make up a convenient lie with regard to the origin of her cut – to do so would be more compassionate towards Anora, but she's made an internal promise to herself never to lie to Alistair again (after lying by omission about the baby during the Blight).

You're right Eamon, Leliana definitely has a high powered career ahead of her, as scary spy master (mistress?) of the Inquisition!

Ooh, the mention of Bones in the Sand reminded me of a PM; I totally forgot to mention it here! The person actually made a connection that I was wondering if anyone had spotted! Flora's voice has three qualities that I refer to a lot – she has the accent of a northerner, she sounds like a peasant – and it also has a slightly hoarse, husky timbre. The person who PMed me actually put two and two together – that Flora's throat has been damaged from the constant exhaling of magic (much like her hands used to get damaged when she healed too much). Or maybe I did explain that in an OOC note from
the original story, lol. I can't remember!
Flora pulled at her own face in horror for a few moments, then took a deep breath and started to make her way after her angry husband. Her knee was shrieking in angry protest; she could feel the strapping unravel with every step that she took along the long corridor.

This is your fault, Flora! You should have realised that going to see Anora was a bad idea.

No, it's not my fault. I was trying to be kind.

Would he execute her just for throwing something in my general direction? Surely not!

Eventually, out of breath and exhausted, Flora made it back down into the gloomy entrance hall. The hearths were only half-lit to save fuel; the majority of the palace had now settled down for the night.

I don't think he would execute her, but... he can be irrational when it comes to me.

Gritting her teeth, she looked from left to right, trying to recall the way to the newest wing of the castle, where the Mac Tir quarters were located. Although Flora had been there that very morning, the palace looked different at night; unfamiliar and shrouded in shadow. Suits of armour threw strange shapes across the flagstones, and archways led into expanses of darkness instead of recognisable passageways.

After an accidental ten-minute detour into the castle armoury, Flora managed to get herself back on track. She limped down yet another stone passageway, no longer caring who saw her physical shortcomings. Her head swivelled from side to side as she searched in vain for the statue of King Vanedrin Therin that marked the entrance to the new wing.

Her knee trembled suddenly beneath her and she stumbled, one hand shooting out to clutch at the dusty wall. Feeling her heartbeat surge forward in a panicky rush, Flora took a deep breath and forced herself to pause for a moment; leaning back against a stone archway and exhaling.

Just then, she heard raised and familiar voices beyond the bend in the corridor.

"Alistair, calm down!"

"Uncle, she threw something- "

"Then let's sit and you can explain what happened to me."

"That Mac Tir harpy threw something at my wife! My child-bearing wife. I'm going to- "

Flora took a deep breath and lifted her chin, bullying her protesting limb into compliance.

When she rounded the corner, a flushed Alistair was pacing the narrow span of the corridor, gesticulating angrily towards a grimacing Teagan. The bann of Rainesfere had his hands out in entreaty, and was clearly attempting to calm down the furious king.

"Flora," Teagan said in relief on seeing her. "What in the void happened earlier?"

"Eehh- ow."
As Flora came to a halt with a wince of pain, the younger Guerrin stepped forward and reached out to move her hair aside, eyeing the swollen bruise on her forehead.

"What is Anora thinking?" he murmured, almost to himself. "The self-controlled woman I once knew would never have struck out in anger, especially not at a defenceless girl."

"She's clearly deranged," Alistair retorted, edgy as an untamed colt. "She can't handle the fact that she's no longer in power."

Teagan sighed, chucking Flora gently under the chin before withdrawing his hand.

"It's a sad situation all round. Before she let her father take control, she'd done a decent job of governing the country in Cailan's stead. I had no idea she had such a capacity for bitterness."

Alistair's anger flared red and hot once again, and he turned on his heel towards the Mac Tir corridor.

"Anora needs to know that she's not above the law," he snarled over his shoulder as he strode off. "If a peasant on the street threw anything at Flora, he'd be in the stocks for a week – at least. Why should a former queen have clemency?"

Flora, horrified at how her well-intentioned idea of involving Anora in the Gwaren restoration committee had gone awry, took a single step after him. Without warning, her knee buckled beneath her and she crumpled onto the flagstones, landing with a bump on her rear. Teagan, whose quick grab had slowed her descent, immediately crouched down beside her.

"Alistair!" he barked down the corridor, harsher than Flora had ever heard him. "Attend to your wife!"

Alistair stopped abruptly a dozen yards away, turning on his heel. Seeing Flora sitting miserably on the tiles, he blanched; his pupils constricting in alarm. He covered the space between them in a handful of strides, dropping to his knees beside her.

"Sweetheart," he breathed, stroking the hair away from her sweaty forehead with trembling fingers. "My love. What's wrong? Is it- is it the baby?"

"No, the baby is fine. But my knee really hurts," she replied miserably, furious with herself for letting such weakness show. "I think I walked on it too much."

Alistair reached down to roll the leg of Flora's breeches over her knee, inhaling sharply at the sight of the reddened, inflamed joint.

"Ah, love," he said, immediately remorseful. "And I made you chase all the way down here after me. Maker's Breath, I'm such an idiot!"

Teagan, who had several decades of experience working with horses, appraised the swollen limb with a practised eye. Although he was no healer, he had treated dozens of lame steeds for similar ailments.

"Right," the bann said, taking charge. "I'm going to fetch a balm from the stables that I think will ease the swelling. Alistair, take her back up to the bedchamber and I'll meet you there. You can deal with Anora tomorrow."

Once you've calmed down, Teagan thought to himself, rising to his feet with a grunt.

With all thoughts of Anora temporarily purged from his mind, Alistair carried his wife back along the
labyrinthine passageways of the Royal Palace. A sour combination of guilt and worry mingled in the pit of his stomach, until he felt vaguely sick. Flora, who was increasingly blaming herself for her impulsive foray to see the old Queen, was equally quiet. She clutched Alistair's shoulder and felt him brush a kiss against her ear, his grip on her tightening.

Once they were back in the Royal Bedchamber, Alistair lowered Flora gently onto the bed; crossing the flagstones to stoke up the hearth. Summer nights in Ferelden were usually chilly, and the evening had also been preceded by a damp and drizzly day.

Alistair returned to Flora's side as the flames feasted upon the sweet-scented cedar logs, his face still creased with worry. Removing the golden band from his own head and the circlet from her hair, he placed them atop the dresser; pressing yet another kiss to her forehead as he did so.

Flora wiped her nose unceremoniously on her sleeve, patting at the dried tears on her cheeks. As Alistair methodically removed her boots, breeches and tunic; the sight of a bottle of apple-water prompted a memory to surface in her mind.

"Alistair?"

"My love?" he replied immediately, returning from the dresser with her striped pyjamas over his arm.

"Tomorrow, when we go down to the estuary to see off the Marcher lords-"

"If you go down, Lo. Depending on the state of that knee."

"It'll be fine," Flora said, shooting a stern glance down at the fiercely inflamed joint. "But, when we're down there, I want to show you something."

She lifted her arms to help him slide the pyjama jacket on over her shoulders, absentmindedly rolling up the sleeves.

"What do you want to show me, baby?" Alistair asked, fastening the buttons on the shirt before pecking her on the nose.

"Remember when we went into the alienage? How awful it was?"

"Mm."

"The waste-water channel from the city runs right into the alienage's water supply. It feeds into all their wells!"

Alistair's brow creased; with some difficulty he forced himself to temporarily stop worrying about his wife and focus on this new issue.

"Well, that doesn't seem right. No wonder the city elves are always getting ill."

"I know!" replied Flora earnestly, distracted from the throbbing of her knee. "It's not fair. But I think there's a way to fix it. In Herring, we have-"

Flora was cut off by the sound of the doors opening, and the guard announcing the Bann of Rainesfere.

Teagan entered a moment later, the door closing behind him as he approached the bed. He was clutching a small bronze tin in his hand, which gave off a pungent odour even with the lid tightly screwed on. Flora gazed at the tin with mild trepidation; unfamiliar with methods of healing that did
not involve her own strange, arcane exhalation.

The bann crouched down to inspect her swollen limb, the flesh red and inflamed to such an degree that it distorted the leather strapping.

"Right," he said, briskly. "This strapping needs to be cut away, and it's going to hurt."

"Whaaa- ?!"

Flora, who did not cope well with pain, stared at him in wide-eyed horror while Alistair grimaced in sympathy at her side.

"And your husband shouldn't be the one that hurts you," Teagan continued, averting his eyes from her alarm. "Alistair, do you have your shaving blade?"

Alistair nodded silently, rising to his feet to fetch it. Flora shot Teagan a look of wariness from beneath her eyelashes; the bann returned her a rueful smile as he reached out to take the slender blade.

"It's better that you be angry with me than with him. Right, poppet, lie back."

Flora obediently swivelled sideways, letting her bare legs rest across Teagan's thighs as her head settled in Alistair's lap. The king reached down to stroke her cheek with his left hand, his right hand already clenched in hers.

Teagan took a deep breath and summoned a straight-faced stoicism; trying to envision Flora's bare legs as the fetlocks of a limping mare. He lowered the blade and she flinched, yelping like a kicked Mabari.

"Ouch! Owww."

"Pet, I haven't even touched you yet. Alistair," the bann added in an undertone. "Can you distract her?"

Alistair nodded, forcing a smile as he gazed down at Flora's pale, unhappy face.

"Hey, Lo, did I ever tell you about the time I got into trouble at the monastery? Well, one of the times."

"At Revanloch?"

"No, at Bournshire, where I grew up."

"Oh!"

"It used to be so quiet within the cloisters – the opposite of life in Redcliff Castle. All you ever heard were whispered prayers, or verses of the Chant. Sometimes, I thought I'd go completely mad if I didn't hear something – anything – else."

Flora listened to him, biting her lip as Teagan lowered the blade to her knee; the bann carefully cutting away the strapping from the inflamed flesh. As she was about to look down Alistair caught her chin with a finger and gently tilted it back up, keeping her gaze on him.

"So, Lo, one morning – I must have been about fifteen – I couldn't take it anymore. I ran up and down the main corridor, just bellowing at the top of my lungs."
"What were – ouch – what were you shouting?"

"Oh, nothing that made sense – I just needed to hear something that wasn't dedicated to the Maker." Alistair smiled down at Flora, stroking a strand of hair away from her sweaty forehead. "Anyway, it was awful timing – the Grand Chantry Mother was visiting the monastery, along with the local Templar captain. I ran smack bang into them as I turned the corner, still bellowing utter nonsense."

"Ooh," breathed Flora, shifting slightly as Teagan pulled away the last of the leather strapping and dug his fingers into the pungent, unguent cream. "Did you – ow – did you get into trouble?"

"Oh, yes," Alistair confirmed, cheerfully. "Had to scrub all the flagstones in the Chantry – front to back – and recite benedictions for twelve hours. How about you, my love? Ever get into trouble at the Circle?"

Flora pulled a little face as the bann carefully applied the cream to the swollen joint.

"Aah – ouch – no, not really. I think my instructors were more disappointed in me for being so useless. I used to get thrown out of class all the time, but it was just because I couldn't do anything. Not because I was naughty. Like you! I always followed the rules and did what I was told."

Apart from sneaking up to the roof, she thought to herself, and stifled a snort. Or down to the kitchens after curfew.

Despite everything, Alistair laughed out loud; bowing his head to kiss her on the end of the nose.

"No, you've always been a good girl. Nothing wrong with that, sweetheart. I think rebelliousness is overrated, anyway."

"There we go, all done."

Both Alistair and Flora looked down at her knee with some surprise. The bann had wound a thin linen bandage over the unguent cream, which gave off an unpleasant tar-like scent but had a pleasant cooling sensation. The pain in the joint was quickly overtaken by a gentle numbness, and the swelling seemed reduced mere minutes after the cream's application.

"Oh," breathed Flora in astonishment, staring down at her bandaged knee. "That feels so much better. What is it?"

Having once relied on the arcane as the source of her healing, she was fascinated by these more prosaic – but effective - methods of soothing pain.

"Embrium flower, mixed with coal tar," Teagan explained, screwing the lid back onto the pot and placing it to one side. "Got the formula from Ansburg. The stable-master there swore it could make any lame horse sound overnight."

"Well, this lame horse is very grateful," Flora replied earnestly, sitting upright to put an arm around Teagan's neck and press an impulsive kiss to his cheek. "Thank you."

"Thank you, uncle," repeated Alistair, exhaling in slight relief as he eyed the neatly bandaged joint. Teagan let out a little grunt of acknowledgement, hoping that the flush hadn't extended above his collar. Patting Flora's good knee in what he hoped was a familial, avuncular manner; he gently moved her legs from his lap and rose to his feet.

"I suggest you both get some rest," he said, slightly gruffly. "Goodnight."
"Night, uncle," Alistair said immediately, as Flora yawned. "Thank you, again."

Once Teagan had left Alistair changed swiftly into his sleep trousers, blowing out all the candles until the room was illuminated solely by the soft, umber glow from the hearth. Padding barefoot across the chamber, he was about to close the shutters; when Flora's voice wended its way through the darkness.

"Can you leave them open? I like seeing the sky."

Alistair did as she requested, returning to the bed and clambering beneath the blankets with a yawn. He held his arm up to allow Flora to curl herself into the crook of his shoulder; the two settling into the position that they had first begun sleeping in long before they had even shared a kiss.

"How's the knee?" he said into her hair, fingers wandering in idle patterns up and down her arm.

"Mm, I can't feel it. Better," Flora replied, yawning and turning her face against the taut muscle of his chest.

Alistair nodded, gratified. The baby shifted inside Flora's stomach and she reached for his wrist, guiding his hand so that he could feel the fidgety movements of their child. He stroked his fingers over the ripe curve for several minutes, feeling the firm line of the baby's back as it changed position. Feeling the pressure of its father's hand, the baby nudged back against his palm and Alistair swallowed; tears suddenly prickling in the corners of his eyes.

_I'll never stop being amazed by this_, he thought wonderingly, and understood Anora's bitterness a little more.

"Sweetheart, promise me that you won't see Anora alone in the future," he said, suddenly. "It doesn't have to be me that accompanies you, but... as long as it's not just _you_ on your own. I know she's got cause to be upset, but I can't risk your safety."

Flora felt a wave of relief wash over her, some of the worry from earlier dissipating. Now that the initial anger had faded, Alistair sounded far more reasonable; it no longer appeared as though Anora would end up in the stocks or on the block.

"I promise," she said, earnest and immediate.

Alistair nodded, turning his head to gaze towards the window. The sky was framed by the opened shutters, a rich, dark expanse studded with bright, pinpricked stars. A moment later, he realised that a constellation was floating in the atmospheric miasma above the estuary; squinting slightly, he tried to connect the stars into a recognisable form.

"It's To-oth," said Flora, the word elongated by a yawn. "Toth. We used to call it the _oyster and pearl_, but I think it's meant to be a man on fire. Or something."

Flora's Herring-father had known each constellation by heart and had taught them to her; she did not remember the more complex ones, but this was a simple one to recall.

"I prefer the _oyster and pearl_," Alistair murmured, kissing the pink shell of her ear. "No burning alive for me, thanks."

Flora smiled, turning her face from the window and pressing it against her former brother-warden, now-husband's sinewy clavicle. Alistair let his mouth linger by her neck; brushing his lips gently over the skin in a slow meander towards her throat.
"I haven't forgotten about returning the favour from earlier," he said, thickly. "As soon as your knee feels better, I'm going to kneel before you."

Flora stifled a giggle against his shoulder, feeling a flush erupt on her cheeks.

"Ooh!"

"Well, that sounded a lot more suave in my head than it did out loud," Alistair admitted, cheerfully. "But the intention was there."

"Mm. Night, night, husband."

"Goodnight, sweet wife."

Chapter End Notes

OOC Author Note: Lol leave the pervert come-ons to Zevran, Alistair!

Flora really needs to understand what her physical limitations are, haha. In this single day, she's been down to the Landsmeet chamber for Oghren's Joining, over to her new garden, back up to the Royal bedchamber to fetch the dress, down to the palace kitchens, all the way into Denerim for the Gwaren meeting, back up to the palace, into the trade meeting, then across to the great hall for dinner… lol it's a lot! No wonder she fucked up her knee!

Incidentally, she couldn't heal her weak knee in The Lion and the Light because she actually mended it incorrectly during the post-Ostagar bewilderment; the only time she's messed up her healing. She literally grew the bone back incorrectly! I did think about having her fix it during the original story – all it would take is for the kneecap to be broken again (ouch) and then she could heal it properly. But I actually like her having this physical limitation, I can't quite put my finger on why! I like having limitations on characters, I suppose.
The next morning, Flora's swollen knee-joint had reduced in both size and redness; enough to wind a new leather strap around it with only a little discomfort. Alistair, who still felt guilty over yesterday's over-exertions, was determined to keep a closer eye on his wife. Their first commitment of the day was down at the estuary, formally bidding their new Marcher trade partners farewell as the lords took advantage of the early tide.

It was an overcast, yet fiercely humid mid-Solace morning. A thin veil of cloud seemed to keep heat trapped between the heavens and the city, the muted sunlight bestowing a milky cast over the clear, green water of the estuary. The seagulls took advantage of the rising thermals, swooping down to harass fishing boats and street traders with defiant insolence.

The Denerim docks ran the full length of the estuary, their purpose changing the further inland they reached. The fishing wharfs were located upriver, near where the seawater mingled with the fresh; this was where the refugees had once gathered, and where the Pearl was located. The mooring-place of the tall ships was towards the coast, where the mouth of the estuary began to widen into the ocean. Still protected from the turbulence of the open sea, there was more room along this stretch of water to anchor the brigs, barques and brigantines of the nobility; as well as the wide-bellied barges of the merchant ships.

Despite their rivalries, the three Marcher lords had been forced to anchor their vessels alongside one another. Due to their close proximity to Ferelden, they had left their arrival late; and thus had less choice of mooring points. For the first – and possibly last - time, the red and black of Starkhaven flew alongside the gold and black of Kirkwall, and the green and silver of Ostwick.

The nobility of the Landsmeet, along with several of Flora's companions, had accompanied the Marcher lords down to the docks to see them off. They were gathered near the harbour-master's office, a two-storey wooden building surrounded by a lawn of dried grass, and several anaemic trees. The king and queen – he clad in Theirin crimson, she in Cousland navy - had just relayed their best wishes for favourable winds.

Although Flora could not read the horizons as fluently as her Herring-dad; nobody growing up in a fishing village was ignorant of the portents of the heavens.

"The sky looks mild enough," she told the Viscount Dumar solemnly, casting an eye upwards. "There's no storm in those clouds. Maybe a bit of rain."

The Viscount shot her a slightly odd look – preoccupied with troubles in his own city, he was not entirely aware of the queen's unconventional upbringing.

"May the Maker watch over your voyage," Eamon interjected smoothly, inclining his head towards bann, Viscount and prince in turn. "And I look forward to our resumed correspondence."

The Marcher lords repeated the sentiment, bowing once more towards king and queen.

"Your majesties!"

"Have a good journey," Alistair added amiably, shielding his eyes against the soft glare of the sun. "Watch out for sea monsters!"
This last comment was added in an undertone as the Marcher men turned to gather their families and retainers, the mass of mingled colours dividing into three separate retinues.

Meanwhile, Zevran had been unsuccessfully flirting with Bann Trevelyan's daughter. Instead of responding to the elf's charm, Beatrix Trevelyan had clutched her Chantry pendants and raised her eyes to the heavens, as though pleading with the Maker to rescue her from such unwanted attentions.

As the three groups began to file towards their separate ships, the elf wandered disconsolately back to the Fereldan contingent; a frown embedded across his rich, tan features.

"I think I'm losing my touch," he complained, directing his petulance towards Leliana, Alistair and Flora. "She was utterly impervious to my substantial charm. It is both confusing, and deeply displeasing."

Leliana rolled her eyes, watching the Vael sons file onto the deck of their wide-bellied galleon.

"Alistair, mon chéri, do you ever wonder what happened to King Maric?"

Alistair let out a little grunt, scratching the back of his head. The sailors were calling out to one another now, swarming over the rigging like flies; loosing the ties that bundled the great sails to the mast. With a sigh of canvas the sails unfurled, their expanding billow immediately checked by tautened ropes. More sailors were hauling up the anchor, sweating and cursing as they shoved the windlass round.

"Lost in a storm at sea, five… six years ago now? I remember overhearing some Templars talk about it at the monastery."

"Do you think he could still be alive?" the bard asked, delicately mopping a bead of sweat from her forehead with a handkerchief. "Florence has mentioned that the fishing villages occasionally salvaged living souls from shipwrecks. Sometimes they'd wash up with no memory of who they were before the storm took them."

Alistair gave a shrug, watching the sails of the Starkhaven ship catch the wind. With a laborious creak of salt-eroded wood, the barnacle-encrusted keel inched away from the harbour wall and began to pull gently out into the centre of the estuary. A flotilla of small fishing boats bobbed to one side; pausing their own progress to let the larger ship through.

"Well, maybe. But it makes no difference whether he's a- a skeleton at the bottom of the Waking Sea, or… an amnesiac blacksmith in Herring. Either way, he's not coming back."

Flora, who had been watching the tall ships with her mouth open, rotated her head instinctively at the mention of her home.

"Eh?"

Alistair leaned down and kissed the top of her skull, directing his lips within the gilded garland. She smiled up at him, cheeks flushed from the combination of leather breeches and her own unbalanced hormones.

Beside them, Zevran was still bemoaning the failure of his flirtation; a touch melodramatically.

"What other tricks do I have up my sleeve, apart from witty banter, killing and love-making?"

"Certainly not lock-picking," muttered Alistair, recalling a certain sealed door in the Temple of Sacred Ashes.
"I cannot afford to lose one of these three," continued the elf, his tattooed fingers skittering compulsively across the hilt of his blade. "They define me, Zevran; as much as Leliana's devotion and daggers define her."

Flora peeled her attention from the diminishing stern of the Trevelyan ship; touching her finger to Zevran's wrist to gain his attention.

"Your tricks number more than three," she breathed, letting her gaze slip sideways to settle on Zevran's face. "And you've not lost any of them."

"That Trevelyan girl has the air of a Chantry sister in the making," added Alistair, helpfully. "I wouldn't feel too bad that your seduction tactics failed."

"I have cajoled Chantry sisters to break their vows of chastity before," Zevran retorted, then relented a fraction. "Ah, but youth can be so stubborn. I prefer my religious women a little more seasoned. After years of a cold and lonely bed, many often desire a little… diversion."

He winked at Leliana, who sniffed and turned her nose up at him.

Flora, who detected a note of genuine melancholy behind the elf's glib remarks, twisted her head to look at him properly.

"That Bernard Trevelyan doesn't know what she's missing," she said, kindly. "It's her loss."

Alistair and Leliana convulsed into snickers at such a catastrophic warping of Beatrix Trevelyan's name. Zevran, on the other hand, appreciated the sentiment; flashing Flora a sly wink from the corner of his blackberry-dark eye.

"I long for the day when your husband permits me to show you the full range of my skills, mi sirenta," he purred, pleased at the rapid pinkening of her cheeks. "The Royal bedchamber will quake in its foundations, I promise you."

The three ships drifted further apart as they headed towards the mouth of the estuary, their sails full with a budding offshore breeze. At this distance only the colours tied to their masts distinguished them, the Vael ship rapidly striking out ahead of the other two. The flotilla of fishing boats - their path into the harbour now clear - limped into the estuary, their pace slowed by nets heavy with the morning's catch.

Eamon approached king and queen with Teagan in tow; trailing Redcliffe secretaries and guards like a mother hen with her chicks. The Chancellor had a sheaf of papers in hand, and his eyes were focused on Alistair.

"Alistair, I've some documents for you to read and put your name to. Sister Leliana, I'd appreciate you casting your Orlesian eye over this 'thank-you' letter from the grand duc."

The harbour-master promptly offered the use of his own quarters for the king to use. Flora was about to follow Alistair inside the lower office, when a hail caught her attention.

"Warden-Commander Cousland! Got yer message."

She startled, turning about her with wide eyes. For a handful of months, this had once been her most common form of address; yet she had not been referred to as such since the Blight had ended. It was also no longer true on both measures – she was no longer a Warden, nor the leader of their Order.

Who hasn't seen me since the final battle? Only they would use my old title.
The answer quickly became apparent when a stout dwarf with an ambitiously sculpted dark moustache made his way forwards, leaning heavily on a stick. Flora immediately recognised him as Oisín, the gifted engineer who had not only planned the series of ditches and bulwarks that had divided the charge of the Darkspawn across the Alamarri plains, but also designed the reinforcements that kept the Denerim city walls intact against the enemy's siege weaponry.

Oisín gave a hoarse laugh, waving a hand towards her as he limped closer.

"Oh, but I suppose it's Queen Florence nowadays. By the Stone! How in the Ancestor's name did you manage to hide that belly before the battle?"

Flora was delighted that the talented dwarven engineer was still in the city. She silently thanked the steward Guillaume for not only scribing her message that morning, but then passing it on through the relevant channels.

"A very tight bodice," she replied solemnly, and the dwarf gave a throaty laugh. "I'm glad you're still in Denerim. I wasn't sure if you'd left with the rest of the dwarves."

Oisín shook his head, the ends of his large brown moustache quivering as he gestured to his twisted knee.

"Got hit with an arrow – my fault, was too busy watchin' my trebuchet bolt take down an ogre - so I'm takin' it easy till it recovers. Was getting awful bored just sat on my arse; so I was happy to get your message."

Flora beamed, delighted.

"I want to show you something," she said, earnestly. "It's not far. Will your knee be alright?"

"Oh, aye," replied the sharp-eyed dwarf, noticing that Flora was favouring one leg over the other. "Will yours?"

"Mm, it'll be fine. It's just this way-"

"Flo? Where-"

Alistair, who had clearly been expecting his best friend to follow him inside the harbour-master's office, appeared at the entrance; his tall, bulky frame filling the doorway.

"I'm going to show the chief engineer something," Flora called across to her husband, watching his nostrils flare in alarm. "Just round the corner. Come and see once you're finished with your letters!"

Alistair ducked his head back within the harbour-master's office, his voice muffled as he spoke to those inside.

The next moment, Zevran and Teagan came out; accompanied by a half-dozen impassive Royal Guards.

"Where are we going, carina?" the elf enquired, shooting a curious glance down at the dwarf. "Ooh – are we going to the Pearl for a little afternoon delight while Alistair engages in boring paperwork? Ay mamí!"

"Yes," replied a deadpan Flora, rolling her eyes at him.

Turning her back on the estuary, she led the way down the docks, careful not to outpace the limping
dwarven engineer. The Royal Guard followed at a discreet distance – far enough not to impose, close enough to intervene at a moment's notice.

The seagulls arced and wheeled overhead, diving down towards where the fishermen were now unloading their catches at the far docks. No more refugees were left in this particular district of Denerim – they had either gathered sufficient coin to escape Ferelden aboard some merchant vessel, or joined one of the dozen restoration committees that had formed in recent weeks. Instead, the docks were slowly coming alive once again – the fishing vessels were supplying the markets with plentiful stock and the Pearl was doing a roaring business.

Flora, however, was not headed towards this bustling end of the docks. Once she had spotted the decrepit warehouses, she turned away from the waterside; heading down the narrow road between the two crumbling buildings. Teagan fell into step alongside her, gesturing down at her knee.

"How's it holding up today, poppet?"

"Oh! Much better. Thank you again for last night."

Flora smiled up at the bann as he grunted; averting his eyes quickly in a manner that he had started to adopt more frequently with her these days.

He's trying to copy Arl Leonas, she thought, slightly bemused. Arl Leonas grunts and doesn't quite look at me in the eye; he ruffles my hair instead, like a dad.

I wonder why Bann Teagan is trying to do the same?

Naturally, there was no explanatory response from her spirits – Flora gave an inward sigh – and so she pressed on, leading them further up between the abandoned warehouses. The high wall of the alienage soon rose up before them, the dirt-packed stones crumbling with age.

"Ah, not this odour again," Zevran murmured, plugging his nostrils with his fingers in preparation. "Ech!"

Moments later, the foul waft of the waste channel drifted towards them; the city's floating detritus carried on a leisurely current towards the fishing wharfs. The dwarven engineer let out a little grunt, rubbing at his streaming eyes. Even the Royal Guard appeared as though they wished they could hold their noses beneath their closed-face helmets.

"Bronto-humper, that's a foul stink!" Oisín complained, lip curling beneath the impressive moustache. Once he realised that they had come to a halt, the dwarf perched himself atop a nearby barrel; puffing slightly.

"Exactly, it's horrible," Flora agreed, wide-eyed. "And all the horrible, dirty water is leaking into the alienage's water supply. All this poison water is coming up in their wells and it's making them sick."

Teagan shot a quick glance sideways at Flora, then down at the alienage wall; eyeing the low iron grating that let in the water. His eyebrows rose as he saw Flora's point – if one bothered looking, it was quite obvious to see that the tainted water was leaking into the alienage's only supply.

"When I was a healer, I used to come down to the alienage in the evenings to offer my services. Remember, Bann Teagan? You came, sometimes," Flora breathed impassionedly, and the bann gave a small nod of confirmation. "There were so many people who had upset stomachs. At the time, people told me that it was because the city elves had weaker constitutions. But when the elves came down to the Alamarri plains to prepare for the battle, they stopped getting sick. It must have been the poison water in the alienage that made them ill!"
Oisín nodded; his interest piqued. The dwarf fiddled with the end of his oiled black moustache, watching Flora carefully as she shifted from foot to foot.

Seeing the dwarf's walking stick propped beside the barrel upon which he was perched, Flora reached out impulsively to grab it. Using the rounded wooden end, she marked out the basic outline of the district in the dirt; including the alienage wall, the estuary and the existing waste-water channel.

"This is the waste-water channel," she said, jabbing the end of the stick in her improvised map. "At the moment, it goes here – mixing with the alienage water supply – and then along here… and comes out here, near the Pearl."

Flora remembered the foul smell that had sometimes blown into the brothel when the wind turned; the madam would tut and hang up sprigs of lavender in the windows.

"So, what're you suggestin', lass? Sorry: your majesty," asked the dwarf, his eyes narrowed in thought.

Flora reached up to pull the crimson ribbon from her hair, letting the dark red strands tumble free of the ponytail. With some difficulty - considering the size of her stomach - she squatted inelegantly down and laid the ribbon out in a new course through her makeshift 'district'.

"In Herring, we have a waste-water channel that goes round the back of the blacksmith," she explained, pushing herself inelegantly to her feet. "It runs down the beach, beyond the tide-line."

Rotating on the spot, Flora lifted a finger to point behind her; her gaze passing straight through the abandoned warehouses to focus on the water beyond.

"The estuary is tidal," she said, earnestly. "Those Marcher ships just left on the tide. If Denerim's waste-water channel is rerouted down there – knocking down those old buildings – then the waste will be carried out by the tide. Rather than building up on the banks of the river further inland. And, that way, it won't mix with the alienage's water supply!"

Flora let out a slightly unsteady breath: she had not given such a monologue since speaking to the troops before the final battle. Turning suddenly anxious eyes on the dwarven engineer, she let her pointed finger drop.

"Do you – do you think it's possible?"

"Of course it's possible," replied Oisín, chuckling derisively at the idea that something could be beyond his engineering capability. "It ain't that complicated. Just got to work out where the tide reaches up to, so I know where to bring the new channel out."

Flora almost clapped her hands together in delight; then felt slightly self-conscious, and lowered her nail bitten palms to her thighs.

Zevran reached down to pick up the crimson ribbon, brushing the dirt from its silken length. The elf held it in his hands for a moment, and then smiled wistfully at her.

"Not just a pretty face then, eh?"

After the loss of her magical abilities, Flora had resigned herself to the gloomy fact that she would now be praised solely on the sum of her looks – which she had no control over, and thus took no pride in. At Zevran's comment, her stoic face broke into a delighted beam.
"Well, it's not my idea," she said, immediately trying to lessen her own contribution. "They do it in all the northern villages – use the tide to take away waste."

She then glanced over at Teagan, who had been silent throughout the duration of her explanation. To Flora's alarm, the bann was in the process of dragging a weary hand over his face.

When Teagan opened his eyes, Flora was hovering anxiously before him; her pale eyes huge and worried.

"Bann Teagan?" she asked, tentatively. "Don't you think it's a good idea?"

"No, petal- I mean, yes. I think it's an excellent idea." The bann hastened to reassure her, one hand half-lifting as though to touch her face. "It'll benefit Denerim twice over – stop the deposition of waste upriver, and reduce disease in the alienage, lessening the chance of city-wide epidemics."

"I'm glad," Flora replied, still a little worried. "You didn't look as though you thought it was excellent idea just then. Your face looked like you were having issues digesting your lunch."

"Ah – that wasn't at your idea, Flora. Forgive me… I'm just a foolish man in his middle years."

Unable to stop himself, the bann leaned forward and kissed her on the cheek. Flora tilted her head dutifully to receive it, smiling up at the younger Guerrin in slight bemusement.

"Alright," she said, eyes swivelling purposefully back towards Oisín. "I'll show you how we can find out where the tidal water starts."

She handed back the dwarf his stick, and headed back towards the abandoned warehouses; the Royal Guard immediately hurrying in her wake. Teagan looked after her with wistful and unguarded emotion; a rare lapse of control that was duly noted by the sharp-eyed elf.

"In Antiva, we have a saying," Zevran murmured, wryness cut through his tone. "'Cuanto más aguda es la belleza, más profundo es el corte.' To translate: the sharper the beauty, the deeper the cut. It means that the more beautiful a woman is, the more callous her character."

The elf let out a rueful little snort, watching Flora point out the abandoned warehouses to the dwaven engineer as they approached them.

"Wouldn't things be so much simpler if she were as cruel as that merciless face would suggest, hm?"

Chapter End Notes

OOC Author Note: Teagan's definitely trying to go the more familial, avuncular route with Flora, lol. Incidentally, the Spanish bit at the end is purely courtesy of Google translate because I know no one who speaks Spanish, so apologies for anything incorrect and feel free to advise me on any edits I need to make, hehehe. But Zevran does have a point - Flo has a deceptive major resting bitch face, just look at the title image for this story, lol. THOSE COLD EYES!

So in this post-Blight reconstruction of Ferelden, Flo isn't making grand speeches to armies or politicians anymore – she's proposing new methods of WASTE WATER
MANAGEMENT! Lol! Still, it's all part of her quest to fill the gaping void left by the departure of her spirits; by helping the most vulnerable people in the city in whatever capacity she has as queen.

Incidentally, the tainted water-link to disease thing in this chapter is inspired by 19th century doctor John Snow, who investigated the cholera outbreaks in East London. He proved (though some of the first methodological scientific investigation) that the cholera was caused by dirty water and not by miasma (bad smells), which was the most widely accepted theory of disease at the time. Unfortunately, nobody ended up believing him and he died in relative obscurity! It's actually a really interesting story, hehe.

Note the dual meaning of the chapter title! I almost called this "Planning The New Waste Water Channel", and then my husband was like yeah do you want to turn off your entire readership? He may have had a point, lol; anyway, I like Catching The Tide a lot better
Swimming And Scholarship

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Once Alistair had finally finished reading and signing the last of the documents, he put down the quill and rose immediately to his feet, turning towards the door. The sun was starting to burn through the veil of cloud, patches of dappled light motting the pale green surface of the estuary. Squinting against the sudden brightness, Alistair swivelled on the spot, looking around in vain for his wife.

"Over there!" Leliana breathed from behind him.

Following the line of the bard’s finger, the king noticed a clump of Royal Guard swarming like anxious beetles fifty yards further down the estuary; where the sharp drop of the dock ended and the muddy bank sloped gently down into the water. They did not appear to be swarming in panic, but merely in mild perplexion – as though not quite sure how to proceed.

As Alistair approached, he saw the familiar black-moustachioed dwarf from earlier, leaning heavily on a stick while scribbling some notes on a notepad. Zevran was perched on a large bollard, giggling to himself while clutching what appeared to be a pair of leather trousers and – incongruously – a crown. A pair of familiar boots rested on the ground at his side.

Alistair quickened his pace, striding over the tightly compressed earth towards where the Royal Guard were clumped. On noticing his arrival, they shifted their pikes quickly from hand to hand; their heavily-armoured captain hastening to explain.

"Your Majesty, we were none of us sure what would happen if we… fell over in the water. We didn't think we'd be able to get up again."

A thoroughly confused Alistair came to a halt at the top of the estuary bank, where the earth subsided gently downwards and segued into the sandy bottom of the estuary. Zevran waved tattooed fingers towards him in greeting, trying to stifle his giggles.

"This must be the first time that an elf has ever laid his hands on a piece of royal regalia, eh? Still, I am more interested in caressing mi florita's breeches. Still warm from those luscious thighs! I will dream happily tonight."

Alistair looked downwards into the estuary, his eyebrows rising into his gilded hairline. Flora was standing ten yards out from the shore, the water lapping up around her bare thighs. The ends of her loosened hair were trailing around her, like strands of floating, crimson seaweed. As he watched, Flora lowered her palms to the water and cupped a handful; bringing it to her nose and touching it with her tongue.

"No, still freshwater," she called to the dwarf, who made a quick mark on his notepad. "But it's not far off."

Alistair, gaping, noticed his uncle also standing in the water a short distance away, fully clothed and with his arms crossed. At the guards’ reluctance to submerge their plate armour in the estuary, Teagan had reluctantly chosen to accompany Flora into the water as a precaution. Several Rainesfere retainers were huddled on the shore, peering down at their hapless bann with wide eyes and trying not to snicker at his expression.

Flora, who was so absorbed in her task that she had not noticed her best friend standing on the bank,
shuffled another few metres eastwards; towards where the estuary opened out into the great maw of the Amaranthine Ocean. This time, when she cupped a handful of water and touched her tongue to it, she beamed and waved at the dwarf.

"Saltwater. This is the tidal flow! Look, here-"

She bent forwards – Leliana moaned under her breath as the sleeve of the delicate lambs' wool tunic was submerged – and retrieved a handful of seaweed from the sandy floor. The clump of marine vegetation had clearly been deposited there by the tide, and Flora inhaled its scent in delight.

"Look, Bann Teagan," she enthused, swivelling in the water and showing him the handful of dark green kelp. "In Herring, we call this bladder wrack. You can dry it out and EAT it! It's very delicious and nutritious."

Thigh-deep in water, Teagan let out a little grunt and eyed the seaweed suspiciously.

"It doesn't look that appetising to me, poppet. I think I'll stick to beef and potatoes."

The habits of a lifetime were hard to forget; Flora shoved the clump of kelp surreptitiously down the front of her tunic.

*Ooh, my breasts can now be used as a shelf,* she thought, with Herring practicality. *That's good to know. Very useful.*

The little creature responsible for her bosom's augmentation yawned and woke up, kicking both feet enthusiastically into it's mother's stomach. Flora peered down at her belly for a moment, and then gave it a little pat of greeting.

"Your first swim, tadpole," she said, out loud. "I hope you're enjoying it."

Looking up, she saw Alistair shifting from foot to foot on the shore. Her best friend was wide-eyed and twitching with alarm.

"Flo, are you… are you almost done?" he called, trying to keep the anxiety from his voice.

Flora nodded and began to wade her way towards the bank, delighting in the feel of sand between her toes.

*I missed this,* she realised, with a little pang. *The salt-water, the press of sand, the smell of seaweed."

As Flora approached the shore, an impatient Alistair came striding out to meet her; splashing through the shallows in his knee-high boots. Putting one arm around his best friend's waist – he did not trust the stability of the muddy sand – he guided her up onto the bank.

"Thanks, uncle," the king murmured in an underside to Teagan, who was bringing up the rear with water streaming from his saturated clothing.

The dripping bann issued a don't mention it grunt, removing one boot and tipping its salty contents out onto the earth.

Alistair guided Flora to sit on an iron mooring bollard, then crouched before her and put his hands on her wet, bare thighs. He gazed into her nonchalant eyes for a moment, and then let out an incongruous laugh.

"You're full of surprises, baby. Did you just fancy a swim, or…?"
"No!" Flora replied, indignantly. "I was carrying out an investigation."

"Into what, my love?"

"Into the salinity of the water."

"The what?"

"Saltiness!"

Flora looked sideways at the dwarf, who promptly rose to his feet and limped over to the king; presenting a clarified version of Flora's initial dirt sketch on his parchment-pad. Alistair returned upright and turned to face the dwarf, listening keenly. Eamon – casting a bemused look at his dripping younger brother – had just arrived at Leliana's side.

"I propose a new waste-water channel be built along here. " Oisín pointed a broad finger along the crudely marked roads. "And a holdin' area built where these old warehouses currently stand. The holdin' area will be released twice-daily into a channel that feeds into the tidal wash o' the estuary; carryin' the waste out to sea, where the foul miasmas won't bother you no more."

"I'll stop the waste building up around the jetties and fishing docks further inland," Flora added, earnestly. "And it'll stop the waste from mixing with the alienage water supply and turning it into poison."

Alistair looked at his former sister-warden, slightly astounded.

"Maker's Breath, Lo! Did you just come up with that?"

"No," she replied, immediately. "It's what they do in Herring, and Skingle, and lots of villages on the north coast. Let the tide take away the waste, rather than letting it build up round the houses."

The king nodded, then asked the dwarf the question that he had learnt was essential for any monarch to issue as soon as possible.

"And what would you charge for completing this work?"

Oisín thought for a moment, fiddling with the end of his moustache.

"I'll do this job on the house," he said at last, shrewdly. "It won't take long. If I can have the long-term contract for strengthenin' the city walls."

"Then half your workforce has to be hired from Denerim," countered Eamon, equally shrewd. "And materials from our quarries, not from Orzammar's mines."

"Done!" replied the dwarf, and then slapped his broad thigh in triumph. "You've got yourself a deal, King Alistair. I'll draw up some proper plans this afternoon and send 'em up to the palace this evenin'."

Flora felt a surge of triumph in her belly, and suddenly wished that she was still capable of jumping for joy. Instead, she wriggled around from her sitting position on the iron bollard and drummed her fingers on Alistair's hip; squirming gleefully on the spot.

_I did something to help. Something that will make the lives of people better._

_Without magic!_
Impulsively, Flora put her arms around Alistair's waist, inordinately grateful for his support. Ferelden's king dropped an affectionate hand to caress the back of his new queen's head, rubbing his thumb over the exposed curve of her ear.

"Alright then, sweetheart. Once you get your, ah, trousers back on, let's get back up to the castle. Eamon's given me the afternoon off, and I can't think of anyone I'd rather spend it with, than with my favourite person in all of Thedas."

"Who's that?" Flora breathed, surreptitiously admiring the thick muscle of Alistair's thigh beneath the leather.

"You, obviously."

"Meee!

Eamon was as good as his word, cancelling the meeting of the King's Council for the afternoon. The Chancellor – who would be acting as regent during Alistair's progress – needed to sort out correspondence with Redcliffe before becoming distracted by the wider affairs of the realm. Eamon also had long-term plans to make his younger brother the Arl of Redcliffe, since he personally would need to remain in Denerim to aid the still-inexperienced Alistair. He had not shared these plans with Teagan yet, resolving to share them with the bann once he had returned from the progress.

A grateful Alistair took Flora up to the palace archives, determined to work further with her on her literacy. He was unsure why his year-younger wife had so much trouble with her letters – even after eight months of his tutelage, she still had barely progressed beyond the basics – but he was not going to give up.

Although they could have retired to the Royal quarters, the king thought that being immersed in such a scholarly environment might have some beneficial effect. The palace archives were located in a wide tower on the north-eastern corner of the palace, in an impressive, lofty chamber that housed circular balconies on six different levels. Bookshelves and cabinets were crowded around the curved stone walls, organised in some obscure reference system that only the chief archivist fully understood. Desks and reading tables were scattered haphazardly on each level; a giant framed map of Denerim was located on the third balcony and an even larger one of Ferelden was located on the fifth. The entire space was lit by an iron shaft that hung from the ceiling, from which wreaths of candles extended at every level, like the spokes of a wheel.

The king of Ferelden was sitting on a curved window seat on the third level, leaning back against the frame with one knee bent casually upwards. His queen was settled against his chest, boots discarded on the floor and bare feet propped up on the opposite side of the window frame. She wore an expression of extreme focus; her gaze fixated on the manuscript in her hands.

"The- Red... Por- Porgy of... S- Se- slime-"

"Slime?"

Alistair peered over Flora's shoulder at the crumpled page. "Oh, Seleny. It's a city in Antiva, Zev has mentioned it before. Apparently it's got lots of statues. And bridges."

"And red porgies," Flora added, more interested in the fish.

"You're my red porgy," Alistair replied, nuzzling his face into her dishevelled hair to find the curve
Flora beamed, swivelling between his thighs so that he could kiss her. Alistair readily accepted her silent invitation and dropped his mouth to hers, his lips working warm and confident against her own. She let the manuscript of *Even More Exotic Fish of Thedas* fall from her lap; curling an arm about his neck and temporarily ceding ownership of her mouth to his desirous tongue. As they kissed with languid familiarity on the window bench, Alistair's fingers edged their way surreptitiously beneath the neckline of Flora's tunic.

The next moment, he let out a squawk of surprise; withdrawing rapidly and pulling something cold and wet from between her breasts. He flung the dark green clump to the flagstones in horror, eyes bulging.

"Aah! What the – Maker's Breath!"

"Oh," said Flora, in sudden understanding. "That's the *bladder wrack*.

"The what?!"

"Seaweed from the estuary. You can dry it out and eat it. It's nice!"

Alistair eyed the lumpen cluster of seaweed on the flagstones and thought that it looked like the most unappetising dish in Thedas.

"If you say so, my love," he murmured, turning her chin to face him once again. "Now, where were we?"

A short time later, Leliana came up in search of king and queen. The library was the last place that she had expected to find the former Wardens; but sure enough, they were both seated on a window bench on the third level of the archive tower.

Alistair was absorbed in an account of Ferelden's history during the Storm Age. He had first picked up the book out of a vague sense of obligation – to learn more about the heritage of the country he had inherited stewardship of – but had found himself reluctantly fascinated. He was currently reading on Warden-Commander Sophia Dryden's attempted rebellion against the throne; an event which he had heard Loghain snidely alluding to at Ostagar. When Alistair had asked Duncan – slightly shocked – *why* the Grey Wardens would want to rebel against the king, Duncan had merely smiled vaguely and promised to explain at a later date.

Flora was supposed to be practising her writing, but was instead gazing out of the window while chewing absentmindedly on the end of her ink-pen. She had relocated herself to sit on the opposite side of the bench, her feet in her husband's lap.

"Leliana," Alistair called, spotting the bard ascending a staircase below. "Did you know that the Couslands once plotted with the Wardens to overthrow King Arland Theirin? The Cousland teyrn was *executed* for his treachery!"

"Of course I knew that," Leliana replied with a little sniff, as she reached the third floor. "It's a fundamental part of Ferelden history."

Alistair reached down to touch Flora's bare foot as it rested on his thigh.

"My love," he murmured, lifting her slender leg by the ankle and holding it on his shoulder. "Your ancestors were *troublemakers*. Resisting Calenhad, rebelling with the Grey Wardens…!"
Flora, whose natural instinct was to be *obedient*, was caught between disapproval and a desire to defend her forefathers.

"Well," she said, trying not to lose her train of thought as he pressed a kiss to her toes. "Maybe *your* ancestors should have kept a closer eye on *my* ancestors. Made sure they weren't being… naughty."

"Well, better late than never," Alistair replied solemnly, letting the book slide from his hand and reaching out to draw her onto his thighs. "I'll *happily* keep a close eye on you now."

Forgetting about the ink-pen, Flora put her arms around his neck and embraced him enthusiastically.

Leliana decided to allow the couple a few moments more before recalling them to public obligation; reaching down to retrieve the parchment that had slipped from Flora's lap. The bard's brow furrowed as she read the three faltering sentences that Flora had managed to scribe over the course of an hour – each one barely legible.

"Alright, *amoureux*," the bard said at last, clearing her throat pointedly as Flora's fingers slid surreptitiously down Alistair's abdomen. "Your free time is over. You've got your first portrait sitting this evening."

Alistair let out a groan, sitting back against the window frame and putting a hand to his head.

"Ah, Maker's Breath! I forgot about that."

"*Portrait sitting?*" repeated Flora, in confusion. "What's that?"

Her best friend grimaced, reaching out to smooth down the rumpled strands of her hair.

"Sorry, sweetheart, I should've mentioned it earlier. We have to have a portrait painted to mark the coronation. It's going to hang in that long corridor near the meeting chambers."

Flora creased her forehead, recalling the passageway that Alistair was referring to. It was lined with a series of large oil on canvas paintings of previous Theirin monarchs; the three most recent being Moira, the Rebel Queen, Maric and a dark-haired woman that must have been Rowan Guerrin, and finally, Cailen looking fidgety beside Anora.

"Oh," she said, then realised that the ink-pen had exploded its contents down the front of her tunic. "Oh, do I need to change my top?"

Leliana let out a little tut, but shook her head.

"No, the artist will paint you in the garb you wore at the coronation. This sitting is to sketch out pose and *face* references."

Alistair groaned, stretching out cramped limbs as he rose reluctantly to his feet. He had seen portrait sittings before – Isolde Guerrin liked to get a new painting of herself done every year. This was a laborious process which involved a myriad of different outfits, the fencing off of whichever part of Redcliffe Castle she wanted to feature in the background, and the increased blood pressure of all in the vicinity. On one memorable occasion prior to her annual portrait sitting, Isolde had imported liberal amounts of Antivan pomegranate oil – she had heard that bathing in it would enhance one's youth and beauty. Unfortunately, the crate must have been dropped somewhere in transit between Rialto and Redcliffe. On being opened, the liquidous contents spilled across the flagstones in a vast, scented puddle. As Eamon had commented wryly, the great hall had smelt like an Antivan whorehouse for *weeks*. 
Even as Alistair grimaced in recollection, Flora caught his eye and smiled up at him; reaching out to anchor his fingers in hers. The king blinked, then grinned back down at her, squeezing her palm against his own.

"No matter how skilled the artist," he murmured, throatily. "They'll never be able to capture the beauty of your-"

"HURRY UP!" Leliana demanded, having already half-descended the stairs in an effort to move them along. "Everything is set up and waiting for you!"

"I was trying to be romantic," grumbled Alistair, as Flora snickered in juvenile fashion behind him. "There had better not be any pomegranate oil involved."

Chapter End Notes

OOC Author Note: The dwarven engineer definitely made Flora's crude design a lot better, haha! As you'd expect from a professional. I borrowed the bit about the waste water being released periodically into the tidal flow from the 1860s London sewer design, which released dirty water into the saltwater of the Thames, timed with the tide!

I mentioned this before in the original, but Flo's literacy is still poor because she's dyslexic – naturally a condition which is not really understood within the context of Ferelden, lol. She definitely has the capacity to improve, but needs pretty intensive tutelage to do so. Unfortunately, she's not hugely motivated in that regard XD
Unfortunately, the portrait sitting turned out to be a somewhat lengthy process. The artist – a Denerim native who had spent so long in Orlais that he no longer sounded Fereldan – had chosen to set up his easel on the Alamari balcony at the far end of the Landsmeet chamber. With the shutters drawn back, the muddied expanse of the plains stretched out for several miles; culminating in the low, rolling hills of the Bannorn. It was not the most attractive background for a royal portrait, but the Alamari plains themselves had been deemed as historically significant following the final battle.

Every hearth and candelabra in the Landsmeet chamber had been ignited to bolster the fading light; two braziers from the battlements had been brought down to provide additional illumination. Alistair was standing against the balcony, his hand on Flora's shoulder as she perched on a stool before him. The brush of the artist would transform stool into throne; day-clothes into ceremonial regalia; and the hearth-poker at Alistair's side would become an ornate silverite blade.

Leliana, who had an eye for the aesthetic, was hovering in the background; issuing a stream of instructions to the artist's assistant as he struggled to note them all down.

"My legs are falling asleep," Alistair hissed, without moving his head. "We've been here for two candles."

"Didn't you learn patience in the monastery?" Leliana called, lowering herself to a nearby bench before recalling yet another instruction that she needed to deliver to the beleaguered assistant.

"I'm sure they tried to teach it to me at some point," Alistair grumbled, then groaned under his breath as the faux-Orlesian artist meandered towards them once more. "Oh, here he comes again to grop[e] your face some more!"

Flora grimaced as the artist came to a halt before her, cooing something unintelligible in a mangled Val Royeaux dialect that made Leliana cringe. He reached out to frame her face with his fingers, turning her head from side to side and inspecting the finely-hewn angles.

"He's going to make you look like a goddess," Alistair muttered under his breath as the artist pranced back towards his easel without sparing the king a single glance. "Which is accurate, darling. But I'm going to look like a cave troll. He's barely bothered to look at me."

"Ooh, I want to look like a cave troll too," Flora said, enchanted at the prospect. "A cave troll in a dress."

Alistair grinned, ruffling her hair affectionately and then hastily flattening it once more after a glower from Leliana.

"Anyway, my love," he murmured in an undertone, trying not to move his mouth. "We need to think about the memorial to Duncan and the Grey Wardens."

Flora let out a strangled squawk of assent, unable to nod. Alistair continued, letting his thumb rub in slow circles over her shoulder blade.

"I don't know whether it's best to have one at Ostagar, or one here in Denerim. Or at Highever – I know he spent a lot of time there during his youth."

Flora bit her lip, anxiously. The more selfish part of her wanted the memorial to be located as close as possible; so she could go and pay proper and frequent homage to it. If it had been up to her, the
statue would be located within the Royal Palace itself.

"I think it should be where everyone can see it," she replied, at last. "So all of Ferelden knows about him and the rest of the Wardens. And their sacrifice."

*Even you, Warden Stene. I wish you were here to call me a one-trick pony again.*

*I'm not even a one-trick pony anymore! I'm a show pony.*

Alistair thought for a moment, brow creasing.

"There should be two memorials, then," he said, slowly. "A memorial at Ostagar to mark the loss of the Wardens. And one for Duncan, here in Denerim. With a proper inscription to explain who he was."

Unable to resist, Flora twisted her head and pressed her lips to Alistair's fingers as he rested them gently on her shoulder. At a reactionary squawk of protest from the artist, she returned to her original position, trying not to beam. Although Flora had known Duncan for only five weeks; the words that he had spoken to her were inscribed on the inside of her skull, as though carved there by some skilled engraver.

*In Rivain, we have mages who commune with the spirits as you do, young sister. They number few, and even fewer in Ferelden. I think you may be one, Flora.*

*You have a rare and precious gift. I would not trade your unique talent for all the conjured flame in Thedas.*

*Use it well, little sister!*

With his words, the Warden-Commander had transformed Flora from defective mage into *spirit healer*; the first person since she had been taken from Herring to truly understand and *appreciate* her utility. It had been a ground-breaking moment in Flora's life, and the foundation upon which she had forged much of her strength during the trials of recent months.

"It should be something *Warden-ish,*" she breathed, Duncan's low, faintly accented voice echoing between her ears. "Like… a griffon. With a ponytail and an earring like he used to wear!"

Alistair, assuming she was joking, snorted. When Flora fell into a sulky silence, he blinked; realising that she had been serious.

"Oh, baby, I'm sorry," he said, ducking quickly to kiss the top of her head. "I didn't realise that you were – anyway. I like the idea of the griffon, but nobody apart from us will know what the earring and ponytail means. They'll just assume that the griffon was… very fashionable."

Flora relented; seeing his point.

"Maybe we should have a shrine to Duncan in our bedroom instead," she wondered out loud, and Alistair gave a strangled cough.

"Ah, maybe." He hastily changed the subject. "Have you thought any more about names for the baby, sweetheart? We need something that'll strike fear into the hearts of the Orlesians, in case they ever entertain thoughts of invading again."

*"Stingray,"* Flora said, immediately. "For a boy or a girl."
Alistair abandoned any attempt to keep himself in the required pose; slumping back against the Alamarri balcony with a guffaw that reverberated to the rafters.

"Stingray?"

Flora beamed: she had not intended to make Alistair laugh, but found that she did not mind the outcome this time.

"King Stingray I would certainly strike fear into the hearts of the Orlesians," chimed in Leliana benevolently, from beside the confused artist.

Still chuckling to himself, Alistair sunk to his knees before Flora, encircling her belly with the span of his hands and pressing his lips to the wool-covered curve.

"I love our little Stingray," he breathed earnestly, raising green-flecked eyes above the apex of Flora's stomach. "And I love my best girl, who made me laugh during the worst days of the Blight, and still makes me laugh now."

That night, Alistair woke up from a nightmare so realistic that he could still taste the metallic tang of fear in his mouth as he sat bolt upright, staring mindlessly into the darkness. The bedchamber was veiled in shadow, lit only from its eastern face by the muted glow of the hearth. The room was scented with the gently burnt scent of cedarwood, which mingled not-unpleasantly with the salty air creeping in through the open window.

Alistair could not remember what had transpired in the Fade that had caused his heart to leap forward so erratically. He had a suspicion that it was one of the two subjects that fuelled the majority of his nightmares: either some haunting memory of Ostagar, or a macabre vision of harm befalling his former sister-warden.

Reflexively, he reached out beneath the furs and felt for his wife. There was a dent on the pillow beside him and a hollow in the mattress where her body had curled; yet the bed beside him was empty. With an irrational twist of alarm in his gut, Alistair pushed himself up against the cushions, squinting through the shadows.

Just then, the door opened a fraction and Flora sidled in, barefoot in her nightgown and clutching a candle in a holster. She smiled when she saw Alistair awake, the small flame bobbing in the gloom as she padded across the flagstones.

"This is the third time I've had to use the privy tonight," she whispered, rolling her eyes as she set the candle down on a low cabinet. "I think the baby's head is pressed against my bladder."

As Alistair set eyes on his wife, he suddenly – with a recoil of horror - recalled the subject of his nightmare. A choked sound of dismay escaped his throat, and Flora peered at him in alarm.

"Flo, I hit you!" Alistair breathed, a distinct tremor to his words as they filtered through the darkness.

"What?" Flora asked, confused. "When?"

She sat down on the edge of the bed, reaching over the mound of blankets and furs to touch Alistair's paling face.

"When we were fighting the blood mage in the warehouse," he muttered. "I- I punched you in the
face. I punched you, and you were *four months with child. Maker's Breath!*"

He passed a hand roughly over his face with a grimace of almost physical pain, bending double.

Flora stared at her best friend for several moments, his powerful frame wracked with the twin wolves of guilt and grief. She had no memory of the fight against the powerful maleficar; but had been regaled on its details by Wynne later the same day.

"Alistair," she said with Herring logicality, squinting through the gloom in an effort to see his face. "You were mind-controlled by a blood mage. It wasn't *you* that hit me. We've been over this before."

"I could have hurt the baby," Alistair breathed, clearly not listening to her. "I could have *killed* it, if I'd hit you anywhere else."

"It wasn't *you*," started Flora, then changed tactic. "Anyway, the baby was fine. It wasn't hurt at all."

She reached out to take his hand and placed it on the curve of her belly; the little creature obligingly gave a vigorous wriggle. Alistair inhaled unsteadily, sliding his hand between the buttons of her nightgown to caress the fleshy mound protectively. For a moment, Flora thought that he had calmed; then his face contorted once more.

"What kind of father am I?" the king asked her, tremulously. "One who endangers the life of his child?"

"Well, what kind of *mother* am I?" Flora countered fiercely, her pale, solemn eyes bright within the gloom. "I was *five* months with child when I led our armies against the Darkspawn. I felt the baby move the night before the *final battle*, and I still fought. I went to face the Archdemon convinced that we were both going to die."

Alistair was silent for a moment, the green flecks in his hazel eyes illuminated by the muted light of the hearth.

"But you did it because there was no alternative," he replied, quietly. "Denerim would have been overrun if the Archdemon hadn't been slain. We would all have died if you hadn't fought. You had no choice."

"And neither did *you*," Flora replied immediately, having bargained on Alistair reaching this conclusion. "You were mind-controlled. You had no choice, either."

Alistair stared at her for a moment, his mouth opening to offer a counter argument and then realising that there *was* none. Flora pressed her advantage, crawling over the blankets and clambering bodily into her husband's lap; wrapping her legs around his waist and her arms around his neck.

"I'm a Herring limpet," she said into his shoulder, the words muffled. "You'll never pry me off."

Alistair drew her tight against his chest, one hand coming up to cup the back of her head. He inhaled unsteadily, combing tender fingers through loose strands of dark red hair and thumbing the curve of her ear.

"If it were up to me, I'd never let you go," he replied, softly.

Weary from being woken three times already that night, Flora fell asleep on his chest within minutes. Alistair remained sitting upright against the cushions, holding his wife in his lap and stroking a hand determinedly up and down the line of her slender back.
And I'll never let anything hurt you again, he thought quietly to himself. I swear it.
Dealing With The Former Queen

Over a breakfast of herbed eggs and unleavened bread in the Royal bedchamber, Eamon briefed the
king on the day’s obligations. The majority of the afternoon would be spent in preparation for the
progress, which was scheduled to depart the next day. Alistair, Flora, Wynne, Teagan, Zevran and
an elite selection of Royal Guard would be embarking upon a two month long journey, which would
not see them return to the capital until the early autumn. Fergus had also loaned them several
Highever mabari to join the dogs from the palace kennels, as well as the use of his best knight, Ser
Gilmore.

"Do you want some eggs, Arl Eamon?" Flora offered the Chancellor amiably, as he paused for
breath.

"I've already broken my fast," murmured Eamon with some reluctance, trying not to eye the
steaming bowl on the table before him. "And Isolde has told me to watch my waistline."

"Go on," Alistair wheedled, nudging the bowl of eggs across the table towards the arl. "They're
delicious. Flo and I won't tell, we promise."

As Flora gave a solemn nod of confirmation, Eamon relented; forking a generous helping of
buttered, chive-sprinkled eggs onto a spare platter. Alistair poured his uncle a fresh tankard of ale as
Flora stifled a yawn, shifting on the chair beside him.

"So, preparations for the progress are happening this afternoon," the king repeated, tilting his head
absentmindedly towards a seagull's clarion call from the window. "And I'm going to go down to the
kennels and see the dogs. Fergus' bitch – Saela - whelped a litter yesterday evening. I want to choose
the strongest two pups for Flo; they'll be ready to leave their mother by the time we return to
Denerim."

Alistair reached over to pat Flora's knee, and she smiled at him with slight trepidation. Flora had not
had much experience with Mabari – nobody in Herring could either afford, or had any need for one,
and the Circle Tower had cats to keep the mice population under control. Jethro – Finian’s dog, who
had perished defending his unconscious master from the Darkspawn during the final battle – had
been friendly enough; but also had a tendency of barking loudly and putting his paws up on her
shoulders. Flora, who was on the short side, had found this a little unnerving.

Which is ridiculous, she thought sternly to herself. I'm a Ferelden native, descended from the oldest
Alamarri tribes. Mabari hounds are part of my ancestry.

Probably literally, if the rumours about my namesake, Teyrna Ragenhilda, were true. Ha! Haha.

Eamon finished forking down the last mouthful of eggs, casting a rueful eye down at his own
waistline.

"It feels as though I've put on a hundredweight since I've been in Denerim," he said, easing himself
back in his chair. "Too much ale and rich food. Perhaps Isolde has a point."

" Personally, I think it's a great improvement from when you were wasting away from the maleficar's
poison,” Alistair countered, and the arl gave a soft grunt of agreement.
Jowan, Flora thought to herself. *I'll have to light my candles tonight. I don't know when we'll next be in a Chantry.*

"What's planned for this morning?" Alistair asked, wiping his mouth with the napkin before tossing it onto the table. Wandering over to the mirror, he picked up the small shaving blade and inspected the rough stubble rising on his neck. "I have a feeling you're going to say *five hour meeting.* Say it quickly, it'll be less painful."

"No, not a meeting," replied Eamon, and then paused.

The hesitation in the arl's voice drew the attention of both king and queen. Alistair put down his shaving blade and turned around, eyebrows rising in silent query.

"Uncle?"

"The stonemasons' guild has finished a programme of repairs at Fort Drakon," the arl said, softly. "They've invited you both to come and see the work."

Alistair inhaled unsteadily, his gaze swivelling to meet Flora's solemn stare. From her face, it was clear that she was thinking along similar lines.

*I don't have any good memories from that place. First, Howe held me prisoner there for three days, and then…*

As shocking and unexpected as a traitor's blade, the Archdemon's fanged maw rose to the forefront of Flora's memory; clear as if she had seen it only the previous day.

*It carried its head low, like a snake; hooded eyes flickering and full of malice.*

Beside the mirror, Alistair had gone several shades paler, and Flora suddenly felt very sorry for him.

*I don't even remember killing the Archdemon on the rooftop. I remember creating my barrier, and letting my spirits in – then a black tide floods my mind, the sound of the Waking Sea in my ears.*

*Poor Alistair; his first memory of Fort Drakon is seeing me, seemingly Tranquil, docile in the arms of Arl Howe. His second memory is of me 'sacrificing' myself to the Archdemon on the rooftop. No wonder he doesn't want to go back there.*

"I can go and see the repair work," Flora said, impulsively. "I don't mind going, Arl Eamon. Alistair, you can stay here if you want."

Alistair shook his head, the corners of his mouth pulling tight with barely restrained emotion.

"No, my love," he replied quietly, turning back to the mirror and picking up the shaving blade with a trembling hand. "Of course I'm coming with you."

A moment later he let out a muffled curse, dropping the blade with a clatter onto the dresser as a bead of blood swelled on his jaw. Flora pushed herself upright, feeling the baby fidget within her belly as she went to Alistair's side. No longer able to heal her best friend's shaving nicks with a kiss from her parted lips, she instead licked her finger and pressed it against the cut. Alistair stared down at her with a myriad of emotions fighting for dominance within his green-speckled eyes.

"I'm still here," Flora whispered up at him, softly enough that her words did not reach Arl Eamon. "I'm still here, you're still here. That's what matters."
She withdrew her finger, her own pale grey eyes searching his face. Alistair took a deep, steadying breath; ducking to kiss her on the forehead.

"Right, so – Fort Drakon this morning," he said, turning back towards his uncle. "The fortress is a vital part of Denerim's defences; it's good to know that it's been restored."

Flora smiled at him surreptitiously, proud of her best friend's raised chin and stiffened shoulders. She knew that Alistair had his own version of deep breath, chin up, eyes straight, and that he was utilising it now.

"Good, I'll speak to the steward and get the horses prepared," replied Eamon. "Will you be ready to leave soon?"

"Yes," replied Alistair, and there was no tremor in his voice. "As soon as I've gone to see Anora Mac Tir."

Flora, who had just sat down on the bed to tighten the leather strap around her knee, looked up in alarm. She had naively assumed that Alistair had forgotten about the thrown-tankard incident from several days prior; the cut on her head was now merely a small scab resting atop a fading bruise.

However, it was now clear that Alistair had not forgotten – or forgiven – the contempt that Anora had shown to his wife. Instead, he had deliberately waited for the passage of a day to dull the sharp edge of his fury; the blind rage cooling into a more calculated anger.

As the king strode towards the newest section of the Royal Palace with his fingers grasped tightly around the hand of his queen, he went over - for a fifth time - the speech that he had planned the night before. Unlike Flora, who spoke best in bouts of spontaneity, Alistair felt more confident when he had had time to prepare his words in advance.

Flora, close at his side, was experiencing feelings of mild trepidation. She had not heard Alistair's meticulously planned speech, and was half-expecting the words off with her head! to emerge from her husband's mouth. As they turned onto the wide, sunlit corridor with the faded ochre and cream tapestries hanging from the wall, she tried to think of ways to save Anora's slender neck from the headsman's blade.

The Royal Guard posted outside the Mac Tir quarters gave a prompt salute; they had been anticipating the king's arrival. Alistair barely spared a glance for the desecrated Mac Tir dragon above the entrance, heading without pause towards the doors. The guards hastened to open them and Alistair strode through with eyes glinting like chips of bronze.

Flora followed him into the chamber, grimacing at the stagnant odour of mildew and rotten food. The room was in no better condition than it had been two days prior. The only significant difference was that now the bedsheets had been hung up over the grimy windows, shrouding the chamber in dull gloom. The lifeless hearth was filled with ashes and the sad remnants of Anora's royal gowns.

Anora herself was sitting at the end of the bed, clad in the same nightgown, her hair hanging in loose tendrils around her face. Her eyes were sunken, her skin greasy and mottled, and she looked far older than her three decades. Despite the fact that the woman had thrown a tankard towards her head the last time that they had come face to face, Flora suddenly felt desperately sorry for her.

Alistair paused for the briefest moment at the general disarray, then strode over to the windows and methodically yanked loose the bedsheets. Sunlight filtered in through the dirty glass, casting a mellow pallor over the chaos within. Anora flinched, putting up a hand reflexively to shield her eyes from the sudden brightness.
"I want to see that you understand what I'm saying," Alistair said over his shoulder, the clipped Theirin drawl shaping each word as it emerged. "So that there's no chance of confusion."

Anora looked at him, the resignation writ clear across her face. It was clear that she expected either the block or the stocks; at the very least, some manner of public humiliation as a consequence for her impulsive throw. Alistair gazed back at her, and Flora suddenly thought that she saw a shred of pity mingled within the cold, refined anger of his glare.

"I don't know whether you deliberately sought to hit my wife with that tankard, or whether you've just got poor aim," he started, with a faint vein of Marician menace. "I think it must be the latter, because you seemed to have missed a few important things recently. You know that the Blight is ended, don't you? That the Archdemon is nearly two months dead?"

Anora let her pointed chin drop forward a fraction; she was not ignorant of recent events. Alistair continued, his tone balancing on the line between anger that was controlled and anger that was not.

"And the person responsible for both of those feats is standing beside me. My wife will be named in the archives as the Hero of Ferelden; vanquisher of the Fifth Blight; saviour of Denerim; gatherer of the first united force in the nation's history. And you disrespected her! All because you believe that she's 'taken' your rightful position as Queen."

Alistair's voice lashed across the room like a whip, sharp and stinging. Anora opened her mouth but he raised his voice, retaining control of the conversation.

"You didn't lose your status as Queen at the Landsmeet, or when I took Flora as my wife. You lost your status as Queen when you failed to take action to protect your country; when you and your father let the Blight spread over the south for months, denying its existence even when refugees were pouring into Denerim in their thousands."

Anora stared at him, the whites of her eyes standing out stark against the pale blue irises. Her bony shoulders, which stuck out through the thin material of the nightgown, hunched over, and she began to twist her wedding ring around her finger.

"I'd… rather the axe than the noose," she murmured, her voice hoarse and rasping.

Alistair looked at her, and his voice softened a fraction.

"I'm not going to have you executed; you're no longer a threat to me," he said, quietly. "But it's time to accept reality and... forge a new path for yourself. I won't have you wasting away in this chamber, for starters – you have obligations to your father's neglected teyrnir. I'll send servants to clean your quarters – you're going to permit them to do this – and I'll have some linens and clothing sent up. The guards will take you into the grounds, if you want some fresh air."

Alistair paused to take a breath and when he spoke again, the cold steeliness had returned to his voice.

"However, if you raise a single finger against my wife again – or disrespect her in any way – I won't be able to guarantee your safety. Nor will I be inclined to do so. Do you understand me?"

Anora paused, and then tilted her head an infinitesimal degree.

"Yes, King Alistair."

"Just Alistair is fine," the king replied, returning to the doorway to reclaim Flora's fingers. "After all, you are my… sister-in-law."
Flora, who was both proud of and slightly awed by the authority in her best friend's voice, squeezed his palm tightly. Alistair returned the pressure, nodding for the guards to open the door.

"I wasn't trying to hit you with the tankard, Florence. I swear to the Maker."

The words filtered out from the grubby room as they made to leave. Flora turned around, her solemn eyes focusing once more on the forlorn figure sitting on the end of the bed.

"I believe you," she said, impulsively. "Your aim is as bad as mine."

As the Royal couple headed back down the wide, sunlit passage; Flora cast an admiring glance at her tall, golden-headed husband. The light streaming through the leaded windows illuminated the strong profile of his face, the prominent angle of the Marician jaw and high, noble brow.

"You spoke very well in there," she whispered, proudly. "Very commanding."

Alistair let out a rueful laugh, bringing their conjoined fingers to his mouth to plant a kiss on her knuckles.

"I practised what I was going to say last night, my love," he admitted, cheerfully. "I had all my lines planned out in my head."

"Well, it didn't sound rehearsed at all," the loyal Flora replied, without hesitation. "And… thank you for being merciful towards Anora. I was worried that you were going to chop her head off."

Alistair gave a little grimace and did not answer immediately, reaching out to steady her arm as they descended the wide stone staircase that led back to the old heart of the palace. The west corridor was in the middle of repairs – one wall had crumbled away, leaving a gaping hole that looked out onto the estuary.

As always, Flora paused to take in the view. She gazed down at the milky green stretch of water below, crowded on both sides with a sprawl of myriad structures. The tall, pointed tower of the Grand Chantry rose up like the hat of a priestess, casting a stern shadow across the Square of the Bride. Flora swung her gaze from the impressive buildings in the noble district – she knew well enough what they looked like – and sought out instead the high walls of the alienage. It was huddled on the southern face of the city, a desolate labyrinth that gained very little sunlight.

*The new waste-water channel will have been finished by the time we return from this progress*, she thought to herself, determinedly. *Then I'll think about what can be done next to improve the alienage. I'll try and meet with their ha- har- harhan – their leader.*

Flora's thoughts were interrupted by Alistair wrapping his arms around her from behind, encircling her belly with proud, protective tenderness. He rested his chin atop her head, his eyes fixed not on the city but on the mottled blue and white sky; the sun burning through the last of the morning mists.

"I did want Anora dead at first," he murmured, fingers caressing the swollen curve of flesh. "But, Teagan was right; I shouldn't make decisions when I'm angry. Anora isn't a threat anymore, and… she should have a chance of showing some loyalty. Her father – as much as it pains me to admit it – is beginning to make amends, so she should be given an opportunity to do so as well. Apparently, she was a decent politician before she let her own father usurp her."

Flora twisted her head to beam up at him and Alistair ducked to brush his lips softly against her approving mouth.

"Hard to believe that going to see Anora Mac Tir was actually the high point of the morning," he
added, a grim note creeping into his tone.

The eyes of both king and queen swung above the rooftops in silent synchrony; resting on the ancient basalt citadel that sat on the very edge of the city.

*Fort Drakon.*

Chapter End Notes

OOC Author Note: OOhhh this was a good chapter to write! I think Alistair showed a lot of maturity when dealing with Anora – once he'd calmed down, lol. It was also nice to write him acting 'kingly', even if he had to practice his speech the night before, haha. It's hardened Alistair in action – he's showing Anora some compassion, but it's within rigid guidelines and on his own terms… and the threat of punishment if she steps out of line!

Castles like the palace at Denerim – or any large castle – would have been in a perpetual state of ongoing repair. There would always be bits falling down, or holes in the walls… it's why I don't mind the holes in Skyhold, lol. It's normal to have a bit of disrepair at all times!
Like its counterpart at Ostagar, the ancient Tevinter stronghold of Fort Drakon was built to intimidate; to loom ominously above the buildings huddled in its far-reaching shadow. With the jagged towers and battlements silhouetted against the morning sun, it appeared more weapon than structure.

They could not take the most straightforward route to the fortress, since the roadway atop the city wall had been mangled by the Archdemon during the last, chaotic chase towards Fort Drakon. Alistair had urged the resolute mare forwards at breakneck pace; while Flora had shielded them from the angry dragon as it clawed its way along the wall in their wake.

Instead, Eamon led them on a circuitous route around the rear of the Grand Chantry, across the Square of the Bride and over the traders' bridge; thus avoiding the majority of the crowds. Alistair and Flora, perched atop the same saddle as usual, followed the arl's tawny mare, alongside Leliana and Leonas Bryland. Many of the soldiers from the Royal Army had been recruited to assist the stonemasons, their efforts overseen by the new general.

Flora could feel Alistair shifting unhappily in the saddle behind her, trying not to look at the looming tower as it gradually expanded to take up the skyline ahead. He had said very little to either Leonas or Eamon on the journey down from the palace, and since Flora was not an especially talkative individual; it was left to Leliana to make conversation. Fortunately, this was the bard's speciality. She managed to maintain a light and natural dialogue with both Leonas and Eamon for the entire duration of the journey; veering between discussing the coronation, the wedding, the entertainment and the weather. Alistair still made no reply; dropping the reins on occasion to run a palm over his wife's living, breathing frame on the saddle before him.

Finally, they turned onto the final approach leading up to the fortress – a narrow, cobbled incline lined with crumbling and barely recognisable statues of Fereldan heroes from Ages past.

"Flora, I've had some travelling clothes sent up to your bedchamber," Leliana called across from where she sat astride her grey mare, finally beginning to exhaust her conversation reserves. "Do you have much skill with a needle? You'll need to let all your tunics out over the course of the two months."

Flora nodded; she had been darning holes in fishing nets since she was a child.

"I'm going to be huge by then," she breathed, glad to be distracted from the towering spectre of Fort Drakon ahead. "I'm going to be as round as I am tall. I'll be rolling back to Denerim!"

"My plump little pumpkin," Alistair chimed in, momentarily roused from his brooding. "Wynne says that a big, strong babe is a good thing."

"Says the person that doesn't have to push it out," Flora retorted, and her best friend grinned and pressed a kiss to the back of her head.

Then the long shadow of Drakon's highest spire fell over the road, and all conversation died away. The ancient fortress – far older than the city it now guarded – still bore the scars from the final battle. The eastern face was blackened from dragon fire, the charring deep enough that it could not be
washed away. One of the lower towers had been knocked down by a glancing blow from the Archdemon's wing; the rubble had been removed, but the fortress now seemed oddly asymmetrical. The gatehouse had been swarmed by the Darkspawn as they responded to the clarion call of their old god for aid, and now stood only with the aid of extensive scaffolding.

The horses came to a halt outside the main entrance as the portcullis was raised in slow, creaking increments.

"Look at that," Eamon mumbled in an undertone to Leonas, gesturing to the walls at either side of the entrance. The stone was disfigured with hundreds of claw marks; vicious, deranged slashes as though the enemy had been trying to burrow their way inside the fortress.

"Aye," the general replied wryly, nudging his horse forwards beneath the raised portcullis. "I understand well enough what damage the Darkspawn are capable of inflicting."

He raised his maimed hand in an ironic salute, squinting up against the midday sun. The stonemasons had downed tools for the royal visit; dozens of workers stood in neat rows at the centre of the courtyard. Their numbers were bolstered by fifty men from the Royal Army, who were grateful not to be drilling in full armour beneath the Solace sun.

As several workers hurried forward to take their horses, Flora felt Alistair take a deep breath behind her; her best friend steeling himself for what was to come. Dropping agilely onto the cobblestones, he immediately reached upwards to lift his wife down in his wake. Alistair's eyes moved briefly over her face, as though reassuring himself that she was alive and well before him. This confirmed, he exhaled long and steadily; and although her husband was not currently wearing the crown of state, Flora saw him lift his chin to bear its invisible pressure. He did not spare a glance for the high balcony overhead where Howe had flaunted his 'Tranquil' Cousland trophy; much like she was determinedly ignoring the corner of the courtyard where Riordan had plunged to his death.

"Ready, my dear?" he asked, softly.

When Flora gave a little nod, Alistair reached out and took her arm in courtly manner. As he did so, the flat of his callused thumb brushed over the fourth finger of her left hand, touching Mairyn's Star and the fish-rope wedding ring as though they were talismans of fortitude.

Together, the king and queen of Ferelden headed across the cobblestones to greet the master of the stonemasons. Alistair had met the master mason before, during one of the countless council meetings that had taken place in the post-Blight weeks.

"Master Answald," Alistair said, recalling the man's name just in time. "I'd like to introduce my wife, Florence Cousland."

Pride gilded the king's words, his eyes warm as he glanced down to where she stood dutifully at his side. A small ripple of excitement went through the crowd of assembled workers; and there was a shuffling of feet as those at the back shifted for a better view. Several of the soldiers, recalling the slight, crimson-ponytailed figure standing at the head of the Fereldan free army, lifted their arms in a salute.

The master mason bowed once more towards Flora, a slight tremble to his knees.

"It's an honour – no – the greatest honour to welcome you, your majesty," he croaked, stumbling over his words in his nervousness. "Your… Hero-of-Ferelden-ness."

There was a somewhat bemused silence, as Leliana let out a soft, Orlesian snort. The master mason
was now as red as a beetroot, a bead of sweat rolling down his nose.

Flora, recalling the haughty coolness of her natural face, smiled and stepped forward. She put her hand on the man's elbow, resting nail-bitten fingers on his forearm.

"I'm looking forward to seeing the repairs," Flora went on to say, with the soft, throaty and entirely incongruous intonation of a northern peasant. "Let's go inside."

Beaming, the master mason proceeded inside the main body of the fortress with the queen on his arm. Unable to help himself, Alistair cast a quick glance up at the high balcony where Howe and Flora had once stood. To his intense irritation, it appeared to have survived the final fight with the Archdemon unscathed.

The lower levels of Fort Drakon had been swarmed by the Darkspawn during the last frantic moments of the final battle. After the death of the Archdemon, they had fled in mindless confusion, only to meet the division of soldiers sent by Leonas Bryland to aid the troops at the fortress. Whilst on the lower floors – which mostly consisted of barracks and armouries – they had left deep claw marks on walls and doors; dislodged flagstones and smashed every item of furniture in their path.

The master mason led them down the wide central corridor, a double height stone passageway lit by iron rings studded with candles hanging from the ceiling. Proudly, he gestured to each refurbished armoury and garrison; showing off the re-tiled floors and freshly plastered walls. Leonas Bryland, in his capacity as general, asked pertinent questions about the replenishment of the armoury stock, which the mason could answer to a limited degree.

"Four armouries out of the six have been fully restocked with new weapons," he replied, gesturing them towards a circular staircase. "The other two still require weapon-stands before they can be used."

"We don't need to wait for weapon-stands," replied Leonas, with a small grunt. "Lean the bloody pole-arms against the wall if need be."

"Aye, General. I'll see to it."

Alistair took Flora's hand in his as they approached the circular staircase, noting the steepness of the steps. She smiled sideways at him, appreciating the concern.

"Everyone else can go in front," she said, apologetically. "It takes me longer to go up stairs."

As they brought up the rear of the party – with only the ubiquitous quartet of Royal Guard behind them – Alistair squeezed Flora's fingers tightly, dropping his voice to a murmur.

"This isn't – traumatising for you, is it?" he asked, in an undertone. "My love."

"Eh?"

"You were here as Howe's prisoner for three days."

Alistair's face contorted as his mouth formed the name of the man who had ultimately superseded Loghain on his list of enemies. Flora thought for a moment, her eyes fixed on the stone steps as she plodded determinedly up them one at a time.

"No-oo," she said slowly after a moment, brow furrowing. "When I remember being here, the memories – they're not very clear. Even though it only happened a few months ago. It's like… they're blurred. The colours are diluted, I can't remember what people said. I can't remember how
As Flora spoke, she realised that this obscuring of her memories was most likely the work of her spirits.

*They took the sharp edges from the memories of my imprisonment, so that I couldn't cut myself on them later.*

At this poignant manifestation of how her spirits had looked out for her well-being, Flora felt hot tears starting to well beneath her lashes. Not wanting to proceed up the steps with blurred vision, she stopped and rubbed her sleeve roughly over her eyes. Alistair reflexively reached out to embrace her, his eyes bruised with concern.

"My love, if you want to leave, just say the word," he murmured, smoothing a tender palm over her tousled head. "We don't have to stay here a moment longer."

"No, I'm fine to stay," Flora replied, blinking back her tears fiercely. "Anyway, they're giving us *lunch*. I don't want to miss that!"

Alistair smiled down at her, a touch wistfully.

"Alright, sweetheart."

The master mason showed them into the officers' quarters, a series of austere stone chambers with little to distinguish them from the barracks below. He led them through a sitting area missing most of its furniture, then into a dining room that Flora vaguely recognised. The windowless chamber was lit by torches set in recesses along the wall; and underfoot there was a distinctive black and white tiled pattern set into the floor.

Flora fought her subconscious for the memory – her spirits had done an exceedingly efficient job of obscuring her days spent as Howe's prisoner. While she searched the recesses of her mind, they took their seats at the long table in the centre of the room. A pair of Leonas Bryland's retainers had brought out a cauldron of meat stew and a vegetable pottage for Flora, along with hunks of crusty bread and salty cheese.

"You can barely tell that the Darkspawn overran this place," Leliana said admiringly to the master mason, who flushed and mumbled something incoherent under his breath. "It's very impressive."

"Took *weeks* to get rid of the smell," the mason replied, with a curl of the lip. "We had to build a fire in every room and burnt all the herbs we could lay our hands on. Their stench was worse than an open privy in summer."

Leliana did not appreciate such graphic detail during their meal; but politeness overruled her distaste and she shot a sweet smile at the man.

"You've all done an excellent job, then. It's fortunate that the General was able to spare some troops to assist with the repairs."

Leonas paused in his conversation with Alistair to let out a small, nonchalant grunt. He was gripping a piece of stew-soaked bread awkwardly in his maimed hand – fifty years of using five fingers had left him ill-prepared for having only three. The two men were busy discussing the guards that would be accompanying the royal progress.

Alistair listened closely to the details, asking the occasional question in-between ladling stew into his mouth. Beside him, Flora suddenly dropped her spoon onto the table with a clatter; eyes widening.
"I remember being here before," she breathed, swivelling her pale gaze to where Alistair sat at the head of the table. "Arl Howe made me come and eat dinner with him. He was sitting where you were sitting!"

Alistair's resulting expression was one of mingled alarm and disgust; he looked almost as though he wanted to jump out of the seat immediately. The rest of the table had fallen attentively quiet – Flora rarely spoke about what had happened to her during her three days as Howe's prisoner. They knew that the treacherous arl had not gone so far as to **assault** her, but the rest of her time in Fort Drakon remained a mystery.

Flora sought to clarify the image in her own mind, holding it up to the light of her memory.

"I was pretending to be Tranquil," she continued slowly, staring unseeing at the hunk of ragged bread on the plate before her. "I had to – I think I had to serve the food? Or the wine, I can't remember."

Flora was fascinated by the gradual emergence of the memory- she had a firm grasp on the image now, and was tugging it from her subconscious like a loose strand of wool from a fraying jumper.

*He made me sit on his knee while he ate. I wasn't allowed to eat anything, even though my stomach was rumbling. I remember thinking how horribly wrong his hand looked on my leg; the knuckles bony and the skin covered with liver-spots.*

Seeing Alistair's face, Flora decided not to mention that particular part of her memory.

"Then Loghain came in through the door – *that* door over there – and I wanted to **kill** him," she said instead, her eyes distant as she remembered the surge of blind rage that had swelled in her stomach on seeing the traitorous general. "But I couldn't react, obviously. Or they'd know I wasn't really Tranquil."

"How did Mac Tir react on seeing you?" Eamon asked softly, his pale green Guerrin stare focused unblinking on her thoughtful face.

Flora's brow creased as she pulled the memory out further; examining it like a piece of clouded sea-glass extracted from a rock pool.

"Loghain was angry with Howe," she said, slowly. "He said that illegally Tranquilising me was… it was a waste, and not a Fereldan thing to do. He was really furious, actually. And then he laughed when a servant came in and said that Howe's estate had been burnt down. Told Howe that he'd brought it on himself."

A silent Alistair shifted in his seat – wishing fervently that he could move elsewhere than the vacated chair of Rendon Howe – and reached out for Flora's hand under the table. Flora took it, entwining their fingers and squeezing their palms tightly together.

*I'm not going to probe my mind anymore,* she thought determinedly to herself. *My spirits obscured those memories for a reason. What's that old expression?*

*Let sleeping Mabari lie.*

"As much as it was satisfying to see Howe's head broken apart like an egg," Leonas commented dryly, picking up his abandoned spoon. "I wouldn't have minded getting my hands on him. Both for his kidnapping of you, lass, and for what he did to your parents. I'd known Bryce for thirty years."

Flora bit into a hunk of bread and considered for a moment whether she would have wanted Howe
to be tortured.

He killed my parents; which I'm outraged about more on principle — I don't remember enough about them to take it personally. He murdered my nephew — Fergus' son. He sent assassins after me and Alistair.

Ooh, we did end up meeting Zevran as a result of that, though. So, not all bad.

Would I have countenanced torture for him?

No. Death, yes. Even a messy death — which is what I ended up giving him. But not torture.

She glanced sideways, noticing that a slightly pale Alistair had put down his spoon. Feeling guilty for putting her best friend off his lunch — he always went very quiet whenever Howe was mentioned — she gave his fingers a squeeze. He swallowed and dutifully returned the pressure, but his spoon remained on the table for the remainder of the meal.

After lunch, the tour of the refurbished Fort Drakon continued. The master mason led them around the upper quarters, pointing out freshly plastered strategy rooms, holding cells and officers' residences. Conscious of her best friend — who was still brooding on thoughts of Howe — Flora did not point out the arl's bedchamber. She had spent a single, restless night in Howe's bed, fortunately without Howe alongside her. Later, Flora had learnt that Loghain had summoned the arl to the Royal palace and kept him there for countless hours on the pretence of a meeting.

"Look at the thickness of these walls," Leliana said admiringly, dragging her fingertips across one particular half-metre wide section. "During the Avvar rebellion in the Steel Age, the warlord Balak laid siege to this place, with little success. Isn't there an old saying, Arl Leonas: if one wishes to take Denerim, one must first take Fort Drakon?"

Leonas gave a grunt of assent; he had indeed heard of this traditional adage.

They had come to a pause at the foot of yet another circular staircase, plain and nondescript. There was nothing to distinguish it from previous ones they had taken, yet Flora's mind gave a sudden twinge of recognition. Beside her, Alistair stiffened; his hand clutching hers several degrees tighter.

"We've managed to repair the western spire," the master mason said, hesitantly. "The lower turret is still scaffolded, but it'll look good as new once we're done. But… this tower, we've not been able to make much headway on."

"Is it badly damaged?" Eamon asked, casting an eye up at the nondescript stone steps. "It seems reasonably intact from within."

"Oh, there's no internal damage, my lord," the mason hastened to explain. "It's… the roof. It's — well."

Alistair shot a sideways glance at Flora, who was shifting from foot to foot with nervous curiosity. Leliana had also fallen uncharacteristically quiet, her pale blue gaze swinging towards them. All three were fully aware of this particular tower's significance.

This is where the Blight was stopped. This was where the Archdemon was slain.

"It'll be easier if I show you, my lord," continued the mason, with a slightly helpless shrug. "If you'll follow me."

Flora, conscious both of her sore knee and heavy stomach, once again dropped back to the rear of
the party. Alistair reached out to take her elbow, the movement mindless; his face cast in a shadow of reminiscence. He didn't speak until they were halfway up the spiralling steps, and even then his voice was quiet and hollow in tone.

"The worst moment of my life was on this rooftop, Flo."

Flora's heart gave a little lurch; she knew full well what he was referring to. Coming to a halt on the narrow twist of the shadowed stairs, she reached out to put her hand on his arm, her eyes anxiously searching his face.

"Don't come up," she said, impulsively. "I'll say you've got indigestion."

Alistair laughed, but there was no humour in the sound.

"Might as well see if the place looks like it does in my nightmares," he replied, the words bleak and hollow. "At least it'll make them more accurate in the future."

They climbed the rest of the steps hand-in-hand, with Flora silently deciding that she was not going to release her husband's fingers until they were safely back inside. The stairs above them began to lighten in small increments as they approached the top of the tower, and then they heard Eamon's astounded voice filtering down towards them.

"Maker's Breath!"

Then followed a wry reply from Loghain: "I take it you haven't been up here before. It's certainly a… a sight, isn't it?"

Alistair swallowed, and felt Flora's fingers tighten around his own. Taking a deep breath, he lifted his chin and led her around the last sharp twist of the steps. Sunlight met them at the top from the open doorway, momentarily dazzling.

Once they had both recovered their eyesight, the former Wardens stepped out onto the rooftop where the Fifth Blight had been officially ended.

"We weren't sure whether to try and… repair it," the master mason was saying, his expression indicating the impossibility of this task. "Or demolish it. Or keep it as some sort of monument."

Flora, whose memories of this rooftop were shrouded in a fog of war, gazed about her in astonishment, mind prickling with small pinpoints of recognition.

The rooftop was divided in half, as neatly as though some vast line tool had been used to delineate one side from the other. The half closest to the door appeared relatively unscathed – the flagstones were clean and intact, the battlement walls had little visible sign of damage. There was even a flagpole still standing incongruously in one corner, though its accompanying banner had been lost.

The other side of the rooftop appeared like something from a lyrium-dream, warped and distorted beyond recognition. The stone of the rooftop – tiles, basalt and mortar – had been contorted into high, jagged peaks; like the sea frozen at the peak of a storm. Most of the flagstones had not survived, they were either caught up in the alien crests, or shattered beyond recognition. The landscape was blackened, charred to the very bones of the building below.

Throughout the centre of this chaotic, scorched terrain, a single channel of clean and unbroken tile remained. This narrow path – which originated from the undamaged half of the roof – cut a swathe though the contorted remains.
Flora stared at it, feeling her heartbeat escalate rapidly in her chest.

*Was that me? I don’t remember. I don’t remember anything that happened up here after we came through the door.*

"That was you, *ma petite,*" Leliana said quietly, reading Flora’s thoughts on her face. "I know you don’t recall it. The Archdemon was in that corner, there. You brought up your barrier to keep us from stopping you. And then you went towards it."

Everyone at the Circle thought I was defective; since all I could do was heal and shield. They felt sorry for me for four years.

But my healing could cure the taint, and my shield could withstand an Archdemon's flame.

I was only able to do two things, but – thanks to my spirits – I did them quite well.

"Maker's Breath," repeated Eamon, once again. He strode over to the edge of the warped stone and placed a hand against it, feeling the mutated rock beneath his hand. "That's harder than bloody silverite."

"Our workers haven't been able to make a dent in it," confirmed the master mason, a frown embedded in his forehead. "So repairs on this tower have been delayed."

As the others went to explore the strange landscape, Alistair stood rigidly in place; staring fixedly ahead like a blind man in unfamiliar surroundings. There was a distinct grey undertone to his handsome face, and Flora could see a muscle in his jaw trembling.

"Lo, you can go and have a look as well if you want," he said, through gritted teeth. "I'm sure it's… fascinating. I'll just stay over here."

"I don't care about seeing it," Flora replied placidly, turning her back on the spot where the Fifth Blight had been brought to an end. "This is a much nicer view, over here."

She led him to the battlements that faced out over the city. Denerim lay spread out below them, a collection of wood and stone rooftops, punctuated by lofty Chantry spires. Although they were too high up to make out any detail, an almost-perceptible hum of activity rose from the buildings; a murmur of commerce, and craftsmanship, and people going about their daily business. The market square was now crammed with stalls, whereas a month ago, it had been only a quarter-full. There were trade ships queuing up in the wide mouth of the estuary, waiting to be guided in by pilot vessels. At first, Alistair stared unseeingly down at the sprawling city, still preoccupied with the traumatic events that had transpired on the rooftop behind him.

Gradually – in slow increments – his attention was caught by the activity and energy of Ferelden’s capital. His gaze moved from the estuary, to the marketplace; then across to a slender caravan of traders waiting to be admitted at the northern gate. He was able to make out a half-dozen carts laden with goods, covered with canvas to protect them from the unpredictable Fereldan summer.

Faced with this bustling, thriving city below, Alistair couldn't help but admire the resilience that ran in Denerim's veins. With a sudden surge of pride, he leaned forward and pointed out one of the ships to Flora; a tall vessel with mulberry-coloured pennants.

"That's from Rialto, one of Denerim's old trading partners – Eamon told me that they'd lifted the embargo!" he said suddenly, eyes lighting with recognition. "Zev will be pleased, they're our main importer of Antivan wine. He can stock up before the progress."
"And Eamon said the other day that there were too many stalls to fit within the marketplace. Look, Flo – he was right! Can you see the stalls running down that road there, just by the chapel? We might have to extend the size of the market square."

Flora beamed, and then felt the baby give a particularly enthusiastic wriggle within her belly. She reached down to rub the heel of her hand over the woollen mound; Alistair saw the movement from the corner of his eye and drew her into his arms, cradling the weight of the ripe curve within his palm.

"My love," he breathed and Flora was relieved to see the earlier shadow lifted from his handsome, tawny face. "Have I shown you how much I adore you today?"

"Not since we broke our fast," she replied solemnly and Alistair grinned, lifting a hand to gently cup one side of her face.

"Then let me rectify that immediately," he murmured, bending his head to kiss her.

Some time later, Eamon had made his throat hoarse by issuing several pointed coughs; none of which had succeeded in drawing Alistair's attention. The arl shot a slightly pleading look at Leliana, who had far fewer reservations about interrupting the enamoured newlyweds.

The bard dutifully sailed across the flagstones and came to a halt just behind the preoccupied Alistair. Moments later, she unleashed a shriek of banshee-like tone and volume towards the back of his head. 

"ALISTAAAIR!"

Alistair, eyes bulging, hastily released a dazed-looking Flora and turned to face Leliana.

"Andraste's flaming posterior," he said, and promptly received a glare for such blasphemy. "What is it?"

"The master mason needs a decision, Alistair," Eamon interjected, hastily. "What do you want to happen to this tower? It could be demolished, they could attempt to build over the damage, or - "

"Leave it as a monument," Alistair replied, his voice now clear and steady. "A testament to my wife's bravery, and to… to Fereldan fortitude."

Leliana bestowed him with a benevolent look of approval, and Eamon hid a small smile.

"That sounds good to me, son. Right – I think it's about time that we returned to the palace."

Chapter End Notes

OOC Author Note: Vexillology is the study of flags! What a pretentious word, I had to look it up, lol.

I liked this chapter because Fort Drakon was the location of some of the grimmest
moments in the whole original story, and it has a lot of bad memories for both Alistair and Flora. Fortunately for Flora, her spirits obliterated or blurred a lot of these bad memories before they departed; but they're still fresh and painful for poor old Alistair!

Originally, once they got onto the rooftop where the Archdemon was slain, I was going to have them recall the slaying of the Archdemon, and then I actually changed my mind! Instead of dwelling on the past, they go and look out at the revitalised Denerim; and that's the whole point of this sequel, moving on and rebuilding.
During their return journey to the castle, Alistair cheered up immensely; delighted at the prospect of the upcoming visit to the royal kennels. If he had not been bearing his wife on the saddle before him, he would have spurred his horse at breakneck pace up through the palace grounds. To compensate for the delay that Flora's presence caused, Alistair chattered excitedly about various Mabari hounds he remembered from his childhood at Redcliffe Castle. Flora leaned back against his chest, fiddling idly with the laces of her tunic as she listened.

"Did I ever tell you my favourite story about Gelert the Mabari, my love?" he asked her as they crossed into the palace grounds, starting on the gentle incline that led up to the forecourt of the castle. "Teagan told me this one when I was a boy."

Flora shook her head, feeling Alistair take a deep breath behind her.

"King Calenhad had a whole pack of Mabari, but his favourite hound was named Gelert. Gelert was a true war-dog, who had fought alongside the king in many battles against Ferelden's enemies."

Flora listened to the slow, nuanced drawl of her best friend's voice, running her fingers up and down his sleeve.

"One night, Calenhad came back from a long day of hunting, and went up to his infant son's nursery. The babe was vanished, and Gelert's muzzle was covered with blood."

She twisted in the saddle to turn appalled eyes on Alistair; he hastened on with the story.

"Calenhad believed that Gelert had attacked the child, and so he thrust his blade straight into the dog's heart. The Mabari died with a little yelp, collapsing at his master's feet."

"This does not sound like a suitable story to tell a child! Bann Teagan had better not tell this one to our baby."

"Then," Alistair continued, earnestly. "Calenhad heard a little cry, coming from near his feet. He bent down and saw his son, unharmed, hidden beneath the cradle. A dead wolf lay alongside the child, the teethmarks of a Mabari sunk into its neck."

"The wolf had tried to eat the baby?" Flora whispered, with eyes wide and tremulous. Alistair nodded, cradling the swell of her stomach in the broad palm of his hand.

"Yes, and Gelert came to the child's rescue. Anyway, Calenhad was so stricken at what he had done – and haunted by the Mabari's last pitiful yelp – that he didn't smile again until his dying day; when he told his council that he was not afraid of death, because Gelert would be waiting to greet him at the Maker's side. Such is the loyalty of the Mabari."

Flora, afflicted both by hormonal imbalance and the sadness of the story, proceeded to burst into tears. Alistair, half-guilty and half-laughing, tried to comfort her as best he could while perched on a saddle with only one arm free.

"Baby, it's just a legend- " 
"He killed his do-o-o-g! HIS DOG!"

"I don't even know if there's any truth in it!"

"And the dog had saved the baby, waaah- "

The imposing face of the Royal Palace rose up before them, stark and brutally intimidating; almost as solid in its construction as Fort Drakon. The horses came to a halt on the gravel, stable boys scampering out immediately from a nearby alcove.

Eamon dismounted with surprising agility for a man of his years, silvery eyebrows rising in mild confusion as he stared at the weeping Flora. Alistair had just lowered her gently to the gravel and she was standing motionless on the spot, still weeping profusely. It was a pitiful sight; especially in contrast to her usual public stoicism.

"Alistair, what have you said to your brand new wife to upset her?" the arl chastised, while a tutting Leliana offered Alistair her own lace-edged handkerchief. "Florence, what's the matter?"

"He murdered his Mabari!" snivelled back Flora, as Alistair dabbed tenderly at her wet cheeks with the silken square. "He murdered his Mabari in cold… in cold blood!"

"What?" replied Eamon, thoroughly confused. "Who did?"

"Because he thought the Mabari ate the baby," she continued, melodramatically. "But it wasn't true! The Mabari saved the baby!"

"I told her the story of Gelert," Alistair hastened to explain, anchoring his wife's fingers within his own and kissing her knuckles. "Sorry, sweetheart. I didn't realise you'd take it– well. Take it to heart so much."

"The story of Gelert?" repeated Leliana, who was naturally familiar with this old Fereldan legend. "That's not really a suitable story to tell an expectant mother."

Flora wiped her nose on her sleeve, Mairyn's Star flashing as the sun reflected off its curved, opalescent face.

There was a scene of gentle chaos inside the entrance hall – the moth-eaten blue carpet was being taken up in preparation for a new, plush replacement. Servants were rolling it from different ends, dust was flying up in plumes and the bellowed instructions of Guillaume could barely be heard above the sneezing.

Fergus was stood at the side of the hall, leaning against one of the hearths and eyeing the proceedings with mild alarm. As Alistair and Flora joined him, the teyrn started to make a comment on the disarray, and then noticed his sister's blotchy, tear-stained cheeks.

"Floss! Are you alright?" He reached out to touch her arm, bluish grey eyes darkening in concern.

As Flora nodded mutedly – she did not quite trust herself to speak yet – Alistair explained the cause of her distress.

"Oh!" said Fergus, once the king had clarified. "Oh, Gelert is a great story. Nanny used to tell it to Finn and I at bedtime. You know, there's a rumour that Calenhad built a memorial to his Mabari somewhere in the Bannorn, and buried half of his wealth within it to show his gratitude to the hound. The knights used to joke about trying to find it."
As he spoke, the teyrn was guiding them towards the palace kennels. Other Royal residences within Thedas housed their hunting dogs either in or near the stables; keeping them well away from the splendour of their own living quarters. Ferelden, as one would expect, was a living contradiction of this convention. Rather than being located in an outbuilding on the palace grounds, the royal kennels were housed within the castle itself. They were situated on the ground floor not far from the kitchens, in a large, hearth-lit chamber which had easy access to the gardens. Four servants were employed to look after the needs of the twenty or so Mabari who dwelt within the kennels. The dogs themselves were given free rein to wander about the palace; many of them chose to made circuits around the noble quarters, begging for scraps.

About half the Mabari were present within the chamber when king, queen and teyrn arrived. They immediately crowded about the doorway, yapping excitedly and competing to lick Alistair's hand. Although they had only recently been introduced to this new Theirin, the perceptive hounds could recognise his similarity to Cailan – and the older ones saw the likeness with Maric. They were gentler with Flora, sensing that she was a little wary of them and intelligent enough to discern that she was bearing young.

As Alistair squatted down to ruffle fur and tug delightedly on ears, Flora reached out a tentative hand and patted a grey-spotted hound on the head. The bitch gave a little whine and licked her fingers gently; gazing up at Flora with calm, pale blue eyes that incongruously reminded her of Wynne.

"How's my Saela?"

Fergus directed his question to the kennelmaster, who had just emerged from an adjacent chamber. The man brightened, bowing perfunctorily towards king and queen before beckoning for them to follow.

"Mother and pups are doing well. Poor bitch is exhausted – took her nearly twelve hours to whelp them all."

Flora blanched – she was aiming for a personal labour time of approximately twenty minutes, and hearing stories of other creatures taking the length of a Chantry vigil-candle was not very reassuring.

The kennel master led them over to a heap of coarse woollen blankets in a quiet corner of the room. Saela – Jethro's litter-mate – lay prostrate and replete alongside the wall, with eight blind, squirming creatures nestled into her belly. The bitch opened wary eyes to see who was approaching; on spotting Fergus, she let out a tired whine of delight.

The teyrn crouched down beside Saela, extending his fingers for her to lick before rubbing the top of her head, affectionately.

"Poor old girl," he murmured, fondling one of her ears between finger and thumb. "Twelve hours is a long time for a whelping."

The king crouched down beside Fergus, scratching the bitch's neck with gentle fingers.

"Who's a good girl?" he cooed, and the Mabari gave a little yap in response. "Sounds like you've had a long night."

"Hey, little sister. You and Saela have something in common," Fergus said over his shoulder as Flora was brought a stool to sit upon by the hovering kennel-master.

Flora lowered herself onto it, eyeing her brother warily.

"Eh?"
Fergus grinned at her, momentarily distracted. "'Eh' – you're such a northerner, Flossie. Anyway, both you and Saela went into the final battle against the Darkspawn while heavy with pup. Although we all knew about Saela."

Both king and teyrn shot Flora simultaneous looks of reprimand, before turning back to the bitch. "They all look healthy," Alistair said in an aside to Fergus, eyeing the plump, squirming bodies of the pups as they clawed their way blindly through the nest of blankets. "Unusual for there to be no runt in a litter this size."

Fergus nodded, reaching down to nudge one squirming creature onto its side to show off its rounded belly. "This is Saela's third litter for the Couslands – probably her last – and she's always delivered strong pups. She's a good girl."

Saela gave a little bark of approval, eyeing Fergus appreciatively. "I want the strongest two for my Flora," Alistair went on, earnestly. "Hounds that will brutally savage the manhood from anyone who even thinks an ill thought in her presence."

Flora eyed the wriggling bundles of fur, trying to envision them lunging, teeth bared, towards the groin of an attacker. Fergus, who had been raising Mabari in the Highever kennels since he was a boy, had a breeder's eye for assessing a dog's potential. He had already identified two pups as the strongest in the litter; now, he reached down and plucked up one fat, snuffling creature from its siblings.

"They're both bitches," Fergus said, passing the wriggling pup to Alistair before scooping up a second. "Good pink gums, larger than their litter-mates. Active, and curious about their surroundings at only a day old."

Alistair, who was trying to hide how delighted he was, stroked the soft bellies of each pup as he held them in his arms. Still blind, they were letting out little squeaks of alarm at being separated from their mother.

"Here, my love. Take them."

Gently, the king lowered the newborn pups to Flora, placing them on the bulge of her stomach as she sat on the stool. Unseeing, they began to crawl over the plump mound; their motions clumsy and unpractised. Maternal instinct surging, Flora gathered them up to her breast and held them there; not wanting them to fall. One was a tawny gold, the other a soft, silvery grey, and she could feel their muscle beneath the downy fur.

They wriggled for a moment, their bodies firm and velvety, and then settled down against the warmth of her chest. One of them licked the underside of her chin, and the other followed suit.

Alistair was beaming proudly down at her – he was aware that Flora was not used to being in such close proximity with Mabari.

"Never mind us standing in the Landsmeet chamber dressed up and fancified," he murmured, huskily. "I'd prefer a painting of you sat there with those pups, darling. I don't think I've ever seen a nicer sight."

Flora smiled at him, leaning back and trying not to move as one of the pups started to make an ambitious climb up the slope of her neck. Fergus grinned down at his sister, continuing to scratch
Saela behind the ears.

"While you're both away on progress, I'll take the whole family up to Highever and keep them with me. Once they're a few weeks older, I'll start introducing them to your scent; Alistair has already given me some of your old nightclothes."

Alistair crouched down and ruffled Saela's speckled fur affectionately, and the dog let out a little whine of pleasure.

"Your pups have been chosen for an important job," he told the dam, solemnly. "They're going to protect the queen of Ferelden, and the new heir, when it comes."

Saela gave a proud little yap and Alistair beamed, patting her hindquarters gently.

"Floss, what do you want to call them?" Fergus asked, watching his sister nuzzle her face against the soft heads of the puppies. "I'll start using their names so they get used to them."

"Cod," said Flora immediately, ducking her chin towards the grey-furred pup. "And Lobster."

This second name was directed towards the one with the tawny coat. Fergus struggled to keep a straight face as he envisioned himself yelling Cod! and Lobster! across the training yard. However, he managed to bite back his laugh and gave a little nod.

"As you wish, petal. Cod and Lobster it is."

Flora pressed an impulsive kiss to each pup's small head, suddenly wondering why she had been so nervous at the prospect of this. Her own baby, annoyed at being ignored in favour of the new arrivals, gave a sudden, vigorous squirm and swung it's foot into her kidney.

As Fergus reached out to take little Cod and Lobster from their new mistress' breast; Flora dropped a hand and patted her stomach.

"Don't get jealous," she said firmly, and felt the baby wriggle in response to her voice. "I haven't forgotten about you, tadpole."

With a final look down at the pups as they fought for position at Saela's teat – Cod and Lobster naturally asserting dominance – king, queen and teyrn made their way out of the royal kennels.

The rest of the packing and preparations for the progress took up the remainder of the afternoon and much of the evening, dinner only a brief respite from the activity. Although they would be travelling reasonably light, with only a handful of carts; it was surprising how long it took to provision and organise supplies for an eight-week journey. They did not know the condition of the land for the first half of their travels – both South Reach and Lothering had been overrun by Darkspawn – and so sufficient food rations needed to be brought.

Once the carts were readied for tomorrow's departure, Fergus issued an open invitation for several rounds of Wicked Grace in the Cousland quarters. Teagan lost a great deal of coin to Finian; Eamon, who had years of experience to counter Finian's Orlesian training, promptly won it back.

Alistair tried, unsuccessfully, to teach Flora how to play chess. Flora – who was even worse at chess than she was at cards - kept laughing, making illegal moves, and stealing his pieces when he wasn't looking. Eventually, the king gave up and decided to take his cackling wife to bed instead; standing
up and leading her next door with a firm grip.

Some time later, they lay tangled beneath the furs on the bed, bare-skinned and sweaty, still conjoined as they recovered from their exertions. Alistair wrapped his arms around his wife from behind, relishing the sensation of her warm, solid body against his own. He was unable to resist several more surreptitious, slow thrusts underneath the cover of the bearskin even as a servant entered discreetly to add more logs to the hearth. She let out a satisfying little squeak, pressing her mouth against her arm to muffle the sound.

However, once the door had closed, Flora squirmed and wriggled free from Alistair's clutches; kicking the furs away with a flailing foot.

"I'm so hot," she bemoaned, patting her fingers against her cheeks and listening to the wet sound of her own sweaty face. "I'm hotter than an Antivan pepper."

The king clambered out of bed with limbs still sated and clumsy. He went to the window, unlatching the lock and pushing gently at the frame; letting in a gust of oceanic air.

"Come and sit here, baby."

Flora heaved herself out of bed with some effort, simultaneously wondering how immobile she was going to be in two months' time.

"This baby is already weighing me down like a cartload of basalt.

I'll have to roll everywhere, or crawl around like a crab."

Banishing this grim prospect from her mind, Flora wandered across the flagstones and joined her new husband on the cushioned bench; turning her face towards the open window with a little sigh of pleasure.

"I think we were quite quiet that time," she said hopefully, inhaling a deep lungful of salty air. "Or at least, Finian didn't bang on the wall."

"I know you were being quiet, sweetheart! I thought you'd actually fallen asleep at one point. Wait, you didn't really fall asleep, did you?"

"Nooo!"

In readiness for their upcoming accommodation under canvas, both former Wardens had attempted to be as stealthy as possible in their lovemaking. This had been accomplished with limited success – Finian had indeed not banged on the wall, but only because those remaining in the Cousland quarters had rapidly relocated to Eamon's chamber after Alistair had led Flora out, aware of what was shortly going to follow.

Alistair laughed, reaching out a palm still damp with perspiration to cradle her flushed cheek. Flora smiled at him, sleepy and satiated, her hair in a disarray of dark crimson whorls and tangles.

"Maker's Breath, my love," he murmured, pressing the ball of his callused thumb against the middle of her lower lip. "My lovely Lo. I'm going to have to kiss you once more before we go to sleep. Just enough to last me until morning."

Flora reached up to draw him to her, their lips coming together with a soft and familiar tenderness. Alistair did not seek to deepen the kiss straight away, but brushed a series of feathery caresses across her mouth; gently testing the fullness of her lower lip with his teeth before tracing the upper lip with
the tip of his tongue. Only once he had lavished both lips in affection did he seek to part them, his
tongue teasing its way into the sweet, familiar warmth of her mouth.

She yielded to him immediately, feeling him draw the air from her throat with the rich intensity of the
kiss. The rest of the chamber faded away into a faded, fire-lit blur; her senses focusing themselves
entirely on the man kissing her as though they were about to be parted for a lifetime. Her body bent
itself towards him like a bow and somehow she ended up in his lap with her bare legs around his
waist; their mouths working each other with increasing, desire-fuelled intensity.

It was the king that reluctantly broke it off, forcing himself to withdraw in a slight daze, eyes
unseeing and thoughts clouded.

"You need to rest, my darling," Alistair croaked, made hoarse from the richness of their kiss. "We
can't be up for hours. It's a long day on the road tomorrow."

Flora knew that he was right, her rational mind struggling with the urges of her lust fuelled body. She
knew from experience that if she straddled him at that moment, he would not be able to resist.
Instead, she retreated, slithering back down on the window bench.

"Mm," she whispered back in reluctant agreement. "Alright."

Alistair leaned over and pressed a chaste kiss to the centre of her forehead. Clambering to his feet, he
lifted her up in his arms as she yawned; curling an arm around his neck.

"Come on, sweet wife," he said, with the same affectionate tone that he once used when calling
her sister-warden. "Let's try and get a few hours of sleep, eh?"

Chapter End Notes

OOC Author Note:

I think a twenty minute labour might be slightly wishful thinking, Flo. Lol!

The story of Gelert is based on a really famous (and depressing) Welsh story, about the
Welsh prince Llywelyn and his loyal hound, Gelert. There's a little village in Snowdonia
(in the northern part of the country) called Beddgelert, which literally means Gelert's
grave. We've got quite a lot of stories about legendary dogs in Welsh folklore (aaah why
am I not a Welsh historian? Opportunity missed!) and they remind me a lot of the
Mabari of Ferelden.

Introducing COD AND LOBSTER, who will be the main Mabari guardians of Flo and
unnamed Royal baby!
The morning’s sky held a promise of fine weather; the sun set against a clear and unbroken expanse of pale blue. It was not exceptionally warm – there was a faint hint of a chilly breeze blowing west from the ocean – but it was good conditions for journeying.

The party gathered on the gravel forecourt of the palace in a tangle of horses, Mabari and covered carts; stable-boys and retainers scampered around to fetch last minute items. Bann Reginalda would be accompanying them as far as her own bannorn of White River and she was already perched on the saddle, impatient for the off. Eamon, who would be acting regent while Alistair was on progress, drew the king aside for a few last-minute discussions. Zevran and Wynne were waiting with the air of experienced travellers; their saddlebags already packed.

As Alistair was murmuring quietly to Eamon, Flora was engaged in several surprisingly traumatic farewells. Her brothers - whom she had only recently been reunited with – each had their own territories to return to.

Fergus needed to head north to take over his father's old domain. Highever, as the largest and most prosperous teyrnir – was a fundamental facet of the Ferelden economy, and needed to be carefully managed. Fergus was not particularly looking forward to residing alone in the vast, empty castle of Highever, with only retainers and the ghosts of his family for company. He was grimly resolved to throw himself into being teyrn; to spend most of his time inspecting the mines, and visiting the string of little villages within his territory.

Finian, as the newly invested Arl of Amaranthine, would also need to settle into his new estate. He would keep an eye on the Wardens at Vigil's Keep, updating Alistair frequently via letter. Finian also had several quietly ambitious plans of his own – to found a university within Ferelden to rival the one within Orlais. Amaranthine needed another source of income other than its port – many of its inhabitants had fled in advance of the impending Blight – and an institute of higher education would attract wealth and international influence.

The three siblings - all that remained of Bryce Cousland's family - clung to each other on the gravel forecourt before the palace. Fergus, prior to the events of the Blight, had not seen his brother for the four years that Finian had spent in Val Royeaux, and his sister for the fourteen since she had been smuggled out of Highever. The teyrn now found it hard to envision life without seeing his brother and sister every day.

"I'll see you in six weeks or so," Flora whispered, having already found out the time that it would take for their journey to reach Highever and Amaranthine. "Will you write to me? Using big letters, not joined up together, please."

Both brothers promised that they would write – in a hand that she could read - embracing their rediscovered little sister as tightly as they dared.

"You're going to be as big as Fort Drakon," Finian said cheerfully, pecking Flora on the cheek before squatting down and patting her stomach. "Goodbye for now, niece or nephew. You'll be almost ready to come out the next time I see your mama again!"

Meanwhile, an anxious Fergus had ventured across to Alistair; slightly self-conscious but earnest in
his entreaty.

"Finian and Florence are all that's left of my family now," he muttered, keeping his voice low beneath the excited chatter of the others. "Please look after my sister on the road. There are still Darkspawn out there, and bandits."

Alistair was about to retort that Flora was his *wife* and his best friend in the entire world, that he was not planning to take his eyes from her for a second longer than was necessary - then he noticed the hollowness in Fergus' cheeks; the spectre of a murdered wife and child hovering in his blue-grey irises.

"I swear to the Maker," the king said quietly instead, reaching out to grip Fergus' elbow. "Not a single hair on her head will come to any harm."

As Alistair and Fergus conferred with their heads together, Flora was faced with an even more distressing parting. Leliana had been the first of their companions to freely join them during the Blight; she had accompanied their travels from the early days in Lothering, she had journeyed with them to Redcliffe and to the Temple of Sacred Ashes. At South Reach, she had transcribed Flora's summons to the three armies; keeping their assembly a secret until it was revealed at the Landsmeet. She had played a fundamental role in helping Flora look the part of first *Lady Cousland* and then *Queen of Ferelden*; and had even willingly imprisoned herself in Revanloch Monastery for a month at Flora's side.

After breaking her fast in the Cousland quarters, Flora had gone straight down to see the bard; bursting through Leliana's bedchamber door and then – uncharacteristically – bursting into tears. Leliana had scolded her for such emotional display, while simultaneously mopping up her cheeks with a silk handkerchief.

"Florence," she had chided with mingled exasperation and affection, brow furrowed. "Pull yourself together, *cherie*. You are soaking my chiffon gown."

"But how can I be Lady Cousland without you?" bemoaned Flora, her voice muffled as she spoke directly into Leliana's ample chest. "How can I be *queen* without you? You've always been there to help me."

"Nonsense," replied Leliana briskly, extracting Flora and shooting her a stern, Wynne-like look. "Your kind heart and brave spirit is what makes you Florence Cousland, *queen of Ferelden*. All I ever did was dress up the outside."

Now that they were on the palace forecourt and the moment of parting was near, Flora was doing her best to maintain a stoic expression; managing to embrace Leliana and kiss her on the cheek without breaking down again. She still didn't quite trust herself to *speak*, so nodded mutedly in response to Leliana's issued instructions.

"I've labelled two clothing bags with *travelling* and *formal* – get someone to read it for you if you aren't sure," the bard said briskly, stepping back and giving an encouraging nod. "And I've packed up all the herbal teas that the midwife left for you."

Flora let out a little grunt of thanks, then shuffled forwards to put her arms around Leliana one final time.

"*Mercy,*" she whispered, trying her best to mimic her friend's Orlesian intonation. "For everything."

Leliana laughed; pale blue eyes warm with affection.
"No need to say merci, ma crevette. I will see you in eight weeks, hm?"

Flora nodded, taking a deep gulp of air.

Alistair, who had just exchanged a final few words with the chief steward, received the reins of his usual bay mare. After checking the horse's hooves and fetlocks with a quick, experienced eye, he led the mare across the gravel towards Flora.

"Ready to leave, my love?"

Flora swept her gaze once more across the faces of her brothers, Leliana and Leonas Bryland – who had also come to see them off – and gave a small, wordless nod. With exceptional care, Alistair gripped her by the hips and hoisted her up onto the saddle; making sure she was seated securely before removing his steadying hand.

As the king planted a foot in the stirrup and swung himself up effortlessly behind her, Flora was momentarily distracted.

"Do you think you'll still be able to lift me up onto the saddle by Kingsway?" she asked, settling back against Alistair's chest as he reached around her for the reins. "I'm going to be huge."

"I'm not sure," Alistair replied, cheerfully. "If not, I'll enlist Teagan to help me. Or use a winch and pulley system."

Flora stared into space for a moment, envisioning her bloated body being hoisted into the air by some complex piece of machinery.

"I miss being my old size," she said, wistfully. "Everything takes more effort now. Even getting out of bed, and going up stairs."

Alistair brushed several wisps of hair aside and pressed a sympathetic kiss to the back of her neck.

"Not much longer, darling. Less than three months."

Flora privately thought that three months sounded the length of an Age, but remained quiet.

The sun had just reached its apex when the company departed from the castle, taking the route through the fruit gardens to exit at the rear of the palace grounds. Ser Gilmore – a loyal Cousland retainer deployed by Fergus – led the way; a map tucked away in an easily accessible saddle-bag. Teagan rode alongside him, more at ease on horseback than he was on foot. The bann was delighted to be on the road once again – he was not accustomed to extended periods of time cooped within city walls.

Alistair and Flora came next, flanked on each side by Zevran and Wynne. The elf was humming softly to himself, his quick-fire mind drifting between a number of topics: his former Crow contact in Highever, which company member he might invite to his tent that evening, and finally - the possible whereabouts of the last Howe brother. Zevran had found out through his sources that Nathaniel Howe had left Kirkwall on a ship bound for Ferelden a week prior; his current location was unknown. Zevran had promptly passed the information on to Alistair, who agonised for several days and nights about whether to inform Flora. Finally, the king decided to keep it to himself until more specific details had been uncovered, not wanting Flora to worry.

Wynne's thoughts, on the other hand, were focused on a single topic: the wellbeing of the Circle. Irving had kept her updated on the renovation of Kinloch Hold, and she was eager to see her former home with her own eyes. The memory of the upper floors seething with maleficar taint was still raw
and painful to think on; she wanted to suppress it with the sight of a rejuvenated, revitalised tower.

The three cart-loads of equipment brought up the rear of the party; escorted by Leonas' choice of Royal Guard. They were not wearing the usual garb – a full suit of armour was hardly suitable for horseback – but their prominent weaponry and grim expressions would serve as deterrent for any would-be ambushers.

"On the road again, amigos," drawled Zevran, rousing himself from his thoughts and flashing a dazzling beam at his companions. "Aah, this reminds me of when we were travelling from South Reach to Denerim."

"Except, this time, we don't have to sneak on back-routes through the hills of the Bannorn," Alistair replied, the same thought having occurred to him. "We can take the West Road."

"And there's no Darkspawn army on our heels," chimed in Flora, sitting up straight and beaming. "It's a nice feeling to be out in the countryside without the Blight looming over us."

Trusting in Alistair's arms to keep her steady atop the saddle, Flora twisted as best she could from side to side to take in the view. Over her shoulder, Denerim Castle loomed on its high, defensible bluff; the crenelated turrets and Theirin heraldry just about visible. To the west, the cliff dropped sharply away into the pea-green Amaranthine Ocean, which was serene and flat as the surface of a mirror. Ahead lay the low, rolling hills of the Bannorn; an undulating dark green meander on the distant horizon.

Flora had not been intending to look to the east, but found her eyes drawn towards the Alamarri plains with the irresistible pull of a lodestone. They stretched out for a mangled mile, deforming the natural landscape with churned up mud and half-collapsed earth-works. The twisted wood and iron remnants of siege weaponry rose up from the dirt like the half-exposed bones of some ancient creature. The majority of the dead had been reclaimed from the marshy soil, but not all; there were bodies sunk below the mud that would rot away without ceremony. In some future Age, their rotted skeletons would surface amidst the soil, and some archivist would open up a dusty tome and say ah, these must be casualties of the Battle of Denerim.

Alistair, who knew full-well what his wife was staring at, gently but firmly drew her attention in the opposite direction.

"Look, my love. There's the mouth of the River Drakon."

Flora turned her head obediently, her fingers clutching Alistair's arm as she swivelled.

"Oh!"

Sure enough, the end of the river widened out into a placid, sand-banked mouth that fed directly into the ocean. There were several children collecting crabs on the shore, their buckets seeming too large for their slender bodies; as they caught sight of the Royal party, they shouted and waved their arms in excitement. Alistair lifted a hand to them, and they began to caper in excitement. One bucket was dropped from careless fingers and its contents went scuttling frantically to freedom across the sand.

"Oh no!" breathed Flora, with disproportionate horror. "The crabs are escaping!"

A cackling Zevran gave a cheer for the ambitious crustaceans, and she shot him a look of disapproval.

"Don't pout at me, carina," he purred back, grinning down at the child as it bent to retrieve the toppled bucket. "You know I love a daring escape."
They rode on, following the line of the river as it undulated leisurely further inland. This part of Ferelden had been untouched by Blight, the fields were bountiful with summer crops and flowers sprung from the undergrowth. The hedgerows at either side teemed with life; birds and other small creatures going about their business with little comprehension as to the horrors that had befallen the south.

"It's going to get worse from here on, isn't it?" Alistair asked Wynne in a quiet undertone, their horses ambling leisurely side by side. "The further south we get. I remember the field we once saw – the one that was Blighted. Everything looked… rotten."

"By the end of tomorrow, I imagine we will start to notice some difference in the landscape, yes," the senior enchanter replied, knowing that there was no point in avoiding reality.

Alistair hissed softly between his teeth, brow furrowing as his fingers tightened on the reins.

"I remember reading that Tevinter took an Age to recover from its Blight," he replied, grimly. "And they had far more wealth and resource at their disposal than we do."

"Yes, but the Darkspawn ran riot over their lands for decades, remember?" Wynne reminded him, steering her horse around a pothole in the road. "The taint had time to sink its claws into the soil. The Fifth Blight – thanks to you and Flora – only lasted a year. The Darkspawn moved quickly, and made use of the Deep Roads."

"Aye," Teagan chimed in, pulling gently at his mare's head to drop back alongside them. "From what the scouts suggest, there's a polluted swathe of land from Ostagar to South Reach, a mile or so wide. It's not continuous – as Wynne mentioned, the horde used the Deep Roads in places, especially as they approached Denerim."

Alistair let out a long exhalation – this was not as bad as he feared. Flora was quiet against his chest; a moment later she let out a soft snore and he tightened his grip around her waist.

"A mile-wide swathe from Ostagar to South Reach," he said after a moment, summoning a map of Ferelden to the forefront of his mind. "I imagine Lothering falls somewhere within that path. Poor sods, I hope most of them managed to get out."

Chapter End Notes

OOC Author Note: ON THE ROAD AGAIN! I love writing journeys! This is definitely not a realistic royal progress – which would have been a ballache to write about, since they included hundreds of people. So this is a much more intimate Royals on Tour squad, hehe. With shenigans and adventures on the way!
The company rode westwards through the afternoon, eventually stopping for a very late lunch at a roadside inn. The innkeeper, star-struck and intimidated in equal measure at such lofty guests, rapidly hustled up a vegetable pottage with chunks of bread and Fereldan cheddar. He apologised profusely for such prosaic fare, only to be assured by Alistair that it sufficed perfectly for their needs.

Flora, who had snacked surreptitiously throughout the journey, had spoilt her appetite. After saving her bread and cheese for later, she made her excuses and wandered off to find the privy. The baby was digging both heels into her bladder - it had been doing so all day - and she gave her stomach a gentle prod in the hope that it would shift position.

Naturally, she was accompanied to the very door of the outdoor privy by two Royal Guard. They were no less professional for their lack of closed-face helms and full armour; Flora, used to being under the scrutiny of the Templars, barely noticed their presence.

On the way back to the main tavern building, she paused and then wandered past the entrance, coming to a halt to survey the scenery. The river valley had become more defined, rising steep and craggy on both sides of Drakon's watery course. The river itself had not yet matured into the wide, leisurely flow that fed into the ocean; it was narrow and impatient; it surged around boulders and crested joyfully over waterfalls. Both sides of the valley were thickly fringed with coniferous trees, their foliage a dense, bristled bottle-green even in the height of summer. The inn itself was built atop a stone bluff overlooking the river, close enough to a small waterfall that the spray from the rocks blew upwards to speckle the aged wooden sign hanging over the tavern door.

Flora paused on the stone bluff, admiring the peaceful, pastoral scene before her. She had been telling the truth earlier: viewing the Fereldan countryside without the threat of a Blight hanging overhead was like seeing it for the first time. For one who had spent the vast majority of their life first in a tiny, isolated village, and then locked up in a Circle; it had been a day of new experiences.

"This is amazing," she said in awe to the Royal Guard at her left – the one with the beard. "Ferelden is beautiful. I didn't realise how… beautiful it was."

Flora realised that she sounded slightly moronic and did not care – the sight took her breath away.

"Please, your majesty," he replied, eyeing the drop between the rocky bluff and the churning water below. "Step away from the edge."

Flora took a single, reluctant step backwards, bringing up a hand to shield against the afternoon sun as she squinted down at the agitated water.

"I wonder what kind of fish swim in this river?" she said to herself, not really expecting an answer. The next moment she startled in surprise as the bearded guard opened his mouth to reply.

"Salmon, I'd reckon."

"Oh! Oh. I agree, but what type? Copper? Pink? Scaly?"

Flora stared longingly at the edge of the bluff, wishing that she were not so physically incapacitated.
"I used to be able to climb things," she said wistfully to the guards, who made no reply. "I used to climb up onto the roof of the Circle tower. I could've climbed down there, easily."

She canted her head towards the rocky cliff, which shelved steeply down towards the river.

You must be deluded! You've got as much chance of climbing down there as you do climbing up into the sky.

Instead, Flora turned towards the surrounding woods, gazing off into the shadowed undergrowth beneath the tall pines. The trees grew densely together, lined in gradually ascending rows up the shelving slope of the valley.

"Have you ever seen a wolf?" she asked, impulsively.

The two guards looked at one another in perplexion, then at her.

"My dad used to chase 'em from his farm on the occasion," said the beardless one, eventually. "Why's that, your majesty?"

"I've never seen one," Flora continued, a touch of wistfulness now in her tone. "A wolf. I know they're out there, but...we didn't see any on our journey."

Apart from werewolves and forest spirits, she thought, recalling the strange inhabitants of the Brecilian Forest.

Flora took an exploratory few steps towards the edge of the trees, and one of the guards issued a slightly awkward cough.

"Queen Florence, you aren't intending to look for wolves!? We can't countenance-"

"I'm just having a quick look," she replied, evasively.

"Flo? Darling, the innkeeper has rustled up an apple tart out of nowhere-"

Alistair appeared in the doorway of the inn, ducking his head to avoid the low sill. As he caught sight of Flora standing at the edge of the trees, his eyebrows rose into his hairline.

"My love, what are you doing?"

"The queen is hunting for wolves," replied the bearded guard, both his tone and expression carefully neutral.

"Wolves?"

Alistair blinked for a moment, and then recovered admirably quickly. Letting the door of the inn swing shut behind him, he strode across the muddied grass and came to a halt beside her, squinting off into the thick tangle of undergrowth.

"Duncan and I saw a wolf once," he said, slinging an arm around Flora's shoulders and pressing a kiss to her cheek. "It was on our way to the Circle, actually. It must have once been tawny, but its fur had gone almost completely grey. It crossed right in front of us - we were close enough to see the whiskers on its muzzle."

"Oh," she replied, shooting him an envious glance from the corner of her eye. "I'm jealous."

Alistair grinned down at her, and then reached down impulsively to twine their ringed fingers
together.

"Let's see if we can spot a wolf then, my dear."

The guards shot each other a look of mutual confusion.

Squeezing Flora's fingers against his palm, Alistair led her a few steps into the woods. Immediately, the noise from the tavern was muffled, the light level plummeting as the high canopy blocked out the early afternoon sun. Thick tree roots erupted leisurely from the crumbling soil, covered with moss like the tentacles of some aquatic giant. Patches of faded grass were interspersed with clumps of vine and fallen logs; the occasional shaft of sunlight pierced the dense canopy to illuminate the forest floor.

Flora gazed around in vain for any carnivorous mammals, peering into the bushes and the wells of deep green between the tree trunks. The king gave a cursory glance around the forest clearing, and then slid his arms around his new wife's swollen stomach from behind; ducking his head to press desirous lips to the side of her neck.

"Mm, sweetheart. I wish we had this quietness all the time."

"You're meant to be helping me spot wolves," a reproachful Flora chided, reaching up blindly to touch the side of his face. "Not distracting me."

Alistair smiled into his best friend's neck, inhaling the clean, soapy scent of her skin. Despite her reproach, he could feel her subconsciously pressing back against him; curving into his frame like a tautened bowstring.

"Well, I can't help but get distracted," he replied, thumbing the curve of her ear. "Your hair looks so beautiful against all this green."

Flora swivelled around in his arms until she was facing him, reaching up to tighten the loose strings hanging from the front of his travel leathers. This was more an excuse to feel the hard, defined contour of his chest, which curved pleasingly against her spread fingers.

"But if a sudden wolf lunges out from behind the trees now, I'm going to miss it," she breathed, lifting her pale gaze to meet his rich, mead-coloured stare.

"If a 'sudden wolf' lunges out from behind the trees now," Alistair murmured back, cupping her cheek in his palm. "I'll be carrying you over my shoulder back to the tavern, while shrieking at the top of my lungs."

Flora laughed, and he took advantage of her parted lips to lean forward and press his mouth to hers; aware that moments of privacy were sure to come few and far between over the upcoming weeks. She reached up to put her arms around his neck, sinking against him without hesitation as her boots pressed into the damp, mossy earth.

They emerged from the woods some time later, flush-faced and bright-eyed. Unfortunately their entire company was gathered before the tavern, the horses readied and waiting. A dozen expectant faces turned towards king and queen as they appeared beneath the trees; both appearing slightly startled at their unexpected audience. Expressions ranged from Wynne's mild exasperation, to Teagan's carefully summoned neutrality, to Zevran's face-splitting grin.

"R-i-i-right," said Alistair, clearing his throat in an attempt to brazen it out. "Are we… ready to go, then?"
"We've been ready for a half-candle," Wynne retorted with a little sniff, sitting atop her saddle with better posture than anyone else present.

"We were looking for wolves," Flora said - rather unconvincingly - and then undermined her excuse further by laughing.

As Alistair hoisted Flora up into the saddle, Zevran nudged his horse closer; leaning over to finger a strand of dark red hair that had been tugged free of its leather tie.

"It appears as though wolves have feasted on you, mi sirena," he murmured, pulling gently on the thick lock before letting it go.

Flora flushed, aware of the mottled pink aftermath of Alistair's affection covering her neck and throat. Hastily, she reached up to check that the lacing on her tunic was fully fastened – fortuitously, it appeared to be so.

"We keep forgetting I can't heal them," she replied, wiping her grass-stained palms on her trousers. "By the time we remember, it's too late."

"Too late for what?"

Alistair, who had just returned from checking Teagan's map, swung himself up onto the saddle behind his wife. Instead of replying, Flora canted her head to the side to show off the brands left by his desirous mouth. Alistair eyed her neck for a moment and then grinned, sliding an arm around her waist as he reached forward for the reins.

"What can I say? You're delicious, baby," he replied, cheerfully. "And I'm a weak, weak man who can't resist. Ready for the off?"

They continued to follow the line of the valley; the trail gently winding between the clustered coniferous trees. Although the sun bore down with muted persistence, the majority of their route was shaded by the high canopy above. The gentle rustling of woodland creatures echoed within the undergrowth, while the occasional bird called out to its partner from the branches overhead. The trail was littered with pine cones, which made a satisfying crunch each time they were compressed beneath the iron-clad hoof of a horse.

"It's a shame that Leliana isn't with us," Wynne murmured, taking a deep lungful of forest air. "The journeying doesn't seem quite the same without an accompanying song. Alistair, you've a nice baritone. Do you know any folk tunes or tavern melodies?"

"No," Alistair said, hastily diverting the senior enchanter from that particular train of thought. "None that are appropriate for the ears of nice old ladies. Flo, you've usually graced us with a song or two by this point."

Flora reluctantly tore her eyes from the undergrowth, where a patch of grey had turned out to be a sunlit boulder rather than a skulking wolf.

"I'm never singing again in front of anyone ever again," she said, a touch melodramatically. "You all hate my voice. I can't help that I sound like a… a pig being skinned. I didn't realise that I sounded so horrible, no one in Herring ever said anything."

Wynne breathed a small sigh of intense relief. Alistair, on the other hand, felt a swift kick of guilt straight to the gut. He let the reins drop – the horse was happy to follow the path unguided – and wrapped his best friend within both arms, kissing the top of her head.
"Darling," he breathed, full of contrition. "I'm sorry. I want you to sing; I love your voice."

"You don't! You used to make earplugs from bits of bedroll."

"No, my love! I adore it."

Ignoring Zevran and Wynne's frantic head-shaking, the king continued to plead with his wife for the next twenty minutes.

Finally, Flora relented, and proceeded to regale the company with a selection of traditional Herring songs. The nature of the little fishing village being what it was, the songs ranged in character from the mildly melancholic to the gratuitously tragic.

As she embarked upon the penultimate verse of a song discussing a troop of sailors being eaten by sea creatures – verse fourteen was about a vast octopus with tentacles the breadth of tree trunks – Zevran leaned over to whisper plaintively to Teagan.

"My horse is about ready to jump into the River Drakon," he whispered, wide-eyed. "I think I can see the poor thing's ears bleeding. How can such supple and sensuous lips produce such grating sounds?"

"What's that?" Flora broke off her verse and twisted her head around to eye her Antivan companion.

"I was only saying what a beautiful mouth you have, nena," Zevran replied, smoothly.

Flora shot him a suspicious look, but continued on with verse fifteen; a particularly depressing stanza about a crab that pinched men in half with vast, razor-edged claws.

As the horses crossed a bridge alongside a gushing waterfall, Zevran took advantage of the noise to lean over to Teagan, murmuring deftly in the bann's ear.

"Trust me, I could make beautiful music emerge from that slender throat."

"Elf! You're incorrigible."

Chapter End Notes

OOC Author Note:

We haven't had a good #forestshag in a while, not since the Brecilian Forest?

Poor Flo still has a hideous singing voice! I liked the bit about her not realising it, because nobody in Herring cared that she sounded horrendous!
They made good progress throughout the afternoon and early evening, the forested valley gradually flattening out into a shallow dip in the landscape. The densely-packed trees had become sparser as they descended; this wide, flat basin had only a few dogged conifers clinging to the soil. The river had become a wide, meandering ribbon of silver that stretched off towards the horizon, several thin tributaries ran off it like skeins of thread. Underfoot, the ground alternated between waterlogged marshland that sucked at the horses' hooves, and bare expanses of exposed rock. It was not a particularly attractive part of the bannorn, yet sunset's mellow cast loaned it a coarse and unexpected beauty.

"There, King Alistair! The Imperial road lies just to the south."

One of the scouts pointed as Alistair drew up his horse, squinting off towards the man's raised finger. Sure enough, lit by the soft light of sunset, the pale, ridged spine of the Imperial Highway undulated across the landscape. Raised by stone and magic many Ages ago, it was designed to facilitate travel and inspire awe; even now, it was still an architectural marvel.

Alistair peered at it for a moment, and then cast an assessing eye west towards the setting sun.

"We'll make camp here, tonight," he decided, as the scout whistled for the return of his falcon. "The light is falling quickly, and the Highway isn't in good condition."

Alistair and Flora knew this from first-hand experience; having often forsaken the unreliable Tevinter highways for more prosaic – and reliable – footpaths on their own journeys.

They stopped on an exposed stone bluff, with a gentle slope of shingle that ran down to a large pond. Although this would not be the most comfortable campsite, it was preferable to pitching tents in the soggy marshland.

One guard took charge of the horses, save for one which had a stone shard caught in its shoe. Alistair and Teagan – who, between them, had several decades of experience in the stables – took the horse to one side and began to confer on the best way to remove the stone. A pair of scouts disappeared into the clumps of reeds to hunt hares; Bann Reginalda instructed her own manservants to start building a fire.

Flora, who had gone to offer her assistance with the assembly of the larger tents, had been politely turned down. Slightly perturbed, she wandered across to where Zevran and Wynne were sorting their own accommodation.

"They won't let me help," she said, wistfully watching Wynne's bulky tent soar several feet upwards. Following the precise movements of the mage's staff, the sheet of canvas folded itself neatly over its wooden scaffold. "Are you both sharing a tent?"

The elf was prostrate on the stone, soaking up the last crimson rays of sunset. A pile of canvas sat abandoned beside its accompanying frame, several feet away.

"Tragically, no," Zevran replied, without opening his eyes. "Even though I have often declared my appreciation for seasoned women. The older the wine, the richer the taste, after all! It is not too late, Wynne! We could still share a bedroll."
Wynne let out a derisive snort, sliding her pack beneath the canvas with a far more prosaic kick of her boot.

"Zevran, I'm flattered, but I hope you'll accept my polite refusal. And, Flora, you should sit down and rest. It's been a long day."

"I can't sit down yet," Flora said immediately, clamping both hands over her leather-covered rear. "My rump is so sore. Why are saddles so uncomfortable? I think I'd rather sit on the horse's naked back."

Zevran was about to make an inappropriate offer involving his massage skills, but was distracted by Flora heaving up the mass of canvas he had discarded. Immediately, he sprung to his feet with the agility of a mountain cat and was at her side seconds later; reaching out to take the heavy folds of material.

"Carina, allow me to do it. If you want to help, you can find me some pegs, hm?"

Flora dutifully began to wander around the campsite, humming a tuneless melody under her breath as she peered down into the grass. Zevran, meanwhile, had espied where the royal tent had been placed – it was indistinguishable from the others, save for an inner lining sewn in to protect the childbearing queen from chilly summer nights. Pointedly, he arranged his pile of canvas close to theirs, their tent walls almost within touching distance.

The senior enchanter, whom nothing escaped, noticed this and gave a little sigh.

"Why torture yourself, Zevran? It will only hurt if you hear her with him."

"Ah, but it is an exquisite torture," replied the elf smoothly, flashing her a white-toothed smile in the twilight. "And I shall at least have the company of my imagination."

Overhead, the first few stars were igniting behind a rose-silver veil of cloud as twilight settled in over the bannorn. It was a mild evening, still and silent; their campfire the only man-made source of light for as far as the eye could see. According to the map, a string of small villages were situated on the other side of the Imperial Highway, yet their presence was hidden by both distance and the rapidly descending dusk.

Teagan had managed to coax the stone from the horse's hoof, while Alistair stroked its nose and murmured calming words. The scouts had returned with three large hares, which were summarily skinned, jointed and placed on roasting spits. Bearskins had been retrieved from one of the carts; these were arranged around the campfire so that the company did not have to sit directly on the damp grass.

Flora had given herself the job of organising the vegetables – partly because she wanted to feel useful, and partly so she could reserve herself the earthiest portion. She no longer questioned why the baby craved the taste of soil and tree bark, but merely sought to appease it's desires in the hope that – in return – it would never develop an aversion to fish.

Teagan was showing Alistair their progress on the map, tilting it towards the light of the fire.

"We've reached here," he was saying, pointing towards a spot on the West Road. "We've made good progress today. If we make similar distance tomorrow, we'll be in sight of South Reach by the end of the day after."

Alistair nodded his gratitude, eyeing the map a moment longer before clapping his uncle on the shoulder and wandering back in the direction of roasted hare. Flora was seated amidst her
companions, balancing her plate on top of her stomach and grimacing at something that Wynne had said.

"The baby needs more than just vegetables," the senior enchanter was saying, delicately wiping her greasy fingers with a handkerchief. "Go and get yourself some cheese, or nuts."

Flora was about to clamber to her feet when Alistair hastened to stop her; heading across to the provisions cart to rummage around in their food supplies. Wynne, Zevran and Flora watched him hunting determinedly through the crates, waving aside a tentative offer of assistance from one of the scouts. Clearly, the king was determined to bear responsibility for nourishing his fat-bellied wife.

"I'm very proud of that boy," Wynne said softly under her breath, leaning back against the bearskin. "He's come a long way."

Zevran and Flora both swivelled curious gazes towards the senior enchanter; though the latter already had an inkling what Wynne was referring to.

"When I first joined your company, the boy had taken no responsibility for anything," the old mage said, watching Alistair hunting for the wheel of Fereldan cheddar buried at the bottom of the provisions. "He had delegated all decision making to you, Flora. He put his fingers in his ears and babbled nonsense whenever his birthright was mentioned."

The loyal Flora immediately sprung to the defence of her best friend.

"He was grieving for Duncan," she protested, earnestly. "For the Wardens. And he was still in shock after what happened at Ostagar."

"And you were a sheltered little girl freshly plucked from a Circle," Wynne retorted, gently. "Anyway, child, let me finish! It has been my pleasure to see Alistair mature over the past year. He has not only taken responsibility for the governance of the country, but he has taken responsibility for your wellbeing, Flora."

Just then, Alistair appeared from the shadows, triumphantly wielding a large hunk of cheese. Sinking down beside Flora, he planted a kiss on her cheek; one hand dropping to stroke the curve of her stomach.

"Here you go, my love. I want you to eat it all."

Flora took the cheese with a beam of gratitude, sinking her teeth into it as Alistair settled himself on the bearskin at her side.

"That's good Fereldan cheddar," he declared, proudly. "Infinitely superior to any varieties with mould in – I'm looking at you, Orlais! Really, who would deliberately let their cheese go bad?"

Alistair then trailed off, looking around at his friends' faces in bemusement.

"Why are you all staring at me like I've grown a second head?"

"No reason, dear boy," Wynne replied quietly, handing him a plate of roasted hare. "Here, eat up."

Alistair took the plate, shooting her a suspicious look. When the senior enchanter continued to smile enigmatically, the king gave a little shrug and tucked into the meat, forking it enthusiastically into his mouth.

For several minutes they ate in silence, gazing up at the starry firmament as it slowly emerged from
the sheer veil of twilight. The stars seemed to ignite one at a time, like vast and looming lanterns; the moon was as round as a robin's egg. Teagan soon came to join them, accepting a plate of meat with a grateful nod.

"When I was younger and staying with a farmer and his wife, I can remember eating roasted hare," Wynne said suddenly, her voice breaking the silence.

They all turned to look at her; it was rare for the senior enchanter to divulge anything from her life before the Circle.

"The farm was plagued by hares, and they attracted foxes, so the farmer hired some local boys to hunt down as many as they could. We were eating hare for months. Except for on my sixth birthday, when they cooked a goose to celebrate."

Flora looked up from her carrot, swallowing hastily to ask her question.

"When is your birthday, Wynne?"

"The last day of Kingsway," the senior enchanter replied, and gave a little nod when Flora's eyes widened. "Yes, about when the baby's due to arrive."

"You'll get a free flagon of ale at the tavern if you share a birthday with the next king or queen of Ferelden," Teagan offered, and Wynne smiled.

"A little bird tells me, Bann Guerrin, that you have coin wagered on the babe being born in Harvestmere."

"Aye, you're not wrong," the bann replied wryly as he lifted his ale flagon. "Quite a few coins, actually!"

Flora, meanwhile, had turned her attention to Zevran. She gave him a pat on the knee, curious eyes settling on her friend's rich, tattooed face as he reclined against the bearskin.

"Zevran, when is your birthday?"

The elf gave a little laugh, propping himself up on his elbows to eye her.

"I have no idea, mi sirena. I am not even sure how old I am, exactly. I know I was born around the fourth or fifth year of this Age, but the actual month and day is a mystery. Anyway, even if it had been recorded somewhere, the Crows would have made sure that I forgot it. They like to obliterate anything about one's self that existed before they did. As far as they are concerned, you were born when you became a member of your House."

This was a long speech for the elf, which was unusual in itself. Zevran snickered at the ensuing silence, reaching up measuredly to tuck a strand of white-blond hair back into place.

"Anyway, mi florita, your birthday was not celebrated either for much of your life."

"But I still knew when it was," Flora replied, and then stretched out an impulsive hand to rest on top of his own. "Why don't you choose a birthday now? Then we can mark its passing."

"You choose for me, carina."

"Really?"

"Sí."
Flora thought for several moments, her brow furrowed. It took a while for her to recall the exact names of the months – even after five years away from Herring, she still was more familiar with the fishing seasons – but eventually, her face lit up.

"The twelfth day of Harvestmere," she said after a moment, triumphantly.

Nobody could work out the inspiration behind this proud declaration – it seemed a date randomly plucked from the ether.

"It's the day when you came to us," Flora continued, kindly not mentioning the circumstances. "I remember specifically because Alistair was singing a song called *The Dozen Blushing Maids of Redcliffe* in honour of the date."

Zevran said nothing, but looked at her very closely. Flora kept her hand atop the elf's tattooed fingers, her pale eyes gazing steadily into his cocoa-dark irises. Although she did not elaborate further; her intention was writ raw across her face.

*It's the day you threw off the black-feathered mantle of the Crow, and became a free man. It might not be your actual birthday, but it's not far off.*

"It's a day worth celebrating," she said at last, patting her palm against his knuckles.

The elf remained silent, trusting in his decades of training to maintain the neutrality of his expression. Instead of replying, he turned his palm over to entrap her fingers; bringing them to his lips for the briefest of moments. Flora smiled at her friend, squeezing his hand tightly in return.

"'The Dozen Blushing Maids of Redcliffe'," Alistair said out loud, his brow creasing as he recalled the verses. "I haven't heard it in full for months. Teagan, what verse comes after 'Clair with the golden hair'?

"Bess with the lovely legs," replied Teagan, with a snort. "Maker's Breath, is that song still doing the rounds? It was popular when I was a boy."

As the night deepened, each member of the company took to their tent. The campfire continued to smoulder away; a beacon in the darkness competing with the silvery wash of moonlight from above.

To Zevran's disappointment, there were no muffled sighs or stealthy movements within the newlyweds' tent. Sated from taking his queen against a tree in the forest earlier, the king was instead determined to ease any of her residual aches from the hours spent in the saddle.

"Anywhere else, baby?" he asked, kneeling amidst the furs with her bare feet in his lap.

Flora, clad in one of his shirts and sprawled flat on her back, shook her head with a little yawn. He had attended to her sore knee, her aching calves and her swollen feet in turn; she was both soothed and intensely grateful.

"Can't I do the same for you?" she whispered as he lay back against the bedroll, lifting his arm for her to settle against his chest. "You can't have no sore bits."

Alistair laughed; he was so accustomed to the saddle that long periods spent on horseback barely affected him.

"None yet. I'll let you know when I get some," he offered, drawing her close to his side and pressing his lips to her hair. "Are you comfortable? Warm enough? I can have more furs brought in."
Flora let out a Herring grunt that translated to *I'm fine*, turning her face against his shoulder and yawning. Alistair cast another eye at the tent doorway to ensure that it was fully fastened, surreptitiously shifting himself so that his broad back formed a barrier between his wife and the entrance. He reached down to find her hand already groping for his; their fingers twining together.

"'Night, my love."

"'Night. Don't let the weever fish bite!"

There followed a few moments of silence, and then Zevran's outraged voice filtered out of the darkness from the adjacent tent.

"Really? Not even a quick grope? I am disappointed! Call yourself newlyweds."

Flora hid her laughter in Alistair's armpit as he propped himself up on an elbow, directing a glare towards the canvas wall.

"Stop eavesdropping and go to sleep!"

"I cannot eavesdrop," retorted the elf, sulkily. "We are in tents. There are no eaves."

Chapter End Notes

OOC Author Note: YES! I love campfire scenes! Haven't had one in aaaaaages. Anyway, I got the bit about Zevran having no idea when he was born from the wikia. I thought that the day that he relinquished his Crow contract and joined the Wardens would be a good day to choose for his new birthday; since it's a fresh start/life free from indentured servitude.
The next day dawned even more benevolently than its predecessor. The sun smiled down kindly upon the company as they made their way out of the shallow valley, eventually re-joining the River Drakon. It was far wider than it had been near the coast, carving a leisurely swathe through the landscape like a Highever-blue ribbon. They had a good view of the meandering watercourse from the elevated Imperial Highway; which crested the hills and stretched westwards as far as the eye could see.

The ancient Tevinter trade route was in remarkably good condition, considering its advanced years. It was built from the whitestone quarries of the bannorn, which were renowned across Thedas for the longevity of their products. The elevated roadway stood thirty feet above the faded grass, with crumbling watch towers and decorative arches rising at periodic intervals. It cut through woods, divided fields and bridged rivers; straight as a Minrathous yard-stick.

The company made good time, stopping for lunch in the shadow of a ruined guard tower. Flora, who had burnt beneath the unforgiving sun, was hiding in the shade while Zevran had stripped beyond the point of appropriateness and was sprawled atop a toppled granite column. The rest of the group were either positioned on the tiles, perched on the edge of the cart or leaning against the wall.

"Look," Ser Gilmore said suddenly, his elbows resting on the stone as he made a gesture towards a hilltop to the south. "You can see what remains of Caer Anwir. Family seat of Bann Gethin."

The eyes of the company turned towards the old ruins, silhouetted like jagged teeth against the backdrop of the forested hills.

"Bann Gethin?" Alistair asked, looking up from his bread and cheese. "That's not a name I know. Is he a member of the Landsmeet?"

"He was a traitor," Teagan interjected, gazing at the single turret left standing on the abandoned castle. "During the Orlesian occupation, he hosted the chevaliers and provided them with a base to prepare their assault on Denerim."

Alistair frowned, feeling an irrational and personal indignation at an event that had occurred decades before his birth.

"What happened to the bann?"

"The freeholders rose up against him," Bann Reginalda interrupted, casting a final glance up at the ruined building. "Burned down the castle, right to its bones. Gethin was forced to flee."

"To Denerim?"

"No, to Orlais. He threw himself on the mercy of the old Emperor. Adopted an Orlesian name and opened a salon in Val Royeaux."

Alistair let out a derisive snort, eyeing the ruins with new resentment.

As the king and nobles gazed up at the crumbling remnants of the traitor's old seat, Flora withdrew further into the shade of the watch-tower and methodically munched her way down a carrot.
"Mi florita," called Zevran, shielding his eyes from the sun as he stretched out a hand towards her. "Come out from the shadows. You are lurking in the gloom like a little gnome."

"I need to stay in the shade," retorted Flora, pressing her fingers to her flushed cheeks. "Everyone else has gone brown, and I've turned into a tomato."

She gestured towards Alistair, indignant. Two days beneath the sun had deepened her best friend's tawny skin to a rich, smooth olive and bleached golden streaks atop his head.

"It's your hair, child," advised Wynne, who was leaning elegantly against the side of a nearby cart. "Redheads are always quicker to burn."

"Well, Leliana never did," Flora said, outraged at the unfairness of it all. "And she's redhead, too."

Zevran sat up, the tunic flung across his naked loins slipping dangerously low. He eyed Flora, and then gave a giggle that was part-sympathetic and part-amused.

"You are the shade of a boiled lobster, nena."

"Thank you for the compliment," she breathed, earnestly. "Lobsters are my favourite shellfish."

The party continued to follow the Imperial Highway west as the elevated road ran alongside the languid meander of River Drakon. The sun bore down relentlessly on the heads of those on horseback; fortunately, the clever Tevinter engineers had built wells into the foundations of each watch-tower. Every few hours, they paused beneath the shade of these crumbling parapets while a pair of scouts ran down to refill the water-pouches and a bucket for the horses.

Seeing the miraculous Tevinter engineering reminded Flora of her own engineering project back in Denerim. As they waited for the scouts to refill the water pouches, she gave Alistair a little nudge in the ribs.

"By the time we get back to Denerim, the new water channel for the alienage will be dug, won't it?"

"Should be, sweetheart," he replied, reaching down to adjust the length of his stirrup.

Flora thought to herself, a faint line furrowed across her brow.

"Maybe once the water channel is finished, we could put some proper drainage into the alienage?"

"Of course, baby. Whatever you want."

Teagan, who had been casually eavesdropping, interjected with a wry smile on his face.

"Flora, your good intentions are admirable. But do you really think you can make a difference to the position of elves within Thedas? I don't agree with the mistreatment of the poor sods, but it's going to take more than some water and sewers to change their situation."

Flora gazed back at the bann, considering his point for several moments.

"It'll make a difference to the elves in the alienage," she replied, with a small shrug.

Teagan opened his mouth to reply, then closed it again; flashing her a slightly wistful grin.
"Aye, poppet. You're not wrong."

By early evening, they had reached their designated point of camp. The ground had flattened out into marshy river plains, the hills of the Bannorn behind them. Tucked into a curve of the river, the camp was located beside a small copse of trees that provided some shelter from the elements. Tents were assembled in a loose semi-circle and a fire was built in their centre. There was no need to go hunting; the company would eat the remainder of the hare that had been caught the previous evening. They cooked the strips of flesh in wide roasting pans, accompanied with root vegetables and a small pot of turnip stew for their meat-averse queen.

As soon as the moon crested just to the north of the eastern hills, Wynne retired to her bedroll with the excuse that she was tired. In reality, the senior enchanter wanted to finish her letter to Irving using the far superior light of her staff, and the use of magic always made their accompanying scouts and guards twitchy. Teagan and Zevran played several quiet rounds of Wicked Grace, accompanied by Ser Gilmore and Bann Reginalda. After Reginalda had lost a sum of coin to her fellow bann - and an even larger amount to the cackling elf - she also retired to her tent with the declaration that she would bankrupt her beleaguered bannorn if she continued to play. Teagan, Ser Gilmore and Zevran embarked on a fourth game; doling out cards on a convenient flat-topped stone with their ale flagons precariously balanced beside them. The dogs rested at the boundaries of the camp, yawning and snapping their jaws idly at crickets.

Alistair was sitting on the damp grass, his sweat-dampened shirt spread over a nearby tree trunk. Flora was kneeling behind him, her fingers working their way into the tight knots of tension that wreathed his broad, bare shoulders. Every so often, her thumbs would alleviate a particular ache that had throbbed for hours and he would let out a soft grunt of relief. Whenever this happened, Alistair would reach up to catch her hand; bringing her fingers to his mouth to kiss them.

One of the scouts brought the map across to show the king, angling it towards the firelight to illuminate the creamy parchment. As the scout began to illustrate the next day's journey using a twig to trace the route across the map, Flora surreptitiously admired the sun-bronzed definition of her best friend's back. Years of wielding a weighty sword and shield had broadened his shoulders and hardened the muscle beneath; and although it was now a familiar sight to Flora, it still made her breathless.

"You are practically drooling, mi sirenita."

Flora beamed at her elven companion, and then slid her arms around Alistair's neck to embrace him from behind. Still talking to the scout, he reached up to caress her slender forearm with his palm; unable to stop himself from grinning as she pressed a kiss to his ear.

"At least there should be some more entertainment for me tonight," Zevran observed in a laconic undertone, watching Flora nuzzle her face against Alistair's broad neck. "She can't keep her hands off him. Buena niña!"

The scout made a tactful retreat with the map as Alistair swivelled his head to seek out his wife, reaching up to draw her face down to his. She beamed against his mouth, parting her lips readily to admit his desirous tongue.

"I see that you two are still incapable of restraining yourselves in public," came an acerbic voice from the shadows above them. "'Tis nice to know that some things do not change."
The guards flailed, scrambling around in a rare display of ill-preparedness. They were trained to respond to an assault at ground level; not a snide voice filtering down from the branches overhead.

Flora, however, recognised the voice's owner immediately. She let out a squeal of delight and thrust herself gracelessly to her feet, using Alistair's shoulders to propel her swollen belly upwards. Her knee gave a soft twinge of protest and she ignored it, too focused on the arrival of this unexpected visitor. Stepping over the prostrate Zevran, she scuttled barefoot across the grass in the direction of the voice.

"Morrigan?" she bleated up to the shadowy branches, head swivelling back and forth. "Morrigan?!

A dark shape dropped from the branches, briefly taking on the silhouette of a bird before fluently elongating into recognisable form. The Witch of the Wilds rose upright, clad in her customary rustic garb. Her skin was tanned a rich nut-brown; though the sun's attention had not lightened the glossy crow's wing sheen of her hair. The usual tiny bones and polished beads hung around her neck, and dangled from matted dark locks. She appeared as though she had not slept beneath a roof in weeks; indeed, the slight hesitation in her steps suggested that she had spent much of the past month as something other than human.

Hearing Alistair approaching from behind, Flora came to a halt several yards before their oldest companion. She shifted from foot to foot in slight agitation, her fingers quivering at her sides.

Morrigan eyed her for a moment, and then gave a little sigh of manufactured resignation.

"Alright, then. If you must."

Flora immediately launched herself towards the dark-haired woman, throwing her arms around Morrigan's tan waist with a muffled squawk. Morrigan rolled her feline eyes, but brought an arm around Flora's shoulders to embrace her gingerly in return.

"Still as sentimental as ever, I see," the witch observed laconically, patting their former Warden on the head with guarded affection. "Now, now, that's enough, Flora. Let me look at you."

Extracting herself from Flora's octopus grip, Morrigan stepped back and swept her gilded gaze up and down the redhead's body. Her eyebrows shot into her hairline, and she let out a small squawk of amusement.

"Ha! You are gargantuan."

"Garga- what?"

"Vast. Are you sure that you did not lie with Alistair earlier than you claim? That babe looks almost ready to drop."

"Reasonably sure," Alistair interjected pleasantly, coming up to stand beside his wife. "And Flo isn't gargantuan. She's gorgeous. How are you?"

Morrigan ignored the pleasantry. Her eyes moved appraisingly over Alistair's bare chest, then dropped to the ring he bore on his fourth finger, then darted across to its twin on Flora's hand; this smaller version resting neatly beneath a fat, gleaming pearl.

"So, you two are finally bound in the eyes of the Chantry, now," she observed, with a sardonic smile. "Congratulations, 'your majesties'. I certainly hope you don't expect me to bow. Alistair, I assume that you would like to know the state of the Wilds?"
"Come and sit down first," insisted Flora, reaching up to pluck a stray leaf from the witch's hair. "Rest for a bit. Have you had any dinner?"

"Only a few worms and beetles," replied Morrigan, delighting in Alistair's grimace. "And a frog."

"We have some hare left over," continued Flora, earnestly. "And I've got some vegetable stew you can have."

Morrigan followed the king and queen back to the circle of firelight, glancing down at the prostrate elf as he waved slender fingers in her direction.

"Buenas noches, my dusky beauty. As titillatingly dressed as ever, I'm pleased to see!"

The witch resisted the urge to plant her leather bound toe between the elf's ribs, setting herself down on the grass before the campfire. Flora immediately began to sort out the remainder of her vegetable stew, tipping it into a bowl and rummaging around for her spoon. Alistair, rather grudgingly, donated the last few strips of his roasted hare to the steaming mixture.

"Here," Flora said at last, offering the bowl in both hands. "You must be tired."

Morrigan made no reply, but took the bowl with a slight inclination of the head. The guards and scouts had withdrawn a short distance behind the wagons to give them some privacy. Teagan eyed the witch for a moment with a carefully neutral expression— he had met Morrigan on a handful of occasions, but was still not entirely comfortable in her presence. After a few moments he retreated to his tent, leaving the flap ostentatiously open.

For several minutes, nobody spoke as the witch tucked hungrily into the stew. Alistair, suddenly self-conscious, reached for his tunic and pulled it on over his head. Flora absentmindedly rubbed her belly, feeling the outline of the baby pressing against the heel of her hand. Zevran rolled over onto his stomach, weaving together strands of dry grass with deft, tea-leaf brown fingers.

"So: the Wilds," Morrigan said at last, licking her lips clean and reaching inside her skirts. "I have marked a map, Alistair, lest you have trouble grasping my meaning."

"Thanks," remarked Alistair drily, shifting himself over on the grass to peer down at the map. Despite the initial wariness, his pupils soon constricted in concentration as he stared at the inked markings.

"Here are the Wilds." Morrigan darted a pointed nail onto the parchment, tracing the outline of her former home. "See? Ostagar is there, marked with the dot."

Flora felt the now-familiar shiver run down her spine; an icy trickle that sprung forth whenever the old fortress was mentioned.

"I have shaded the areas that were swarmed by the Darkspawn," Morrigan explained, steadily. "The areas which have been the most tainted are shaded the darkest. The soil there is dry and crumbling, there are patches of decay running through it. The trees and foliage have rotted into mere skeletons. The marshes themselves hold no more life; they are stagnant and impure."

Alistair nodded, grimly. He pointed to the area either side of the black shading, which had been lightly speckled with ink.

"What about this part?"

"The Darkspawn passed through the land, but did not stay there for a long duration," explained
Morrigan, with surprising patience considering whom she was speaking to.

"And the condition of the soil?"

"Tainted on the surface, but I do not believe that the poison runs deep," she replied, letting him take the map to study it more intensely. "The Chasind are working to reclaim their old lands. There is one tribe which claims to have mixed a fertiliser that can cleanse tainted soil and make it arable again."

"Do you think it works?"

"'Tis possible, I suppose." Morrigan shrugged a bare shoulder elegantly, the small bones about her neck rattling. "They are renowned for being gifted at the alchemic arts."

Alistair nodded and then fell silent, his olive brow creased in thought. Morrigan eyed him for a moment, letting out a soft, slightly exasperated sigh.

"If you wish me to investigate further, Alistair, then simply say the word. I have a great range of talents, but mind-reading is not one of them!"

"Ah," Alistair raised his head, hopefully. "Sorry. Yes – yes. That would be very helpful… if you don't mind."

"Then I will do it, since you ask so politely. 'Tis always good to have a king beholden to one."

Flora beamed, delighted at the lack of the rancour between the former Templar and the hedge witch. Alistair and Morrigan had spent much of the journey around Ferelden sniping at one another; but he had matured since accepting the mantle of king, and she had learnt a fraction more patience during her months spent in the company of others.

"Oh," Flora said, suddenly. "Did you ever find your mother?"

"Flemeth? Why, it's a mystery, really," Morrigan replied, raising both eyebrows while adjusting the red fabric that hung across her breasts. "Our hut – as I suspected – was destroyed. But she has gone, and taken our possessions with her. Indeed, I have heard rumours that she has gone north. She could be hiding out in the Marches. Equally possible, she could be on a mountaintop in the Anderfels. She could be advising the Empress Celene in Val Royeaux! Who knows?"

Flora did not know quite how to respond and so stayed silent, biting anxiously at her thumbnail. Morrigan snorted, and then rose elegantly to her feet.

"You're not staying the night?" the queen breathed, glancing over her shoulder. "We could find a tent for you."

"Plenty of room in mine, amor," offered the supine Zevran, cackling.

Morrigan curled her lip, and gave a small shake of the head.

"No, I will waste no time. I shall fly south to seek out these Chasind, and see if there is any truth in their claim. If there is something to it, Alistair, then I shall bring back a sample of this miraculous fertiliser. Expect me in a few weeks."

Alistair gave an appreciative grunt of thanks, his gratitude wary but genuine.

"No offence," he said suddenly, as the witch turned to leave. "But you're being so… helpful. Why?"

Morrigan let out a small, amused laugh; her gilded eyes flashing like those of an owl in the darkness.
"Do I have to have an ulterior motive, Alistair? Is a desire to repair this crippled country not enough?"

When he remained silent, eyeing her with unblinking focus, the witch relented a fraction.

"I may also have a wish to travel in the future, beyond the borders of Ferelden," she said, quietly. "And I should like to say that I am acquainted with both of your newly prominent selves if some foolish Templars – or anyone else – attempts to interfere with my journeying."

"You're more than an acquaintance," Flora replied, solemn and earnest. "You're our friend."

She elbowed Alistair, who gave a mildly ambiguous grunt.

The witch inclined her head, licking a finger to ascertain the direction of the prevailing wind. Without a proper farewell – as was her custom – she stepped back into the shadow of the tree. Moments later her shape blurred into a winged form, ascending above the canopy with several powerful flaps and angling itself towards the south.

Chapter End Notes

OOC Author Note: Hurray Morrigan! There’s a lot of headcanon stuff in this chapter, like the bit about Bann Gethin, you won't find it on the DA wikia but I enjoy just making little lore things up. Hopefully it fits in reasonably well with existing lore! Also about the Chasind fertiliser that restores life to Blighted soil. But Ferelden can't remain fucked forever! This story is called the BLOOM after the Blight, after all, hehehe
Alistair, Flora and Zevran gazed after the witch's shadow as it diminished into the night; their expressions ranging from wariness, to admiration, to wistfulness.

"I still don't trust her, Flo," Alistair said eventually, reaching for Morrigan's discarded bowl and spooning up the scraps. "Not fully."

"Mm, I know. She's so clever, though," breathed Flora, enviously. "I want to see her transform into a fish."

"So close," bemoaned Zevran from beside them. "I was convinced that was going to be the moment when her shirt would finally slip to the side. Honestly, there is some enchantment on that fabric that makes it cling so stubbornly in place."

Alistair gave such a grimace of horror that it was visible through the fire-lit gloom. Zevran cackled, reaching out to rap him pointedly on the knee.

"Come now, Alistair! I know that you and Morrigan have had a few squabbles- "

"A few? A few?!

" – a few minor disagreements. But you cannot deny that she is a beautiful woman, despite the prickly exterior."

Alistair let out an ambiguous grunt, handing the bowl to Flora so that she could scoop up the final spoonfuls of cooked carrot. Zevran rolled over onto his side, dropping the braided grass and smiling wickedly up at the king.

"If things had gone a little differently, you would have had to lie with the witch, to save the life of the one you love. Remember?"

Alistair snorted, watching Flora as she assiduously wiped the bowl clean with a handful of leaves.

"I think we both would have needed to wear bags over our heads if it had come to that," he said, wry and honest. "Or blown out the candles very quickly. Do you need any help, darling?"

"No," she replied, leaning forwards to stack the bowl neatly alongside the others. "Who hasn't cleaned their plate? The ants will swarm it."

Plucking up a fresh handful of leaves – fortunately, they lay about the clearing in abundance – Flora wiped clean the plate. She then spotted some scattered cutlery in the dirt several feet away, and let out a little grumble of disapproval. As she reached for it, Alistair clambered to his feet with Morrigan's map; rolling it up as he went to retrieve a square of the soft, oiled leather used to protect documents.

Flora, distracted by thoughts of transformations into fish, accidentally let a spoon drop into the tangled branches at the base of the fire. Without thinking, she reached her hand towards the heart of the flames to retrieve it; instinctually expecting the glimmering shield to form around her naked, vulnerable skin.
Quick as a viper, a set of richly tanned fingers wrapped around Flora's pale wrist, intercepting her hand before it could pass into the flame. Zevran had spotted her thoughtless gesture and had lunged forwards, whip-like; acting just in time to stop her from burning herself.

Flora stared speechless at the elf, and then down at her hand. Her pale grey eyes widened, gleaming with sudden sadness. Her lower lip gave a dangerous tremor as she was reminded, once again, of what she had lost.

"Ooh-!"

"Shh, shh, carina," Zevran crooned, shooting a quick glance over to where Alistair was still rummaging through the wagon. "We don't want dear marido to worry, do we? Already, he frets too much about you."

The former Crow patted her cheek gently and Flora took a deep breath, knowing that he was correct. Feeling her heartbeat slowly return to a more sedentary pace, she reached up to cover Zevran's hand with her own, grateful for his quick thinking.

"Thank you," she whispered, clutching his fingers tightly against her palm. "I really am an idiot."

"Don't be ridiculous, nena," he replied, flashing her a wistful smile. "Just be more careful in the future, eh?"

Flora nodded, squeezing Zevran's palm hard once more before letting his hand go. She took another gulp of cool night air, calming herself down and letting the solemn mask fall once more over her face.

Alistair returned to the campfire several minutes later, wielding the leather-wrapped map in triumph.

"Took me ages to find the cover," he said, cheerfully. "Buried underneath a lot of fancy outfits for you, Lo. I think Leliana was under the impression that you'd be attending all sorts of parties during this progress!"

Flora stared up at her handsome, honest-featured husband, firelight flickering over the olive skin and gilded hair. Alistair grinned back at her as he lowered his muscled frame onto the grass, just about managing to fold the lengthy limbs into place.

"You've got a bit of a peculiar look in your eyes, sweetheart," he said, peering at Flora's face through the gloom. "Are you alright?"

"Nooo," Flora whispered, shuffling across the grass until she was pressed against his side. "I'm very sad." Alistair's eyebrows rose upwards into his hairline, the green flecks in his hazel eyes standing out in dismay as he stared at her. The concern radiated from him in waves, immediate and intense. Flora felt a rush of affection for her best friend, who always showed such consideration for her feelings.

"Darling, what's wrong? Tell me, and I'll sort it."

"I'm sad because you put your tunic back on," she replied, earnest and straight-faced. "And I wish you hadn't."

Alistair's wide, generous mouth curved into a grin; the natural hauteur of his face dissolving into relief and pleasure.
"Well, that's easy to fix, my love," he murmured, pulling off his shirt in a single, swift gesture. "There we go."

Flora beamed up at him, clambering over the grass in a crab-like motion until she could crawl into his lap. Alistair laced his fingers behind the small of her back, and then laughed as she spread greedy palms across the hard muscle of his chest.

"What are you doing, sweetheart?"

"I'm doing… an inspection," his wife replied vaguely, tracing the sinewy outlines of sun-bronzed pectoral muscle with her thumbs.

"An inspection of what?"

Flora gave an indecipherable mumble in response, and slid her fingers up to grip both shoulders, admiring their breadth and latent strength. Lifting a hand, Alistair caught Flora's cheek gently in his palm, turning her face towards him. The muted glow of the fire lit strands of copper in her hair; her pale eyes loaned artificial warmth by the reflected flame.

She parted her lips as her husband's mouth came down on hers, letting her tongue nudge gently into his mouth. Wanting suddenly to coax more of those wanton little sounds from his best friend's throat; Alistair began to bite softly at her lower lip, nibbling at the tender flesh until Flora was panting and flushed in his lap. As he made love to her mouth with his tongue, his fingers worked on the laces at her chest, pulling them loose.

Kissing the full, sulky curve of her Cousland mouth, Alistair slid the tunic down Flora's arm; wanting to trace her collarbone with his tongue. Instead, the navy wool slipped down far enough to reveal the creamy swell of a breast and the pink of a nipple. Alistair hesitated for a moment, and then his attention was caught by Flora's mouth landing firmly back on his own. Simultaneously, her hand delved down the front of his breeches; small, covetous fingers seeking out the proof of his desire.

For a few moments they kissed with a rich, enjoyable languidness; his fingers caressing her swollen breast and her hand moving surreptitiously down the front of his breeches. Leaning back to grant her stroking palm more room, Alistair happened to catch the elf's wide, fully-blown pupil.

"Maker's Breath, Zev!" he hissed, hastily tugging the fabric over his wife's shoulder. "I forgot you were – you should have said – anyway. Come on, Flo – I think we'd better retire to our tent."

Flora reluctantly withdrew her hand, instead gripping Alistair's fingers as he led her towards their tent.

"Night, mi florita," the elf murmured as she wandered past him, barefoot in the grass.

"Night, night," Flora croaked back dazedly, wanting nothing more than to have her best friend at that very moment. She did not know what had brought on this sudden tide of lust – possibly it was part of the general unbalancing of her body due to the baby – but it was a far more welcome side-effect than the nausea or the indigestion.

Alistair was already unbuttoning his breeches as he followed in her wake; loosing the last button while ducking into the privacy of the tent. As the entrance flap dropped, his breeches were thrust impatiently down around his strong thighs; olive buttocks contracting in preparation.

Zevran, holding his breath but knowing that he was as silent as a cat in his movements regardless, crept around to his own tent. In similar manner to the previous night, he had positioned his quarters
directly behind the newlyweds' tent.

To his surprise, the distinct sound of bodies moving frantically together was already filtering through the canvas. Flora was clearly trying to muffle her whimpers of pleasure; his rhythmic grunts escaped through tightly gritted teeth. The couple continued in such a manner until she let out a trembling, throaty sound that was half-wail and half-sob. There followed a brief pause while they changed position, and then the slick, percussive rhythm of wet flesh colliding began again. The king was having a more difficult time concealing his pleasure in this round; his soft, low moans carrying on the cool night air. The former brother and sister-warden climaxed together this time, breathing heavily in each other's arms.

Kissing followed for the next short while; gradually accompanied by the unmistakable sound of conjoined loins.

"ENOUGH IS ENOUGH!"

The reprimand split through the night air, loud and authoritative. It came from the only person in the company brave enough to issue orders to a king and queen; an old lady of the Circle who had known them when they were both humble, inexperienced and virginal warden-recruits.

"Now, I'm no prude," Wynne continued, her stern words easily able to penetrate the layers of thick canvas. "But three times in a night is, frankly, excessive. You both need to get sufficient rest!"

"Wynne! They are newlyweds." Zevran sprang to the royal couple's defence. "They are young and beautiful. Let them enjoy themselves!"

Alistair let out a groan, while Flora hid a sudden fit of laughter against his chest.

"Sorry. I... I suppose I got carried away. Wait, I can't believe you're all listening!"

"I didn't intend to, believe me," Teagan offered grimly from his tent on the other side of the campfire. "It seems that a single pair of earplugs won't be sufficient."

The king gave an embarrassed cough, and his queen whispered something unintelligible to him.

"Right," Alistair said, clearing his throat and retaking control of the conversation. "Fine! I swear to the Maker that I won't lie with my brand new, bloody gorgeous wife for the rest of the night. I hope you all feel bad!"

The next morning, Alistair was determinedly chatty; resolved not to be self-conscious about engaging in a wholly natural activity with his Chantry-blessed partner. Flora, who had found the whole episode hilarious, kept dissolving into laughter over her spiced eggs.

"You're incorrigible, child," Wynne said sternly as the tents were being loaded onto the wagons. "I don't know where you get the energy from."

"I don't know, either," Flora replied, shifting position on the toppled log and taking a long gulp of water. "I had a sudden urge when we were sitting by the campfire last night. I LUNGED at him. We almost did it in front of Zevran."

"I'm sure the elf wouldn't have minded," the mage commented, drily. "Anyway, it's not unusual for women in your condition to experience such... sudden cravings. Bouts of uncontrollable lust, if you
"Ooh," the queen replied covetously, eyeing Alistair as he helped Ser Gilmore manhandle a bundle of heavy canvas into the back of a wagon. "Really? It's normal? He's so handsome. I wish we could go back to bed NOW."

"Close your mouth, my dear. You look like one of the Mabari slathering over some meat."

"I feel like one of the Mabari slathering over some meat!"

Rejoining the Imperial Highway, the company followed the ancient route for the next few hours. They had made good time along the West Road, but would soon be diverting along a tributary route to the south-east, where Leonas Bryland's abandoned seat of South Reach lay. The weather was fair to middling; the sun occasionally bothered to drift out from behind a curtain of cloud. Flora – who had burnt yesterday – was grateful for the cool reprieve.

Soon after, they descended from the elevated highway and began following a dirt trail, lined with prickly bushes on both sides. Once the company had reached a circular clearing, Wynne, Ser Gilmore, Teagan and Alistair dismounted to inspect the map once more. Their compass seemed to be malfunctioning; it insisted stubbornly that the north lay in the direction that the sun had risen earlier. The map had an unhelpful ink blotch across the juncture they were seeking, and nobody could quite agree on the direction of travel.

After several minutes of discussion, Alistair and Teagan elected to ride swiftly around a copse of woods to see what lay beyond. Ser Gilmore and the scout would climb to the top of a nearby ridge to gain an elevated view of their surroundings. The rest of the company would remain within the sun-dried patch of grass, surrounded by waist high tangles of butter-yellow gorse and blushing lavender.

After letting Flora gently down into the arms of a guard, Alistair shifted position on the saddle and squinted off towards the small wood, spread sparsely over the next hillside.

"Right," he said, gathering the reins in one hand and returning his gaze to his barefoot wife. "I'll be back shortly, my love."

The king's gaze swung over to Zevran, who was leaning against a mossy boulder and fiddling idly with the leather strap around the hilt of his blade. Feeling the heat of Alistair's stare, the elf inclined his head a fraction.

Worry not, my friend. No harm will come to her while she is with me.

Alistair and Teagan cantered off towards the small copse of woods, their horses glad to pick up the pace after days of ambling along at a plod. The scouts and Ser Gilmore made for the hill, dismounting to lead their own steeds along a narrow, fern-lined trail.

Wynne sat down on Zevran's mossy boulder and took out her half-completed letter to Irving, perusing what she had written to ensure that it made good sense. Zevran read over her shoulder for a few moments and rapidly grew bored; returning his eyes to where Flora had been standing. She was no longer there, and the elf's heart stopped for a fraction of a second.

Seconds later, his sharp eyes spotted the top of her crimson head, clashing against a clump of butter-coloured gorse. Flora was kneeling down within the bushes, plucking the small flowers and storing them in a leather pouch.

Zevran sauntered towards her, taking several deep breaths to calm his nerves.
"Mi sirenetta," he purred, inching his way through the bristling gorse bushes. "You gave me palpitations. I thought you had run away."

"I don't think I could run anywhere," Flora replied, sucking her finger after pricking it on an errant thorn. "I'm collecting the flowers. Mab – the midwife – told me that gorse tea was good for the baby."

She showed him a cupped palmful of yellow petals, several drifting to the mossy soil as she unfurled her fingers.

"Ah! I admit, all herbal teas smell and taste the same to me. Like diluted grass. There are better uses for herbs."

Flora snickered, since she was not particularly a fan of tea either. Still, she tipped the palmful into the leather pouch and continued to strip the bushes of their flowers. Zevran went to assist, his elegant fingers far more skilled at extracting the petals without getting pricked. They worked in tandem for several minutes, until Flora's leather pouch was overflowing.

"How do you spell gorse? Is it like horse?" she asked as they sidled their way back through the bushes, pollen dust leaving steaks of yellow on their trousers.

"Sí, mi florita. It is very similar."

"H-o-r-s-e?"

"And an E."

"G-o-r-s-e," Flora breathed, trying to envision the shapes of the letters in her mind. "Huh."

Once they had negotiated their way out of the waist-high bushes, she went to the cart where her leather pack was stored; leaning in to tuck the pouch into a side pocket. Zevran returned to the faded grass, sprawling himself out beneath the midday sun. Now that the early cloud had burnt off, the day was turning out to be far finer than the gloomy morning had suggested.

For several minutes, Flora watched Wynne writing her letter, a touch wistful at how swift and fluent the senior enchanter scribed her sentences. Realising that she was growing envious, she turned away and wandered back to the bushes. Zevran brushed his fingers over her bare ankle as she passed; proving that the elf was equally alert prostrate as he was standing.

"Don't go too far, nena."

Flora nodded, stepping over his legs and heading to the waist-high clumps of lavender that sprung joyfully upwards at the edge of the clearing. The sun bore down with increasing intensity, and she turned her back on it, reaching forwards to finger the dusty violet blossoms. The soft, gentle hum of bumblebees rose from the bushes; at least a half-dozen fat, striped creatures hovering about the perfumed herb.

Flora watched them for a moment, fascinated by their erratic, lurching flight. She wondered if Morrigan was able to turn into a bumblebee. Tentatively, she held out a finger to coax one of the insects onto her palm; they all ignored her.

Almost an hour later, there came the sound of hoofbeats thudding dully against grass. Teagan and Alistair had returned from scouting out the far side of the woods, and based on their perplexed and frustrated faces, their mission had been unsuccessful.
After dismounting and watering his horse, Alistair tied its reins to a tree stump and reached for his own waterpouch. Draining the contents, he swung his gaze across the bush-lined clearing, his furrowed brow easing as he set eyes on his wife. She was standing amidst the lavender, a sprig of it held to her nose.

"Did you see anything?" Flora asked as he approached, lowering the scented bundle.

The king bent his head to kiss his queen on the mouth; passing a brief palm over the top of her head.

"Not a thing," he said, with a little shrug of frustration. "The wood ends in a cliff dropping down to a stream, which is definitely not the right direction."

"The scouts might have more luck," Flora offered, smiling up at him.

Alistair nodded, unable to stop himself from smiling back down at her.

"Flora, surrounded by flowers," Alistair continued, struck by sudden inspiration. "Hey, isn't Flora Ancient Tevene for flower?"

Flora shot him a slightly bemused stare, unsure why he would assume that she had any knowledge of Ancient Tevene. Alistair's smile widened into a grin, and he reached down to pluck a stem of lavender from her fingers; sliding it gently into her hair.

"Beautiful girl."

After a short while, the scouts and Ser Gilmore returned down the hillside trail, their faces equally grim. At first those waiting in the clearing below assumed that the men had been unsuccessful and that the company was still hopelessly lost. Then those waiting below saw the pallor on their faces; the slight tremor in their legs as they made their way down to the clearing.

"We've found the path," Ser Gilmore said, gulping down several mouthfuls of water. "It's just over the hill. There's a lower road that the carts can follow, to the west."

"And what else did you find?" asked Wynne quietly, rolling up her letter to Irving. "Your faces have a strange pallor to them, gentlemen."

"What the Darkspawn left behind," replied one of the scouts, in a low and sombre voice. "It's... well. You'll have to come and see for yourself."

Flora saw Alistair's eyes move from her, then across to the cart, and knew what he was about to say.

"I'm coming up as well," she breathed, a steeliness in her tone that brokered no argument. "I want to see."

Chapter End Notes

OOC Author Note: Lol pregnancy hormones! Flora has never had much impulse control so she's pretty doomed, hahaha.

In terms of where they are at the moment, if you google a map of Ferelden, the company
is on the road just to the north-west of the "S" of South Reach!
Wynne elected to accompany the guards, Mabari hounds and Bann Reginalda on the lower road, unsure of her capability to climb the hill. They were accompanied by the carts and the horses, who would have struggled with the steepness of the ascent. The others began to climb the narrow trail; a single-file dirt path which wended its way through the gorse and lavender bushes.

A quarter of the way up, Flora felt a twinge of protest from her knee. She came to a halt, having learnt her lesson about overstraining her weakest joint. Alistair also stopped in his tracks a pace behind – he had been watching each of her footsteps like an eagle, prepared to grab his wife if she lost her balance.

"Darling, want some help?"

Flora nodded, swivelling around and reaching out. Bracing his knees, Alistair hoisted her up onto his waist; she wrapped her legs around his hips and her arms about his neck. He took a moment to grow accustomed to this new imbalance of weight, then kept determinedly treading his way up the hill.

"Are you feeling equally generous, Bann Guerrin?" Zevran whispered to Teagan, who gave a snort in response. "I'll reward you amply later."

"I think you'll be fine, elf," replied the bann drily, brushing a sprig of gorse from his lean, leather-clad thigh.

The scout reached the top of the hill first, coming to a pause on the grassy ridge and shielding his eyes from the sun. Teagan and Zevran arrived almost simultaneously; moments later, the bann inhaled an unsteady gulp of air.

"By the void!"

Even Zevran was uncharacteristically quiet, his coal-black eyes in pinpricks of focus as they swept across the terrain. He glanced sideways at Teagan, who had put a hand to his head in disbelief.

Alistair appeared over the rise of the hill shortly afterwards, a flush warming the cool olive tone of his skin. Flora planted a grateful kiss on his cheek and gave a wriggle; he let her down gently onto the grass.

"Uncle, you look like you've seen a ghost," he started, striding in Flora's wake as she headed towards the apex of the rise. "You're making me nerv-"

He came to an abrupt halt beside the bann, stopping at the top of the ridge. Flora had also frozen in her tracks, her pale eyes expanding in dismay.

Before them stretched miles of what would have been a typical Fereldan pastoral scene: rolling hills, farmland and the occasional copse of woods. The fields were a patchwork of mottled green and gold; crossed with streams like strips of navy ribbon.

Yet this bucolic terrain had been carved brutally in two by an ugly strip of land at least a half-mile.
wide that divided fields, severed streams and demolished woodland. The soil had been churned up into a maelstrom of blackened, poisonous mud, clouds of yellowish miasma drifting over the fetid mire. It stretched into the horizon for as far as the eye could see; nearer to them, it ended in a great mass of loose mud, where the horde had burrowed their way back underground. Remnants of farmhouses and steadings – little more than rubble – rose from the oozing soil. Any other traces of civilisation within its reach had been obliterated by the Darkspawn army as they streamed north.

"Have to erase those two villages there," murmured Ser Gilmore to the speechless bann, making a gesture towards the map. "They've gone."

"Maker's Breath," breathed Alistair, astounded and horrified in equal measure. "And this goes south as far as Ostagar?"

"One would assume so," Teagan replied, softly. "Via South Reach and Lothering. Over a hundred miles."

Flora had last set eyes on a Blighted stretch of land months prior, on their journey to the Brecilian Forest. Confronted with the ravaged landscape, she had shrieked in rage and plunged down the hill; snatching up the nearest hard object and hurling it at a stray Darkspawn that had fallen behind the rest of the horde.

Now - eight months later - the new queen reacted with no less anger. She let out a sound that was part-fury and part-shock; colour rushing up her neck to flood her face with a great wash of crimson. The others turned to look at her, startled at such vehement anger from their gentle and compassionate companion.

"They've destroyed everything!" Flora wailed, caught up in a sudden bout of irrational despair. "It's – it's all tainted. How dare they!"

She quivered on the spot, impotent and furious; a storm-tossed ship in a bottle. Having no enemy to take out her anger on – there was no Hurlock present to batter with a frying pan – Flora instead turned her anger on herself.

"I should have ended the Blight sooner," she continued, her voice trembling with every word. "I should have called the armies sooner. Killed the Archdemon more... more quickly. Then there wouldn't be so much of this – this – poisoned land! And I can't even purify it any mo-o-o-re!"

"Darling- " started Alistair in alarm, reaching towards her. Flora side-stepped him, shifting frantically from foot to foot as the colour in her cheeks deepened.

"What about all the people who lived there!" she wailed, waving an arm in the vague direction of the Blight scar. "If I'd killed the Archdemon earlier, they might still be alive!"

They could practically see the pulse racing in Flora's throat, her eyes wide and bright with guilt. Yet again, the realisation of her own new uselessness hit her like a lead mantle; and she put her hands over her face, letting out a choked sob.

"You need to calm her down," Teagan murmured to Alistair, who was already striding anxiously towards his wife. "The stress could cause her to go into premature labour; if humans are anything like horses."

Alistair's face contorted in horror, his fingers clamping around Flora's trembling arms.

"My love, sit with me," he entreated, sinking down to the grass and bringing his best friend with him, drawing her onto his lap. When he wrapped his arms around Flora, he could feel her still quivering in
rage, her heart racing against his chest.

"Come on, baby. Deep breaths, now."

Flora inhaled unsteadily and then let out a painful, hacking cough; for a moment, he thought she was going to be sick.

"Please, Flo. It's not healthy for you to get so upset."

The note of desperation in her husband's tone punctuated the red veil of anger and guilt, and Flora curled her fingers against his shoulder. When she turned her tearful face towards him, Alistair ducked his head and kissed her damp cheek with gentle concern, his own fingers seeking out hers.

To his relief, Alistair could feel her frantic heartbeat gradually begin to slow. He murmured half-intelligible comfort into her ear, stroking a palm up and down her back as he felt the baby fidget within her belly.

Teagan crouched down beside Alistair, eye-level with Flora's sad face as she rested her chin on her husband's shoulder.

"Petal, you performed a miracle ending the Blight as quickly as you did," he said, soft and earnest. "Nobody could have asked for more."

Zevran had been standing back in deference to Alistair; on seeing Teagan going to offer his reassurance, the elf decided that he was not going to be left out. He too went to Flora's side, nudging her cheek with a finger and making a quick gesture behind him.

"Carina, do not spend overlong looking at that forlorn strip of land. It is but a strip, in a land that is still fertile and ripe for harvest. A man is neither defined, nor weakened by his scars, after all."

Flora nodded quietly, feeling the tears drying in place on her cheeks. Zevran's words were sweet and thoughtful, and she appreciated Teagan's reassurance; yet most comforting of all was the gentle, measured stroke of her best friend's palm along the length of her back.

"Yes," she whispered, suddenly embarrassed at her own outburst. "I'm sorry. Thank you, everyone."

A relieved Alistair cupped the back of her head lightly in his palm, stroking his thumb around her ear.

"My lovely Lo," he murmured, pressing a kiss to her tear-stained nose. "I understand why you're angry. I'm furious too, but – you can't blame yourself. We... we did our best, didn't we?"

She nodded silently, curling her arms about his neck.

They made their way down the hill, quiet and contemplative. From the vantage point, they had been able to see the correct road wending its way southwards. At the bottom of the hill, they met up with the other half of the party; who took in Flora's pale, tear-stained face and said very little.

The isolated, exposed bluff of South Reach was now visible on the distant horizon, emerging like some great prehistoric creature rising up from the earth. They could just about see the silhouette of the Bryland castle perched at the apex of the granite peak. The road ran south towards it, straight as a dart, running parallel to the Blight-scar. To everyone's relief, the corrupted soil was mostly hidden
from view by trees, or by the curvature of the land. Nobody wanted to look at it too long, lest it brand itself irredeemably into their memory.

Bann Reginalda left them at a junction in the road, taking a narrow trail east towards her bannorn of White River. Teagan offered to escort the bann to where her retainers were meeting her; Reginalda laughed and offered a derisive refusal.

"Lad, I was riding the hills of the bannorn when you were but a young rake carousing in Ansburg! I'll be fine, I promise you."

Before she left, the bann drew her horse alongside Alistair's saddle, tapping Flora firmly on the thigh. Flora had been hunched into Alistair's chest, despondent, for the past few hours. At the bann's touch, she looked up with pink-edged eyes.

"Stop sulking, young Florence," the bann told her, gentle but firm. "It's a single strip of land, in a nation three hundred miles wide. If not for you and your husband, the entire country would have been Blighted from Denerim to the Frostbacks."

Flora nodded, wiping her nose unceremoniously on her sleeve. Behind her, she could feel her husband slumping in the saddle with weariness and dejection; as Ferelden's new king, he took its wounds as personally as one inflicted on his own body. Thrusting away her own frustration and anger, she turned her attention on Alistair, running her thumb over his knuckles and sitting up a little straighter to prompt the same from him.

The sun began to sink into the horizon, flooding the scarred landscape with shades of mellow umber, ochre and nectarine. Wisps of rose-coloured cloud manifested in the fading light, delicate as a lady's gossamer-thin nightgown. The first faint pinpricks of starlight peeked through the veil of cloud; a prelude to the encroaching lushness of night.

The company reached South Reach just as the moon rose from behind the eastern hills. The great rocky bluff rose up like the back of an armadillo from the grasslands; the buildings of the town clinging to the steep slope. The fortress-castle sat at the crown of the rise, squat, broad and ugly.

The king's party did not attempt to ascend the rise, instead making a wide circle around it to reach the base of the cliffs. The South Reach restoration committee had moved into an abandoned farm in the shadow of the bluff, converting the buildings and outhouses into basic accommodation and storage space. Although Leonas Bryland had not yet been able to visit his beleaguered seat due to taking charge of the Royal Army, he had no intention of neglecting South Reach. Dozens of carts filled with resources and building tools had been sent from Denerim over the past month; there was barely enough room in the farm courtyard for the company to leave their own wagons.

Several members of the South Reach restoration committee came out to greet the Royal party as they arrived. The interim mayor – whose predecessor had been killed in the flight from South Reach – stood at the forefront of a small crowd that had gathered in the courtyard. He was a bulky man named Silas, who had once made a living as a blacksmith.

Flora could feel Alistair barely disguising a yawn in the saddle behind her, her best friend taking a deep breath as he sat up straighter and prepared to greet the crowd. She could feel the weariness exuding from him as a pulse of dejected tiredness; the scar carved across his nation still at the forefront of his mind.

"Your majesties," the interim mayor breathed with blatant nervousness, bowing deeply as the king descended from the saddle and reached up to help down his queen. "Thank you for coming. It's our honour to welcome the King – and the Hero of Ferelden."
This last cognomen was breathed with a slight tinge of awe. There followed a brief ripple of appreciation from the crowd, especially once they caught sight of Flora's swollen stomach. They nudged each other in shock both at the sheer size of her belly, and the realisation that she must have been heavy with child even when fighting the Archdemon itself.

Flora heard Alistair take one more deep, steadying breath and knew that he was about to ask how the initial survey of South Reach had gone; whether it was possible to venture up there tonight; what condition Arl Bryland's castle was in. Her best friend had always had a rigid sense of duty, following it even against his own best interests.

"We're honoured to be here," she said quietly, before Alistair could speak. "And keen to see the condition of the town. South Reach was where we gathered the support of the banns and arls before travelling to Denerim. But, if you don't mind, we'll do so tomorrow morning. I don't feel well from the journey, and... I need to rest."

"Aye, and the king must attend to his wife. I'm sure you understand," Teagan added, and Flora shot him a grateful look.

The interim mayor hastened to assure them that of course that was fine, that South Reach was not going anywhere. As he led them inside the main farmhouse building, Flora could feel Alistair's anxious eyes on her back. Once Zevran, Teagan, Wynne and the other members of the company had been housed in rustic, but comfortable, quarters; the blacksmith-turned-mayor led Alistair and Flora up to what once must have been the chief farmer's own quarters. They were decorated in a plain, rural style with dark furniture and white-plastered walls, exposed beams running across the ceiling. Some effort had been put in to make it more aesthetically pleasing; a vase of flowers stood on the dresser and a threadbare fur rug had been thrown across the bed. A trembling youth with the features of the mayor brought in several candles, scattering them about the horizontal surfaces to light the room.

"Sorry the accommodation isn't very fancy, your majesties," the mayor explained as he showed them inside the reasonably-sized chamber. "We haven't got much here, yet."

"Thank you very much," said the polite Flora in her soft, solemn northern tones; flashing father and son a rare public smile. "We look forward to seeing what you've accomplished in the morning. Would you be able to bring up something to eat?"

The door closed and they were finally alone, for the first time since early that morning. Alistair, ignoring his own tiredness in the light of his concern, immediately reached out to touch the side of Flora's face tenderly.

"Darling, you don't feel well?" he breathed, anxiety running through each word. "What's wrong?"

Flora reached up to cover his hand with her own, clasping their fingers tight together.

"I'm fine," she reassured her best friend, leading him with a gentle yet firm grasp over to the bed. "You need to rest. It's been a long day, and I made you carry me – A SMALL PONY – up the side of a mountain."

Alistair laughed – intensely received that she was not genuinely feeling unwell – and leaned back on the lumpen mattress with a sigh.

"It wasn't a mountain, my love. And you're not a small pony."

He dragged a sleepy hand over his face, rumpling up the golden hair. Flora reached down to pull off
his boots one at a time, tutting at him when he tried to assist.

"Lie down, husband," she instructed him firmly, giving his chest a gentle push.

The pressure of her small hand against the broad span of muscle was negligible, but Alistair still leaned back obediently against the square linen cushions. The scarred landscape was still writ bare across the king's features; he seemed years older than he had done when they had left camp that morning.

"As you wish, my own sweet wife." He smiled at her, eyes bruised with mingled tiredness and affection.

Flora shuffled about the chamber, ignoring the twinge in her own knee as she drew the curtains and poked vaguely at the hearth with the poker. A flagon of ale had been set out with two tankards on the dresser; she poured one out and brought it carefully over to the bed. The exhausted Alistair was already snoring against the cushions, his spread-eagled limbs taking up the majority of the mattress.

Flora had just placed the flagon gently atop the bedside table, when there came a knock at the door. Nostrils flaring in a manner reminiscent of Leliana, she scuttled across the room; determined to stop anything from disturbing her weary husband.

To her dismay, the sound had not heralded the arrival of dinner. Instead, Teagan was hovering in the corridor, which was patrolled by a single yawning guard. Flora opened the door wider and eyeballed him suspiciously, positioning her fat-bellied body between the bann and the bedroom.

"Ah," he started; easily able to see over the top of Flora's head. "Is Alistair asleep? I was going to go over the schedule for tomorrow with him."

Flora's face now resembled a particularly belligerent mule, and it was clear that Teagan would have to bodily remove her to enter the room and disturb the sleeping king.

The bann smiled wryly down at her, and lifted both hands in surrender.

"Alright, poppet, don't fret. I won't disturb him. I hope - at some point - I can find a wife who guards my wellbeing as fervently."

Flora's ferocious expression softened and she stepped forward, patting her fingers gently on his elbow.

"I'm sure you will," she breathed, gazing up at him in earnest as the door swung shut behind her. "Tell me what we're doing tomorrow and I'll tell him later."

Teagan nodded, offering Flora his arm as he spotted her favouring one knee over the other. Together, they headed to a bench positioned outside the room that had been assigned to Zevran. The bann let her down gently, knowing that the long day's journey must have taken its toll on her weak limb.

Flora sat down and stuck her bare, swollen feet out into the corridor, eyeing the sore patches of skin that had been aggrieved by her leather boots. The baby woke up and stretched it's limbs against the confines of her stomach; the movement shifting beneath the thin lambs' wool of her tunic. Flora patted it, tracing the outline of a rounded head with her thumb.

"This is the wrong time for you to be awake," she said sternly, gazing down at the quivering tunic. "I want to try and sleep soon."
Teagan stared down at the small ripples against her stomach, reluctantly fascinated. Flora caught a glimpse of his curious face, and nudged her elbow gently into his ribs.

"Haven't you seen that before?"

"Only with horses, pet. It's not quite the same."

"What about Lady Isolde, when she was heavy with Connor?"

Teagan let out a soft laugh - considerate of the dark shadows beneath Wynne's door - then gave another wry shake of the head.

"Isolde favours Orlesian gowns, which all tend to have about sixteen layers of ruffles. A regiment of soldiers could be performing troop manoeuvres under her skirts and we'd be none the wiser."

Flora smiled at the bann, then impulsively reached for his wrist; lifting his hand onto the curve of her stomach.

"Give him a tap," she suggested, and Teagan rapped his fingers lightly against the firm flesh.

There was a pause, and then the bann's eyebrows rose into his auburn hairline as he felt a responding nudge against his palm.

"Maker's Breath," he commented, astounded. "It could feel my touch?"

Flora nodded, an irrationally proud beam spreading over her face.

"He can hear us talking," she added, and Teagan let out a soft laugh of wonder; tapping on her stomach once more. The baby responded with a kick so hearty that Flora gave a little grunt, and Teagan flinched.

"By Andraste – that's as strong as a kick from a Fereldan Forder! Eight weeks left of growing, yes?"

Flora nodded, wondering if it were possible for her body to be bruised from the inside. Teagan withdrew his hand, thoughtful and astonished in equal measure.

"Do you think it's a boy, then? You said, 'he'."

"In Herring, they believe that if you've got a desire for oily fish, it's a boy," Flora explained, wide-eyed. "And I've been wanting nothing but sardines since we left Denerim. I've eaten half our stock already!"

Although it was just village superstition, based on nothing but hearsay and old wives' tales; when looking at Flora's solemn face in that moment, Teagan believed her. Both of them looked down at her twitching stomach, at the child who had survived werewolves in the Brecilian Forest, Arl Howe's treachery at Fort Drakon, multiple assaults by the Darkspawn and - ultimately – the wrath of an Archdemon. They were well aware of what the baby represented to the people of Ferelden, the townspeople of Denerim had wagered heavy coin on birth, weight, name and sex. It was a symbol of new life in the face of despair; of fertility, rejuvenation, and hope for the future.

"It's a lot for one small baby to cope with, Flora thought, tracing the outline of the child's spine. I'm sure you'll be fine, though. You've got Herring grit in your veins, just like me."

Teagan cleared his threat, quashing his sentimentality as he lifted her eyes to his face.

"So, tomorrow's schedule."
The bann relayed to her the information passed on by the South Reach mayor; Flora repeated each point until she had memorised the plan for the day.

"Thank you," she said at last, smiling up at him. "I'll tell Alistair when he wakes up. I think I'm going to eat a snack and then go to bed."

"That sounds like a sound plan," Teagan started, and then stopped abruptly as horizontal lines furrowed across his forehead.

Flora also tilted her head, attention caught by the same noise. There was a rhythmic thudding from the chamber behind them – a periodic collision of wood against wall – that could only be the sound of a vigorously used double bed.

"My room had better not be next door to the bloody elf," Teagan muttered, shooting a dark look over his shoulder at Zevran's chamber. "I wonder who he's got in there with him?"

Flora pushed herself upright, sidling across the corridor and coming to a halt before the occupied chamber door.

"Goodnight, Zevran," she breathed quietly against the wood, underestimating the sharpness of the elf's hearing. The frantic creaking came to a halt, there was a brief moment of silence, and then Zevran opened the door. He was entirely naked, save for a steel helmet positioned strategically over his manhood.

Teagan groaned and put a hand over his eyes, as Flora kept her own gaze diplomatically above the elf's neckline.

"I was just saying goodnight," she said, trying to resist the temptation to look beyond Zevran's lean, sinewy shoulder and see who was in the bed. "I'm sorry to disturb you."

"Nonsense," he breathed, tilting his tattooed cheek to one side in expectation. "I need my goodnight kiss, carina, or I will have frightful nightmares."

He smiled at her, and there was a faint cast of truth over the rich darkness of his irises.

"Sometimes I envy your dreamless slumber, mi corazon."

Flora pressed her lips to one cheek and then the other, just as it was done in both Antiva and Orlais. Then, impulsively, she hooked an elbow around his neck and gave him a one-armed hug; trying not to dislodge the helmet. He embraced her back, beaming at her as he tucked a slender platinum braid behind his ear.

"See you in the morning, nena."

As the elf's door closed, Flora mouthed a silent goodnight towards the senior enchanter's chamber; the audible snores indicating that Wynne was already fast asleep. Feeling her knee twinge – a warning that she needed to take the weight off – she went to say goodnight to Teagan.

"Thank you for coming with us," she said gravely, her pale eyes searching his face. "We appreciate you being here."

"I was getting itchy feet behind the city walls," Teagan replied, wondering whether to peck her cheek goodnight. Instead – as part of his efforts to act more avuncular – he reached out and ruffled her hair, slightly awkward.
"Goodnight, Bann Teagan," Flora said, smiling up at him bemusedly. "See you in the morning."

Chapter End Notes

OOC Author Note: I couldn't find much lore about what land looks like after it's been Blighted, so I just sort of made it up, hehe. I'm looking forward to having them go back to South Reach – they did spend about forty chapters there while gathering noble support. Those were fun chapters to write!

Also, do we think there's any truth in Flora's Herring old wives' tail, about the oily fish? Hehehehe
Back inside the bedchamber, Flora pottered around for several minutes; relighting the candles that had gone out and adding another log to the hearth. Alistair was still snoring on the bed, flat on his back and fully dressed. While Teagan had been detailing tomorrow's schedule, a tray of bread and cheese had been left on top of the dresser by helpful servants. Flora used the knife provided to cut several thick slices from the loaf, and then placed flat squares of cheese between the slices to create a sandwich.

Tearing off a ragged chunk of bread for herself, she clenched it between her teeth and wandered across to the bed with the sandwich in hand. Sitting down on the mattress, Flora cast a fond look down at her best friend; his powerful, prostrate frame resembling a Tevinter statue toppled by the elements.

"I love you so much," she whispered impulsively, reaching out to pat his flung-out hand. "Brother-warden."

Alistair grunted, some barely conscious part of his mind registering her words. His fingers curled upwards to reflexively seek out hers; a moment later, he gave a yawn and stretched back against the cushions. One eye opened, and then the other, blinking away the bleariness of sleep.

"Darling," he mumbled, disorientated. "What time is it? Did I oversleep?"

Flora shook her head, rubbing her thumb over the calloused knuckles of his hand.

"It's still the evening. Do you want a sandwich?"

Alistair pushed himself up against the cushions, stifling a yawn as he smiled dazedly at her.

"Eh! I'm always disorientated after I wake up from a nap. And I'd love a sandwich, my love."

Flora retrieved the sandwich from her lap and handed it to him, brushing away residual crumbs from her legs.

"Thank you, baby."

Alistair carefully divided the sandwich into two equal parts with strong fingers, handing half back to her. Flora took it, and then crawled up the bed to sit beside him, leaning against the cushions at his side. He ducked his head to press a kiss to her hair, and then they ate their sandwiches in comfortable, companionable silence. Flora dozed off shortly afterwards, her head resting on his shoulder.

She was submerged in her peculiar, dreamless slumber for an indeterminate amount of time. When she awoke, their austere quarters were dark and cold. The hearth had burned down to its ashes and the candles were blown out by the draught; there were no Royal servants awake to relight them.

Flora blinked, acclimatising her eyes to the soft, bruised well of shadows that flooded the room. In
her sleep, she had slithered down onto the mattress and now – rolling over - she could see Alistair sitting up against the cushions. Her former brother-warden was staring unseeingly into the darkness, the day's stubble spreading dark across his cheeks. As Flora's vision clarified in small increments, she recognised the dull light of anger in Alistair's hardened hazel stare. It was the same vengeful, bitter look that had settled across his handsome face periodically during the Blight; usually after they had witnessed some wanton piece of devastation inflicted by the Darkspawn.

*This is because of the Blight-scar from earlier,* Flora realised, pushing herself up against the cushions. *He didn't show his anger then because I was hysterical and he needed to calm me down.*

Usually sensitive to Flora's every movement, Alistair was so absorbed in his own thoughts that he had not even noticed that she was awake and staring at him. For all intent and purpose he was not in bed beside her, but wandering the ravaged terrain of the Blighted land, taking in the abandoned farmhouses, the ruined villages and the poisoned soil. When he inhaled, it was an unsteady and laboured gasp of air; as though his lungs were filling with tainted miasma. Despite being king for only a few months, he felt every Darkspawn-inflicted wound on Ferelden as acutely as a laceration on his own body.

Flora had not seen her best friend in this state for several months, regardless, she recognised it well enough. It did not matter that they no longer shared the corrupted blood; that the Archdemon was dead and the Blight ended; in that moment, she was Alistair's sister-warden once again.

She slid an arm around her husband's shoulders and let her breath warm his cold skin, her lips brushing against his ear. Instead of speaking, she kissed his neck; slender, nail-bitten fingers curling into his shirt. The king let out a soft exhalation, his queen's mouth coaxing him back to the present with each insistent press of her lips.

As Flora touched her tongue to Alistair's collarbone, he once more faced the choice between brooding over the day's events, or focusing on his wife's affectionate caresses. He had never before chosen the former, and tonight was no exception. Blinking, he gazed at the top of Flora's dishevelled, dark red head and reached down to stroke her cheek.

"Did… did I wake you, my love?"

"No," she replied, pressing her lips to the hard muscle of his chest. "I woke myself up. You can't sleep?"

"I tried," Alistair said, quietly. "I kept tossing and turning. I couldn't get what we saw earlier out of my head. I can still see it when I close my eyes. All that ruined land, the destroyed buildings."

Flora had suspected as much, and wondered which of her various methods of comfort to employ. Alistair never failed to be distracted by the movements of their child, but the baby had gone to sleep several hours earlier. She thought about whispering reassurance into his ear; but realised that she would simply be repeating his own thoughts back to him. The rational part of Alistair's mind was well aware that it was only a *fraction* of Ferelden that had been poisoned by Blight, that thousands of acres of arable land still remained, that the nation had been exceptionally lucky; yet, all he could see at that moment were the two obliterated villages that the scout had crossed out from the map.

Instead, Flora decided to use a tool of distraction that had never let her down in the past. Shifting slightly on the mattress, she reached up to fiddle with the buttons of her tunic. When Alistair glanced down at her a moment later, Flora gazed innocuously back up at him with one ripe, swollen breast exposed. The paleness of her skin contrasted with the blushing, rosy shade at its peak.

"Do you think my nipple is the size of a silver coin, now?" she asked, wide-eyed and earnest. "Last
time we measured back in Denerim, it was the size of a copper.”

"I… I don't know," Alistair replied, his gaze dropping to her breast. "I've got some coins in my pocket."

Pressing the cold metal against her nipples invariably made them stiffen. By that point, Alistair was suitably distracted from his sour mood; his tongue laving circles around one while he rolled the other between finger and thumb. Shortly afterwards, the dozing guard in the corridor was woken by the rhythmic thud of a headboard against the wall, the sound accompanied by the frantic creaking of a bed-frame.

Once they were both satiated, the newlyweds lay in each other’s arms, bare-skinned and sweaty. When Flora peered up at her best friend's handsome face through the gloom, she was gratified to see that the shadows of anger had dissipated.

"Darling girl," he breathed into the darkness, stroking the back of her head with a clumsy palm. "It's... it's going to be alright, isn't it, my love?"

"Of course it's going to be alright," Flora replied steadily, in the same confident tone that she had once said of course the armies will offer us their aid. We have the Warden treaties. They can't say no. "Ferelden will be fine."

The next morning, as the party rode on horseback towards the ruins of South Reach, Flora repeated her words over and over to herself.

**Of course it's going to be alright. Of course it is.**

The town of South Reach clung to the back of a bluff that protruded from the surrounding plains like the shell of some submerged animal. The buildings were clustered erratically up one tapering slope, which ended in Leonas Bryland's family seat perched precariously on the apex. On the other side of the castle, steep cliffs dropped sharply to the plain below, giving the bluff an almost lop-sided appearance. The population of South Reach had evacuated at the approach of the Darkspawn, many of them cut down on the road as they attempted to flee. The great tainted swath of land lay to the west, a black stain cutting parallel across the fields of the bannorn.

The blacksmith-turned-mayor was at the head of the party, riding a stocky bay pony. Teagan rode alongside him, while Alistair, Flora and Zevran brought up the rear. Several other men from the South Reach restoration committee accompanied them on foot. On mutual agreement over breakfast, they had all brought weapons. Alistair had cast a mistrustful eye up at the shadowed town and gone to rummage through the cart to find his best whetstone, sharpening his blade to a razor's edge.

Flora had no weapon, but was perfectly content to ride surrounded by her companions, with her husband at her back. Unfortunately, nobody else was happy with this solution; aware of how vulnerable their former healer was without her shield.

"Mi florita, you need to learn how to use some sort of weapon to defend yourself," Zevran entreated, his fingers wrapping around the reins as the road gradually began to climb upwards. "The world is a dangerous place, even with the Blight ended."

"But I've tried to learn how to use a weapon, lots of times," Flora protested, feeling Alistair give a little grunt in agreement with the elf. "Your friend Isabela tried to show me how to use a dagger and I couldn't do it. Sten gave up! I was awful."
The elf shot her a pointed look of reprimand, one eyebrow arching upwards.

"Perhaps if you and Alistair had not ended up in bed with Isabela after twenty minutes, you might have learnt a little bit more!"

Several yards in front, Teagan nearly fell off his horse.

"You're right," Flora agreed gravely, then stifled a laugh. "Oh, dear."

Zevran continued, a slight plea in his tone to counteract the humour.

"And the Qunari was training you as though you were a seven foot tall behemoth. You are a girl of small stature, and his techniques were unsuitable; especially considering your current condition."

Flora had no idea what a **behemoth** was, and so gave a solemn nod.

"Mm, bee-moth."

"I will train you myself, nena," the elf continued, determinedly. "During our travels. If Alistair is amenable, of course."

"As long as you don't overexert her," replied Alistair, pressing a kiss to the back of Flora's head. "But if you can do anything to make Lo safer – I'd be eternally grateful."

The elf nodded, and then shot the royal couple a sly, sideways grin; his dark eyes flashing.

"And what if I demand the same payment as Isabela, hm? Which – as I recall – was a kiss."

"Zev," replied Alistair, without a shred of jest in his tone. "If you teach Flo something that she later uses to save her own life, I'd kiss you myself."

The elf cackled, pointing a finger marked in fading ink towards the king.

"Done!"

The company fell silent as they reached the edge of the town. The fields lay barren and crumbled, the soil appearing almost **burned**. The defences that the men of South Reach had constructed – wooden palisades, sandbags and pointed stakes – lay strewn about in forlorn smithereens. The Darkspawn had crashed through them like the tide would sweep away a sandcastle.

Flora swallowed, remembering how she and Wynne had watched Alistair, stripped down to the waist, building up these very defences. The men of the town had been forcedly cheerful, singing tavern songs and exchanging friendly banter as they drove the stakes into the earth.

*There are the woods where I found the wandering Darkspawn. Alistair shouted at me because I went to face them on my own.*

*Ah, I was a bit of an idiot.*

"As you can see, King Alistair," the mayor explained awkwardly, waving an encompassing hand. "The lower ward of the town – well. There ain't much left."

The horses proceeded up into the first part of the town, nearest where the city wall had once stood. This ward had contained mostly residential dwellings, dotted with the occasional unsavoury tavern or cheap brothel. Now, all that remained were the brutally amputated foundations; the empty outlines of where homes and livelihoods had once stood. The wooden frames and stone walls had been pillaged
so thoroughly that hardly a roof tile had been left. Even the cobbled roadways were haphazardly ransacked, their stones removed to reveal bare patches of earth.

"The Darkspawn took the materials to build the siege weapons they used at Denerim," Wynne observed quietly, recalling a letter that Leonas had shown her. "But, Alistair – the air smells fresh enough."

Alistair nodded, forcing himself to lift his chin even as he clutched Flora a little more firmly about the waist.

"It doesn't seem like the taint has sunk deep into the earth," he agreed, with a small nod. "And the buildings can be raised again."

"Arl Leonas has already sent us six cartloads of materials," the mayor added, earnestly. "And he's promised labourers from his property in the Marches."

"He owns silver mines near Ansburg," Flora piped up, remembering that Fergus had once mentioned them. "And a slate quarry!"

They continued to follow the main road as it zig-zagged slowly up the sloping terrain. The mayor announced that they had now reached the middle ward, which had escaped with only minor damage. Many of the shops here had been boarded up; their owners fleeing even before the Wardens had arrived at South Reach. Flora recognised several blacksmiths, a half-dozen leatherworkers, three large taverns and myriad other businesses characteristic of a large and prosperous town. Despite the deterioration caused by months of neglect – missing tiles, broken windows and splintered door frames – their base structures appeared intact.

"This looks a lot more promising," Teagan offered as they rode past an abandoned silversmiths. "Wouldn't take more than a few weeks to get these businesses back up and running."

"So long as the original owners haven't fled to the Marches," replied Alistair, then felt Flora flinch. "Sweetheart?"

Teagan blinked, then realised that the king was talking to his wife. Flora was following Zevran's stare, down an alleyway lined with nondescript, rather ramshackle wooden housing. The elf turned, his dark eyes uncharacteristically sombre as they met Flora's anxious, pale gaze.

*That house over there was where we helped the steward's sister with the birth of her child. Zevran cut it out of her stomach and I healed her up again. Both her and the little baby never made it out of South Reach. I remember Arl Leonas telling me.*

Flora hunched back into Alistair's chest, vaguely hearing Zevran quietly explain the significance of that particular house. Alistair inhaled unsteadily and let the reins drop, using his thighs to control the horse as he embraced her within strong arms.

"My love," he said into her hair, pressing a kiss to the top of her head. "Do you want to go back to the farmhouse?"

"No, no," Flora protested, wiping her nose on her sleeve.

"Darling, I won't have you upset. It's not healthy for you or the baby."

"I'm fine, I'm fine! See!"
She bared her teeth at him in a vaguely terrifying grimace. Alistair stared down at her for a moment and then tightened his grip even more around her waist; reaching down to reclaim the reins.

As Flora composed herself, she distinctly heard her husband murmur an aside to Teagan, his voice low and anxious.

"Will you take my wife back if she gets upset again? I should have known this would be hard for her."

"Aye, she's a sensitive soul," Teagan replied in similarly soft tones. "Of course."

Chapter End Notes

OOC Author Note: Ooh it's been a nostalgia trip so far during this chapter! I remember writing the construction of the South Reach defences chapter back in the original story – it was when Flora wandered off after hearing the call of the Darkspawn, and almost got skewered in a forest. Alistair got genuinely pissed off with her for the first time, and then they shagged in a stables. Aaaah memories!

How creepy would it be though, to travel through the ruins of an abandoned town? I did some research once on plague-villages, where entire settlements were abandoned when the Black Death killed almost the whole population. At least the upper parts of South Reach have escaped much of the devastation.
The eeriest part of their slow ascent was the silence. South Reach, at its apex, had been the most prosperous town in the Bannorn. With a population of eight thousand, it had almost rivalled Gwaren in size and scale. Now it had become a ghost town, with windows and doors boarded over and shop-fronts shrouded with cobwebs. Surviving windows were caked with a thick layer of dust; not even stray dogs had remained to reign over the abandoned settlement. The market square – which was more of a curved U shape, meandering around three sides of the town Chantry – was desolate, the stalls collapsed into sad piles of wood and mouldering cloth. The sound from their horses' hooves echoed about the stone walls, inappropriately loud.

"I haven't even seen any rats," murmured Wynne, clearing her throat. "Nor heard any birds."

The senior enchanter lifted a hand, and a bluish glow radiated from her fingers. Flora, still sensitive to magic being used in front of her, hastily looked away. Wynne let her hand move from side to side, waiting for any corresponding prickles of life to echo in her fingertips. A moment later she shook her head, taking up the reins once more.

"Nothing," she breathed, a frown furrowing itself into her brow. "No signs of life at all."

They had now nearly reached the highest part of the bluff, where the brutal and uncompromising Bryland fortress sat squatly, facing the distant Brecilian Forest in silent challenge. It was one of the ugliest – but most fortifiable – castles in Ferelden, famously holding out against an Orlesian siege for almost a decade.

The entrance portcullis was wedged halfway up, the rusting iron spikes at an alarming angle. The Bryland banners hanging from the outer wall had mouldered away, only a few scraps of tattered green still clinging to their brackets.

"Have you been up here before?" Teagan asked the mayor, and the elevated blacksmith shook his head.

"Didn't feel right without no noble present," he replied, hesitantly. "Y'know, like we was trespassin'."

The party rode hastily beneath the treacherous portcullis, their horses' hoof beats sending percussive echoes about the looming walls. They came to a halt in the greater of the two courtyards, dismounting and tethering the horses to a nearby bracket.

As Alistair and Teagan conferred quietly, Flora wandered into the centre of the courtyard; the memories arriving like unexpected depositions from the incoming tide.

*There's the wing where we stayed. We used to come down those steps every morning, head across the courtyard and break our fast in the great hall.*

*Up there is the tower where I made the golden ship sail in the sky for Connor Guerrin.*

*And over there is the lesser courtyard, with the little Chantry hewn into the bedrock of the castle.*

*I met Fergus for the first time – well, for the first time in a long time – here. Leliana and I sent off the*
letters that summoned the armies to Denerim from Arl Bryland's rookery.

I first realised that something was wrong with my body here. My moonblood was late and I was being sick every morning. I think I did know what was wrong, deep down, but denial was comforting.

As if on cue, the baby woke up and stretched; kicking two sturdy feet into the base of her spine. Flora put a hand to her belly, just as her name wended its way through the still air.

"Flo?"

She saw Alistair – sword and shield in hand – striding towards her, an expression of grim determination writ across his handsome features. Behind him, Teagan and the mayor were similarly armed, gazing up at the stern and inscrutable wall of the fortress.

"Sweetheart," he breathed, sheathing his sword and caressing the side of her cheek carefully with gloved fingers. "We're fetching some papers from Leonas' solar – deeds, ledgers, that sort of thing. Would you stay out here with Wynne and Zevran? We don't know what's inside."

Flora nodded, reaching up to rest her palm atop of Alistair's leather-clad fingers.

"Be careful," she instructed, feeling a twinge of sadness that she could no longer accompany him into the unknown. "Please."

Flora stood on her toes and he ducked his head to kiss her mouth, one hand dropping to caress her stomach affectionately. With Zevran and Wynne at her side, she watched her husband climb the shallow steps leading up to the castle's great hall. Teagan reached out to tug at the door and it yielded with a laborious creak, swinging outwards to reveal a well of shadow within. The men disappeared into the gloom with swords readied; the low sound of their conversation gradually fading.

"I wonder what condition the fortress is in on the inside," Wynne murmured out loud, shielding her eyes against the midday sun as she squinted up at the battlements. "It appears intact enough from out here."

"More's the pity," Zevran shot back, leaning back against the well and casting a look into its stagnant depths. "I'd forgotten how wilfully ugly this place was. It makes Fort Drakon look like the palace at Halamshiral."

Wynne smiled, lowering her gaze from the eastern tower.

"It wasn't designed for aesthetic, Zevran. Anyway, I doubt that Leonas will return here now that he's got the army to curate. His daughter, Habren, will most likely become arlessa when she comes of age."

The elf screwed up his nose, recalling the spoilt, dark-haired arlina who had insisted on decorating her bedchamber in the Orlesian style.

"Ha! She'll have the entire place transformed into a Val Royeaux chateau in months. Nena!"

This was directed towards Flora, who had begun to make her way determinedly towards the lesser courtyard. Zevran and Wynne exchanged a glance, and then hurried in her wake.

"Flora, Alistair doesn't want you to go inside, remember?" Wynne reminded her, nostrils flaring. "We don't know what's been trapped within those walls."
"I know," Flora threw over her shoulder, passing beneath the archway that led to the smaller courtyard. This had once been used as a drilling area, the training dummies leaned half-rotten against one wall. The stables ran along the opposite side of the courtyard, their doors hanging open and stalls empty.

"I promise I'm not going inside," she continued, spotting the narrow archway that marked the entrance to the kitchen allotments. "I want to see what's happened to the garden I grew for Arl Leonas."

Zevran and Wynne glanced at one another, but this request seemed innocuous enough and they could think of no reason why she should not do so.

They followed in Flora's wake as she made her way alongside the thick wall of the fortress. The kitchen allotments, which had once provided South Reach with a dozen different types of vegetable, were now barren and overgrown with weeds. The runner bean poles had toppled, the berry bushes were trampled, and the herb garden was obscured entirely by a thick nest of nettles.

_\textbf{I used to grab a raw carrot or potato whenever I passed through here,} Flora thought sadly to herself, avoiding a puddle of stagnant mud. _\textbf{I could never resist; I didn't know why at the time.}_

After ten minutes, the grey stone wall that ran around the perimeter of the enclosed garden came into view. The walled rose-garden had once belonged to Leonas' wife and after her death, the grieving arl had neglected to tend to it. During the Wardens' month-long sojourn at South Reach, Flora had taken it upon herself to clear away the overgrowth and plant new seeds; prompting artificially fast growth with selective application of her rejuvenative magic.

Now, Flora approached the stone archway with some trepidation, preparing herself for the inevitable sight of her efforts gone to waste. Taking a deep breath, she rounded the corner and stepped into the garden.

Sure enough, as Flora had predicted, the garden had succumbed to disarray in the absence of any interference. The borders, which had once been an array of colourful flowers, were lost beneath a thick forest of blackthorn. The grass was buried beneath moss and creeping weed, and the peach tree was hunched over beneath its own weighty branches. The thicket of fruit trees at the bottom of the garden had been consumed with an overgrowth so thick that the orchard was a mass of shadow.

Flora swallowed, taking a deep breath and blinking back her sadness.

"It can all be pruned and replanted, child," Wynne said softly at her side. "The fact that weeds can grow in the soil shows that it's not polluted."

Flora nodded, grateful for the senior enchanter's comforting words.

"I think there's a few chrysanthemums over there," she said, determinedly. "Beneath those thorns. I'm going to see if I can get some cuttings for my garden."

_\textbf{If I can grow them in the garden back in the Royal Palace, I'll give the new plants to Arl Leonas.}_

The time passed with a slow languor beneath the afternoon sun; mellow heat flooding into the overgrown garden and bouncing between the stone walls. Zevran found a patch of grass and prostrated himself there; Wynne used the head of her staff to clear a tangle of bramble away from a stone bench. After adding a few more sentences to Irving's letter, the senior enchanter let out a soft curse as her ink-pen broke. With a grunt of frustration, she rose to her feet; heading back towards the main courtyard to retrieve a spare.
Flora was kneeling beside the blackthorn, determined to retrieve at least a sprig or two of living chrysanthemum. She had found a shovel leaning against the withered peach tree, and had used it to create a small hole in the midst of the thorns. The baby had gone back to sleep within her belly, nestled with its rear pressed against her spine.

Just then, a flicker of movement caught the tail of her eye. It came from the thicket of trees at the bottom of the garden, and Flora felt a little twinge of alarm. Awkwardly, she clambered to her feet and squinted into the depths of gloomy undergrowth.

_Surely it can't be a Darkspawn. We haven't seen any so far._

_Who's that?_

To Flora's initial shock – and then delight – a woman rose to her feet within the tangled bushes. She was facing away from the garden, clad in a tattered blue gown and with her hair hanging in dishevelled wisps. Her arms were little more than skin and bone, and the tendons stood out sharply in her neck.

_It's a survivor!_ Flora thought to herself, joyfully. _She must have stayed alive by scavenging in the gardens. It's a miracle._

"Hello," she called out earnestly, taking a step towards the woman. "Hellooo?"

"Flora."

The woman's head began to rotate, just as Flora heard Zevran say her name. There was a strange tautness to the elf's voice and she frowned, turning to face him.

"What?"

Her companion was standing several yards from her with every muscle in his body tensed; like some feline predator about to pounce. His pupils had constricted to tiny black dots of focused intensity, and a blade glinted in his hand.

"Do not move, carina," he murmured, his stare unblinkingly fixed beyond her left shoulder. _"Do not move a muscle."_

Flora stared at him in perplexion, her brow furrowing.

"Wha-"

The blade flew through the air with deadly precision, whistling past her ear before burying itself into something fleshy. A thoroughly bewildered Flora turned around on the spot, and then her jaw dropped in disbelief.

The woman was no more than a few feet behind her, a clawed hand stretched outwards. The blue dress clung to a withered, skeletal frame barely covered with mottled flesh, and the woman's papery, black-veined skin clung to her skull. Her eyes were all white pupil, her nose caved in and her mouth a raw wound; there was nothing of the human left about her. As Flora gaped in shock, the creature toppled backwards onto the grass, Zevran's blade having sunk itself with pinpoint accuracy between the eyes.

_It's a ghoul, _she realised, suddenly. _Like Ruck and Hespith from the Deep Roads. But in a more advanced stage of corruption._
Zevran was striding towards her with a hand stretched out, his face alight with a fixed intensity.

"Come on, mi florita," he said measuredly, alert as a Mabari scenting a stranger on the wind. "We are going to return to the main courtyard, get a horse and return to the farmhouse now."

From the other side of the stone wall there came a sudden, animalistic scrabbling; as though something was trying to climb the twelve-foot height.

"To me," Zevran breathed, reaching forwards to anchor Flora's hand in his. "Come, nena."

She had enough presence of mind to grab the hoe as he led her to the centre of the garden, positioning her with the trunk of the peach tree at her back and himself at her front. The scrabbling at the stone now came from both the northern and the western walls; followed by a low, bestial snarl from outside the garden's boundary.

"Don't be scared, mi corazon," Zevran breathed, blades readied at his sides as he stood poised before her. She could see the energy vibrating through his taut limbs like a coiled spring waiting to be released. "You must keep calm, sí?"

"I'm not scared," Flora replied immediately, feeling the rough bark of the peach tree against her shoulder blades as she clutched the hoe. "I'm with you."

The first ghoul made its way successfully over the wall, falling in a tumble of skeletal limbs into the bushes. When it rose, Flora saw that it was clad in Leonas Bryland's colours, the tattered remnants of a tabard clinging to its ravaged body.

It stumbled across the grass towards them with a guttural snarl rising in its throat; Zevran dispatched it with a quick and efficient scissoring of his blades. A moment later two more ghouls came over the wall, twisted mockeries of the servants they had once been. They lunged towards the peach tree, hollow-cheeked and dripping at the mouth.

The elf went first for one and then the other, side-stepping with feline agility as he avoided their clumsy lunges. His knife swung in a glittering arc, slicing through rotten flesh and spongy bone; ending both in quick succession. Their bodies fell to the ground, leaking a greyish, watery fluid across the grass.

Flora heard a sound from behind her and thrust the hoe in a blind sweep. It made a cracking sound as it collided with another creature's skull; moments later, Zevran had spun around and leapt forward, finishing the ghoul with a brutal thrust to the heart.

There followed a long silence, save for the elf's rapid, but measured breaths. Apart from the beads of sweat that had broken out on his tan forehead, Zevran appeared utterly unruffled; his expression cool and calm.

"Alright, mi amor," he said, very quietly. "We are going to return to the courtyard now. We are leaving this castle."

"But, Alistair! Wynne and the others - "

"– Can take care of themselves," her companion finished, steel infusing the words. "Think of the babe."

Flora nodded wordlessly, keeping her grip on the hoe.

"Now, I want you to walk three paces ahead of me, carina. But no more than three, hm?"
Chapter End Notes

OOC Author: OOooh, some excitement! Ugh, what a creepy image though – the tainted servants of Leonas Bryland roaming around the abandoned castle. It was quite sad to write about the garden getting all overgrown once again, especially after I spent several chapters having Flora weed it out and regrow it, haha.

AAAAH the mental image of Flo just standing there, oblivious to this ravaged skeleton of a woman reaching out behind her! The stuff of nightmares, lol. I'm not a brave person at all and I freak myself out very easily, hehee.
Flora and Zevran made their way out of the walled garden unimpeded, following the narrow path between the kitchen allotment and the South Reach fortress. At one point, Flora thought that she heard another ghoulish snarl, sensing the elf tense in preparation. Positioned just behind her, he could see everything ahead and around Flora; while also covering her back.

It turned out to be merely a figment of their imagination – or perhaps the ghoul had changed its mind and slunk off into the shadows. They continued through the allotments without interference, emerging into the lesser courtyard just as the others appeared on its opposite side. The men who had ventured into the castle had their swords drawn, the blades stained with greyish fluid.

"Flora."

Alistair, who wore a face as ghastly as any ghoul, immediately fixed his eyes on her. A small, indescribable sound of relief escaped his throat and he dropped the sword onto the cobbles, striding across the courtyard to see his wife.

"There's ghouls up here," Flora complained, outraged. "The poor servants, I think I recognised one of – oh!"

This was in response to Alistair scooping her bodily up into his arms; turning abruptly on his heel and heading back across the cobbles. Flora wound her arms around his neck, mouthing a question to Teagan as they passed. He grimaced at her and shook his head, bending down to retrieve the king's dropped sword.

Flora turned her face towards Alistair, struck into silence by her best friend's grey pallor and clenched jaw. There was a muscle twitching just below his eye and she inhaled in dismay, realising how frightened he was.

Wynne was waiting in the greater courtyard, staff in hand and three charred ghouls strewn across the flagstones, twitching. The horses were whinnying anxiously; save for the king's bay mare, who had once led an Archdemon on a chase atop the city walls without twitching an ear.

Alistair reached out to loosen the mare's reins, and was just about to lift Flora up onto the saddle when the nearest ghoul lurched to its feet nearby; a ghastly spectre of burnt and rotted flesh, clad in a cook's outfit. It flailed in a blind and ineffectual totter towards Alistair; who gripped his wife in one arm and channelled all of his fear and fury into the swing of his responding punch. His fist – which was clad only in a leather riding glove, drove straight into the creature's decomposed face and out the back of its head. The ghoul's skull broke apart like a rotten melon; pulpy brain matter flying in all directions.

Flora blinked, absentmindedly wiping some grey fluid from her cheek.

"I call that: doing a Howe," she offered eventually, for want of anything else to say. "Remember when I .... Arl Howe...?"

This was not a particularly wise choice of recollection; Alistair had hated Howe as much as he had hatred the Archdemon, and on a far more personal level. He shot Flora a reproachful look, lifting her up onto the saddle and abruptly clambering on behind her. Without waiting for the others – his
thoughts solely on removing his wife and child from danger as rapidly as possible – he turned the horse towards the portcullis and prompted it into a brisk walk.

As they passed back into the eerie stillness of South Reach's upper ward, Flora leaned back against Alistair's chest and exhaled. There was a slightly suspect aroma drifting up from her lap; she realised that the source was Alistair's bloodied arm, currently wrapped around her waist. She eyeballed it for a moment, watching the greyish sludge seep into the lambs' wool of her tunic, then gave an inward shrug.

*Alistair and I were covered in worse at various points during the Blight.*

From somewhere behind and above them, Flora heard the others riding across the drawbridge that separated the castle from the town. She wondered if Alistair would slow their pace to wait for the others, but he remained staring fixedly ahead, urging the mare onwards in a brisk walk.

They passed by the abandoned town Chantry, its empty windows staring out like blind, resentful eyes. Flora remembered suddenly the reason that Alistair had gone inside the castle, and swivelled around in the saddle.

"Did you find Arl Leonas' papers?" she asked, curiously. "And his lodger? I mean, ledger?"

Alistair did not reply for several moments and when he eventually did, his voice emerged as taut as a bowstring.

"Don't talk to me yet," he snapped, his eyes swivelling side to side in a search for lurking threats. "Just let me focus on getting you both out of this fucking town."

Flora grimaced but fell quiet, almost bringing her fingernails to her mouth before realising that her hand was covered in greyish sludge. The baby woke up within her belly – ironically, it had been asleep for the duration of the ghoul attack – and gave its mother a little nudge. She ignored it, thinking on her best friend's grim-faced anger.

Alistair did not stop the horse until they had ridden down through the neglected middle ward, the obliterated lower ward, and out through what remained of the town gate. As they turned onto the trail through the dry and dusty fields, he slowed the mare to a more gentle walk; exhaling long and unsteadily. In the distance, the Blight scar was visible as a dark smudge on the horizon, casting a menacing shadow over the placid summer's day.

Alistair had still not uttered a word, his fingers bone-white as they clenched the reins. Flora mentally ran through her own actions, wondering if she had somehow been responsible for the afternoon's danger.

*No, I don't think so. He said not to go inside; I stayed outside. And there were ghouls in the courtyard too, not just in the garden.*

*I haven't even said thank you to Zevran yet.*

She twisted as far as she was able on the saddle, just about catching a glimpse of the others emerging beneath the town gate ruins. They were only about a quarter-mile behind and would soon catch up; their horses were free to pursue faster speeds. Just ahead lay the farmhouse where the company had been staying, beneath the sharply sloping end of the bluff. South Reach castle loomed overhead with a particularly gloomy air, now that Flora knew what pitiful inhabitants resided there. To augment the general desolation, thunder clouds were rapidly rolling in from the direction of the Brecilian Forest; casting a strange light over the hills of the bannorn.
Alistair drew the mare to a halt in the yard before the farmhouse, just as the first low roll of thunder echoed overhead. Fat drops of rain began to splash against the dirt as a South Reach local came hurrying from an outbuilding to take the reins. The king, with a face to match the skies overhead, slid off the saddle and immediately reached up to help Flora down, lowering her carefully to the ground. Even when she was safely on the cobbles, he did not let her go for several minutes, his fingers firmly wrapped around his own.

Alistair then launched into a tirade of furious accusations; blaming the South Reach mayor for not searching the castle beforehand; blaming the guards for not accompanying them into the town; blaming himself for letting his wife out of his sight. Flora knew this anger well – it bore the same characteristics as the old bitterness over his birth-right, and was rooted in fear.

The others arrived in the middle of Alistair's stream of invective; the horses immediately flickering their ears in alarm at the raised voice. They dismounted, with eyes swinging between the pacing Alistair and the downcast Flora, who was sitting inelegantly on a barrel. Teagan shot her a glance and she gave a little shrug, knowing better than to interrupt her best friend when he was in full flow.

Zevran looked across at Flora and flashed her a wan smile; she roused herself from her gloom to mouth thank you across the cobbles. The elf shook his head in a quick don't mention it, blowing her a kiss.

The South Reach blacksmith-turned-mayor now received the brunt of the king's outrage, which he bore with remarkable fortitude.

"My wife," Alistair snarled, in a remarkable and unconscious mirror of Maric. "My wife is expecting a child, and you led us into that death trap. The place was swarming with ghouls! Why was it not scouted out? If she'd been hurt – or worse! Maker's Breath."

The king did not give the man a chance to reply, continuing to launch blistering accusations of blame. After several more minutes spent repeating the same points over and over; the mayor was dismissed abruptly. The former blacksmith shuffled off into the farmhouse, head hanging low as he wrung his cap in his hands.

"Alistair," said Teagan measuredly, unfastening his horse's bridle. "There's no point in getting angry after the fact. We'll learn our lesson for next time."

"I know what lesson I've learned," Alistair retorted, his eyes swinging across to Flora. "Flo isn't strong enough to be exposed to a place like this. She's so vulnerable, now. Helpless."

To hear the truth spoken so brutally was akin to receiving a slap to the face. Flora flinched as though he had struck her; her pale eyes widening and a hurt flush rising up the length of her neck. Alistair put his hand to his head and let out a humourless laugh, the fear from earlier still smouldering in the depths of his pupils.

"It was selfish of me to want to marry you, my love," he said, bleakly. "I wanted you to be my wife and take the throne as my queen. But I would sleep so much easier if you could shield yourself, Flora. I'd be content to keep you as my mistress, if your spirits were protecting you still. I- I wish more than anything that you still had your magic."

Flora had heard enough. She clambered to her feet - grateful for the cold stoicism of her natural face - and turned her face away from the courtyard, heading blindly away from this unwelcome truth.

"Alistair!"
Wynne cut sharply across the king, her duck-egg blue eyes flashing. Alistair stopped abruptly, the mottled flush of anger draining from his face to reveal a pallid undertone of fear.

"Ah, Maker," he croaked, dragging his hand over his face as he sat down on the barrel that Flora had so recently vacated. "I don't think that came out how I intended it to."

"You'd be surprised how often that happens," Zevran murmured from nearby, reproach running through each word. "When you speak in anger."

Alistair ran a despairing hand through his hair until it stood on end, turning his eyes on Teagan.

"What did I say to Flo, uncle? I can't even remember. My brain feels like it's been knocked around in my skull. I was so frightened."

He looked down at his glove, which was still coated with the drying contents of the ghoul's skull.

"Well, you wished that Flora was still a mage, instead of your wife" Teagan stated, a quiet but weighty note of reprimand in his tone. "Which – just to remind you – would make your child a bastard."

"And implied that she's somehow diminished by the loss of her spirits," added Zevran, equally un-amused. "I would be more than happy to take your queen off your hands, if you have grown tired of having one."

Alistair groaned, putting both hands over his face.

"Ah, Maker's Breath – that's not what I meant at all! I'm such an idiot. Why do my words always come out so different to the way they sound in my head? I have to find her."

Wynne reached out to put a hand on Alistair's arm as he stood, shaking her head swiftly back and forth in a cautionary gesture.

"I would give her some time, Alistair."

The king slumped back down onto the barrel and pressed his fists into his head, gritting his teeth.

Meanwhile, Flora had headed off in the direction of the barn behind the farmhouse; taking deep gulps of afternoon air. This was supposed to both cool and calm her, but it was so humid that it felt like inhaling mouthfuls of watery, luke-warm soup. She rubbed a hand over her eyes, willing herself not to cry.

I wish I still had my spirits, too. And I know that I'm weak, you don't need to tell me.

I never appreciated how fortunate I was. I took my abilities for granted. I thought they'd be with me forever.

Not entirely certain of where she was going, Flora passed the barn doors and entered a storage-shed that had been converted into a makeshift stables. There were a dozen horses resident in the stalls; mostly Ferelden Forders, but with a few Marcher steeds standing amongst them. They chewed messy mouthfuls of hay, eyeing Flora curiously.

Flora recognised Alistair's tall bay mare at the far end; its dark coat damp with perspiration. On seeing her it gave a little whicker of recognition, and she wandered down the central aisle towards it: avoiding several buckets and a toppled pitch fork.
"Hello, horse," said Flora, tilting her gaze up to its noble brow. "I keep forgetting your name."

The horse didn't seem to care. It bumped a long, white-striped muzzle against her chest, nostrils quivering. Flora realised that it was searching for the raw, earth-covered carrot that she had surreptitiously tucked between her breasts that morning.

"Oh no! Not my snack."

The horse eyed her belligerently, and Flora relented, retrieving the carrot and holding it up, tentatively. Although horses had been a necessary part of her life for the past year; they had barely featured during her time at the Circle, or in Herring. Even during the past year, she had always shared a saddle with Alistair; who, loving horses, naturally took charge.

"I hope you appreciate-" she began, and then froze in terror as the huge horse lunged forward, teeth bared and nostrils flared. It devoured the carrot in two large chomps, flecks of orange falling to the hay-strewn dirt.

"Oh!" Flora said, both impressed and slightly traumatised.

She reached up and scratched the horse's nose, feeling the short, bristled coat beneath her bitten nails. The horse let out a low snort, swishing its tail in a gentle, contented arc.

A mouse skittered between the stalls in a streak of soft grey. The sudden, scuttling noise caused several neighbouring horses to shuffle in alarm, their nostrils drawing tight and ears pointed forward. Alistair's horse remained placid and calm, staring down at the queen solemnly with a beautiful, liquid-dark eye. Flora smiled up at it, suddenly struck with a memory that had not surfaced for many months.

"When Duncan took me from the Circle, I had to ride a horse for the first time. You won't know Duncan, he's dead," she added, with the perennial twinge of grief.

"Anyway, I'd only ever seen horses before when the Templars came to capture me from Herring. We never used to get horses in Herring, because nobody ever wanted to visit us, for some reason. I don't know why! Oh, I'm getting off track. Anyway, so I had to ride a horse. And I fell off about sixty times on the road to Ostagar. Then we got attacked by bandits and my horse ran off, so I had to share a saddle with Duncan. He promised to teach me to ride better, but… we ran out of time. There wasn't enough time."

The horse, bored of Flora's monologue, turned away from her and went to take a drink from the water-bucket in the corner. Flora eyed it for a moment and then let out a little sigh, the strange melancholy that always accompanied recollections of Duncan settling upon her like a damp blanket. She remembered his tawny, lined face more clearly than any of her Circle instructors; the sound of his voice – northern, with a faint tinge of somewhere else – as familiar as the waves on the Herring shore.

'You have a rare and wonderful gift,' he'd said. 'Use it well.'

Duncan would never recruit me as I am now. He chose me because of my spirits, and they're gone.

Chapter End Notes
OOC Author Note: Ooh we need to get Flo that weapons training asap, she is a bit useless at the moment. I think Alistair has got a point, but he did express it in a slightly clumsy way! Flora is well aware of how her shield used to withstand an Archdemon's flame- and now she can't even defend herself from a couple of crappy ghouls.
Alone in the stables Flora exhaled, feeling her shoulders slump. She gave the horse a farewell pat, glancing up at the sloping wooden roof as the clouds unleashed the rest of their humid contents. Thunder rolled once more in the distance, ominous as the drums of an approaching army.

Yet Flora had been raised on the Storm Coast, where thunder and lightning were the weather's one constant. Ignoring the distant rumbling, she wandered through the remainder of the stables and into a small paddock that lay to the rear. Several goats were sheltering from the rain beneath a wilted tree; nearby a chicken pecked at a puddle.

Silas, the blacksmith-turned-mayor of South Reach, sat on an empty stone trough at the edge of the paddock. The man was staring down at his careworn hands, either unaware of the rain, or entirely ignoring it. He started as though woken from a dream when Flora sat down on the edge of the trough beside him; eyes widening as he spun his head towards her.

"Your majesty!" he croaked, scrambling so rapidly to his feet that he almost skidded on the damp grass. "Queen Florence!"

Flora, who was stretching out her sore knee, let out an ambivalent grunt.

"Your majesty, I can't say how sorry I am- " the mayor continued desperately, looking as though he were about to fall to his knees in the mud.

"Eh?" she asked, perplexed. "Sorry for what?"

"For putting you and the Royal heir in the danger. Your majesty, if anything'd happened to you or the baby, my life wouldn't be worth two coppers. Please, forgive me!"

Flora gazed silently up at him for a moment, then patted the trough in a prompt for him to sit down.

"There's nothing to forgive," she said, with Herring rationale. "You couldn't have known that there were ghouls in the castle grounds."

"I should have sent men to scout it out," Silas declared, a grimace embedded across his weary features. "To clear the keep of enemies. King Alistair was right to blame me for endangering you."

"But you don't have any scouts," Flora retorted, narrowing her eyes. "Arl Leonas has sent builders, and carpenters, and tools for fixing things. He's not sent any guards or weapons. It's not your fault that there are still threats within the castle."

The baby woke up and gave a wriggle on hearing the impassioned voice of it's mother. Flora dropped a hand to her stomach, stroking the curve of a small rump through the skin.

"You need proper soldiers to help you," she said, earnestly. "I'll write to Arl Leonas today. Or – I'll ask Wynne or Bann Teagan to write. Alistair can authorise troops to be sent down, too."

They sat in silence for several minutes, watching the goats huddling beneath the tree. A whip-crack of lightning shot across the sky, illuminating the hills of the Bannorn in a split-second of electric light. A rumble of thunder followed in its quicker cousin's wake as the humid rain continued to fall,
turning the dust beneath the trough to mud.

"I don't know why I ever thought I could be mayor," the blacksmith said, suddenly. "Forgive me, your majesty, but I didn't even want to be mayor of South Reach. The others chose me during one of the committee meetings."

"Well," Flora replied, squeezing water from her rain-soaked sleeve. "There must be a reason why they chose you."

"If there is, I don't know it."

Flora gave a little shrug, letting go of the wet material.

"Give yourself a chance," she said, recalling how she had once rejected even the temporary title of Warden-Commander. "You can learn on the job, like I did."

Like I'm still doing, Flora thought, thinking of the crown packed away in a watertight case within Teagan's travel-trunk.

"But the king is in a fearful rage," Silas said suddenly, paling a fraction. "With me, in particular. He'll demand for my resignation."

"No, I won't."

The mayor clambered to his feet in a panic as Alistair emerged from the stables, the rain plastering his golden hair to his head. His eyes shot towards Flora; with great difficulty, he stopped himself from going straight to her side.

"Your majesty!" Silas bleated, looking half-tempted to prostrate himself in the muddy field. "Please forgive me for endangering your queen."

"I shouldn't have blamed you, ser," Alistair replied, frankly. "As Bann Guerrin has explained, you've had no military support from Denerim. I'll write to Arl Leonas and have some troops sent down to assist in the clearing of the castle."

Flora blinked at her best friend, inwardly pleased that their thoughts had run along similar lines. Alistair stared back at her for a moment, his eyes searching her face; desperate to go to her but knowing that this business needed to be resolved first. King and mayor conversed for several minutes, ignoring their incongruous backdrop of a paddock and myriad puddles. Silas grew more at ease with each exchange, shoulders straightening and eyes brightening.

"Well, that's settled, then," Alistair said at last, his gaze returning once more to where Flora was perched on the empty trough. "We'll discuss the particulars before our departure, tomorrow. Now, if you don't mind, I'd… I'd like to speak with my wife."

The mayor nodded and bowed deeply, far more cheered than he had been a half-candle prior. He made his way back towards the stables, his chin elevated and determined in expression.

Once the paddock was empty, save for the goats and the chicken, Alistair strode forwards and dropped to his knees before his queen; careless of the mud and damp grass.

"Flora."

Flora blinked, looking down at her husband as he knelt before her, the rain streaming down his brow. Alistair reached out to take her fingers, pressing them hard against his lips in a kiss.
"I'm so sorry for what I said before, my love," he breathed. "Don't pay attention to any of it, I just – sometimes, I just don't think before I speak. I thank the Maker every day that you're my wife. I'm the luckiest man on Thedas to be married to you. And being king is so much easier with you as my queen. I wouldn't want it any other way."

She stared down at him as he clutched her fingers tightly; unwilling to release her hand.

"I… I failed to protect you and our child earlier," Alistair continued, a note of despair ringing hollow in the words. "And it terrified me. I was furious with myself, and I took it out on you."

"And Mr. Mayor."

"And the mayor," he agreed, feverishly. "Forgive me, Lo. But the thought of you in danger – if you or the baby had been hurt- I wasn't thinking straight."

As his face contorted in sudden distress, she reached out and touched the top of her best friend's head; her fingers brushing over his wet hair.

"But you did protect us," she said, earnestly. "You asked Zevran and Wynne to come on the progress. And Zevran killed five of them in the garden, and Wynne the same amount by the horses. None of the ghouls even got within touching distance of me. I never felt like I was in danger."

Poor creatures. I wonder why they didn't flee the castle with the others? Perhaps they thought they'd be safe in Ferelden's most defensible fortress.

Alistair blinked; he had not thought of the situation from this perspective.

"You're right," he said eventually, pushing himself up from the mud and perching on the trough beside her. "I need to thank them. But, I shan't make the same mistake again, Flo. When we go to Lothering – or anywhere else that could be dangerous – I'm not going to stray from your side."

As another rumble of thunder echoed across the hills of the Bannorn, Alistair bowed his head to press a kiss against her damp cheek.

"Anyway, I've thought of a solution," Flora announced as he drew back. "Once this baby is born, I can start taking ragwort. Leliana told me about it; it stops your womb from catching."

"Flo-"

"So I won't get with child any more," Flora continued, hastily. "Then I can learn how to fight, and defend myself. With knives, and swords, and axes, and…. garrottes. And then you won't need to worry about me so much. I'll be as deadly as Leliana."

And I won't be weak and vulnerable anymore, she thought grimly to herself.

"Axes? Garrottes?"

Alistair had been shaking his head slowly from side to side, his eyes widening in dismay as he listened. He reached out to cup her face gently within his palm, sliding his fingers into her wet hair.

"My love, if that's what you truly desire, I'll support you," he breathed, probing the depths of her Waking Sea eyes with his stare. "But… is that really what you want? To be like Leliana?"

Flora shrugged, turning over her hands and staring down at her nail-bitten fingers.

"I don't think so," she replied, honestly. "I don't know what I want to do with myself, other than
trying to fix what's broken in this country. And help the elves in the alienage. What do you want?"

"Me?"

"Mm."

"Honestly?"

"Yes," she said, lifting her eyes curiously to rest on his face. "Honestly."

"I want to have all the children that the Maker blesses us with," Alistair replied, his face open and earnest. "I want to make you a mother many times over, my sweet wife."

"Many? Many times?" Flora asked, alarmed. "How many?"


Flora thought about this for several moments, absentmindedly fiddling with a loose thread trailing from Alistair's tunic sleeve.

Alistair has never had much in the way of family, even though he calls both Eamon and Teagan uncle.

Whereas I doubled my family when I found out that I was a Cousland.

"Well then, maybe I won't take the ragwort after the baby comes," she replied, smiling at him.

The king inhaled unsteadily, sensing that she had forgiven him for his earlier thoughtless comments. Flora did not see the point in holding grudges, and anyway, she understood that Alistair had been shaken to the core by his pregnant wife's brush with danger. She still remembered the pure white bolt of fear-fuelled rage that had shot through her when an assassin's dagger had come within an inch of Alistair's throat before she had intercepted it.

I made my shield punch the man through the side of a cart and let it pin him up upside down; his skin turning blue as I shrieked all the northern curses I could think of, crude as a Herring fishwife. Then I couldn't speak afterwards for almost an hour, I was so badly frightened. I was in tears all night and Alistair had to hold me.

Fear makes you think quickly, but not with reason.

Flora let her fingers slide gently between Alistair's large, tan knuckles; familiar with the wear that had resulted from years of wielding a blade. She knew intimately the location of every groove and callus, could describe each freckle from memory alone. She had spent the best part of a year clutching this hand as a talisman against both bad dreams and Blight, until it felt almost an extension of her own body.

Alistair turned his hand over to link their fingers more tightly together, nestling his chin affectionately against the top of her head.

"My love," he murmured hoarsely, rubbing his thumb in slow circles across the back of her hand. "I want to keep planting children in you until we have a whole litter running about the palace. My beautiful wife."

Flora smiled at him, feeling the baby fidget within her as though able to hear their plans to create
some little brothers and sisters to keep it company. Alistair shot her a quick, sideways glance; the faintest flush rising to his cheeks.

"I've already asked the midwife for advice on how to make your womb catch," he confessed, slightly embarrassed. "In case – in case we wanted to make another baby quickly."

Flora's eyebrows rose; as a former healer, she was still fascinated by the complex inner workings of the body.

"How?"

"I can't spill my seed over my hand," he replied, caught between amusement and self-consciousness. "So I won't be able to watch you bathe in the mornings, ha. And she gave me a special tea to drink to enhance my potency."

"Not one of Zevran's teas! I think they have bad side effects."

"No! Not that kind of potency. And in your fertile period, I'll need to excuse myself from the royal council afternoon session. Just long enough for me to put my seed in you in the middle of the day."

"Making more royal heirs sounds like an activity the council should support," breathed Flora, wide-eyed. "Maybe they could put it as the last item on the day's agenda and bring in a bed. Eamon would approve."

"You little minx!" Alistair kissed her ear, deciding not to mention a certain dream he'd had recently involving the royal throne and his naked queen. "Stop, or I'll embarrass myself in front of those goats."

Flora smiled up at him and he leaned forward, letting her hook her arms around his neck. She knew full well what had brought on this sudden bout of broodiness in her best friend: the death-tinged Blight scar, the destroyed villages within, the abandoned town of South Reach and its ghoul-infested castle.

_This is like when we used to lie together all the time during the Blight. During the darkest and most desolate weeks, we joined ourselves three or four times a night, night after night after night. Each climax was like an affirmation of life in the midst of death._

_Talking about the future and creating new life together – birthing a litter of children – it's the same thing. It's a form of defiance._

"Start drinking the tea now, then," Flora said, impulsively. "As soon as the midwife says it's alright, we can start making some brothers and sisters for this one."

Alistair beamed at her, genuine delight spreading over his face as he drew her into his arms.

"You mean it?"

"Mm," replied Flora, who liked children and quite fancied the notion of a large family. "I mean it."

The rest of the afternoon was spent in a four hour meeting of the South Reach restoration committee. This took place in what had once been the farmhands' mess quarters, the only chamber large enough to house several dozen at once. The attendees discussed several pertinent issues, including the
summoning of Royal troops from Denerim to clear the castle of ghouls. The mayor had glanced at Alistair with some trepidation as the topic was raised, but the king's earlier anger was passed; soothed by Flora's gentle reassurance in the paddock.

Docile as a well-fed Mabari, Alistair sat beside his wife with a hand on her knee, his fingers absentmindedly tracing patterns on her thigh as he listened to the men speak. Teagan made the occasional comment, scrawling notes on a roll of parchment to send to Eamon. The Guerrins rarely used secretaries to take down their letters; trusting only correspondence writ in the hand of the other.

Just before the meeting was adjourned, Alistair cleared his throat, immediately drawing both the attention and the silence of the chamber. Curious eyes turned to the king; many darting glances to the side where the Hero of Ferelden sat, quiet and solemn-faced.

"I'm going to grant South Reach a ten-year leasehold over the northern isle of Wickway," Alistair said, naming the territory that he had been given as part of Flora's dowry. "There are copper mines on the island that make good coin. Use the profits to help rebuild."

"Your majesty!" breathed the mayor, as an excited murmur broke out around the room. "I – I can't thank you enough. I know you've no personal ties to our town."

"I'm the king," Alistair replied, with a wry smile. "I've ties with every patch of land in Ferelden. Also, the queen and I spent a month here before we travelled to Denerim. We both want to see it restored to its former condition."

Flora impulsively leaned over and kissed her husband on the cheek; suddenly very proud of him. Alistair smiled sideways at her, wishing that they were alone.

Chapter End Notes

OOC Author Note: Aaaah, this was a nice chapter to write! I always imagined Alistair as wanting a big family. I can forgive Alistair for being so foot-in-mouthy last chapter (which he definitely was – poor Flo, she's well aware that her spirits aren't with her anymore!) because he was terrified. Ten kids though! GOOD LUCK, FLORA.
After dinner – a simple, hearty meal of rustic Fereldan fare – they retired to Wynne's quarters for the evening. Teagan and Zevran played a game of dice in one corner, while Flora and the senior enchanter practised her writing in the other. Flora's companions had taken on a joint responsibility for her literacy, and the queen never lacked for somebody to read with. Alistair was trying to focus on Teagan's notes from earlier; in reality, he was still exulting over Flora's ready agreement to increase the size of their family. The thought of his best friend with several children at her feet and a babe suckling at her breast made the breath catch in his throat from sheer longing.

"What are you beaming at, Alistair?" Wynne asked from across the room, turning the page of her book as Flora hesitantly enunciated the last sentence. "You look like a Mabari left alone with a meat pie."

"Nothing," Alistair replied hastily, putting aside Teagan's letter. "Shall we play a game of Wicked Grace?"

"Strip Grace?" enquired a hopeful Zevran, and received several glowers.

Wynne, Zevran, Teagan and Alistair all sat around the table, bringing their candles across to light the patterned cards as they were dealt across the wood. Flora had elected to finish copying out Wynne's carefully scribed sentences; legs crossed beneath her as she rested the parchment on her plump stomach.

"Shall we play Nevarran rules?" Teagan suggested, shuffling the final few cards remaining in the deck before placing them face-down on the table.

The bann's suggestion was agreed, and soon each player was peering down at their cards. Zevran didn't spare his hand more than a quick glance before leaning back in his chair and curling the corner of his mouth.

Alistair spotted the elf's lip curl upwards, and let out a bellow of laughter.

"That feigned smile won't fool me anymore, Zev. I know that you only grin when you've got a losing hand."

The elf's dark eyes widened innocently, and he put tanned, tattooed fingers to his chest with mock-indignity as Wynne laughed.

"Alistair! I suggest that you stick to the business of governance, rather than facial analysis," he countered, flashing very white teeth in the candlelit shadow. "My face is an Orlesian mask of trickery."

"Well, I think you're bluffing," Alistair started and then gaped, eyes widening. "Wynne! Did you just look at my cards?!"

Wynne gave a little laugh as the elf cackled in delight.

"I take advantage of all opportunities presented to me!" the senior enchanter retorted, eyes sparkling. "You shouldn't hold your cards at such an overexposed angle."
The three other players smiled at Alistair's outrage. The king's handsome, open features were capable of as much duplicity as a new-born babe; whatever emotion he was experiencing was writ plain across his face.

"Sweetheart," Alistair called across the room, still indignant. "Come and help me when you're finished. I'm in need of your ambiguous beauty."

"I'll grant you, her face may be without bias," Zevran murmured in Teagan's ear, surreptitiously glancing at the bann's cards as he leaned across. "But she goes 'hee hee hee!' when she has a winning hand, and 'I want to swap my cards' when she has a poor one."

Meanwhile Flora, who was sweating with the effort of wrangling the letters into some sort of order, decided that she was finished. When she looked down at the lines she had copied, they appeared more Ancient Tevinter than Wynne's neatly scribed writing.

*I think there must be something not quite right with my brain,* she thought, slightly wistfully. *I'm sure I should be improving more quickly than this.*

Putting the parchment to one side, Flora unwound her legs and clambered awkwardly to her feet, wandering across to where the others were gathered around the table. She went to Alistair and sat down on his thigh, leaning back against his chest as he put an arm around her waist.

"I need your help," he whispered in her ear, unable to resist nuzzling his face into her cheek. "I think I'm going to lose."

Flora nodded, then turned her solemn face towards Alistair's rivals.

"We need another hand," she announced to the table, all of whom gaped at her in mild disbelief.

"But you are working with Alistair, carina!" replied Zevran, trying not to laugh. "And he already has his allocated hand."

"Well, the baby is playing too," Flora retorted without batting an eyelid. "It needs some cards."

"How can it play?" continued the elf, voice shaking with the effort of restraining his cackles.

"I'm it's mother," Flora retorted, placing a hand on her stomach. "I know what it wants."

She turned earnest, entreating eyes towards Teagan, who blinked wordlessly for a moment. Aware that he was being cajoled but unable to deny the queen's limpid and long-lashed stare, the younger Guerrin coughed and doled out another hand of cards.

"Bann Teagan!" reprimanded Wynne, nostrils flaring. "You are too shrewd to fall for the beguilement of a pretty face."

Teagan gave a helpless shrug of defeat, smiling back at Flora as she beamed at him, reaching forwards to take the extra hand.

To the general astonishment of the group, she then proceeded to swap several of the baby's cards with those in Alistair's possession; until the king had ended up with a far more favourable hand.

"What are you doing?!" squealed Zevran, wide-eyed. "You shameless little hussy. This is cheating on a scale that even I would not engage in!"

"The baby wants to help it's father," replied Flora, sweet and brazen.
"It's inherited Flo's generous nature," added Alistair, who was now laughing openly.

Flora beamed, leaning back against her best friend's chest and folding her fingers across her stomach.

Despite Flora's blatant cheating, Alistair still ended up losing badly. His Marician features lacked any artifice or cunning, and his wife could not offer any particularly helpful advice. She had spent most of the game weaving the loosened laces of his tunic into fishing knots; her fingers automatically working the strings into familiar patterns.

*Clinch knot; palomar knot; turtle knot-*

*Turtle knot...*

*How do I tie a turtle knot again?*

Flora felt a cold jolt of fear trickle down her spine. Herring suddenly seemed an ocean further away than it had done a few moments prior; her heartbeat lurching forward erratically.

*I can't have forgotten how to tie a turtle knot. It's the main knot used to tie a thin line to a small hook. I used to tie it a dozen times a day back in Herring.*

*In the Circle, I tied the different knots into my own hair to make sure I didn't forget them. But I didn't do it during the Blight, because I was so preoccupied with everything else.*

*Have I forgotten how to tie a turtle?*

She closed her eyes, hoping fervently that – with the deprivation of her senses - the memory might return to her.

Zevran, naturally, won all three rounds. Wynne came close to victory on the second game, but the elf's wiles were too convoluted for even the senior enchanter to match. Conceding defeat, Wynne bade them all goodnight; passing her farewell on to the apparently dozing Flora. Teagan took his leave shortly afterwards, reminding Alistair that the committee meeting would start shortly after breakfast the next morning.

Finally, Zevran, Flora and Alistair were left alone in the upper chamber, the candles guttering in a breeze from the open hearth. Zevran was humming an Antivan-tinged melody softly to himself, sorting out the cards with dexterous fingers. The rest of the farmhouse had fallen quiet around them, since the majority of the South Reach restoration committee had also retired to bed. Their room alone still gleamed with candlelight; a single spot of brightness amidst an array of dull windows.

Still Alistair was leaning back in his chair, both arms encircling his best friend as she slumped against his chest, her eyes tightly closed. His hand gripped the back of her neck with careful gentility, one callused thumb rubbing slow circles into her skin.

"Zev?" the king said suddenly, his voice cutting across the smoky room.

The former assassin looked up from the cards, dark eyes coming to rest on Alistair's face.

"Sí, amor?"

Alistair opened his mouth to spill forth a rambling and effusive thanks. He was aware that without the elf's consummate skill with a blade, the newly vulnerable Flora would have been easy prey for the ghouls of South Reach. The king's earlier fear and anger had faded, leaving behind a relief so potent that he could almost taste it sharp on his tongue.
"You don't need to say it, Alistair."

Zevran could read faces like Flora's Herring-dad could read the sky; and could see the gratitude writ naked across Alistair's features.

"But-"

"It is unnecessary. You know I would never allow a hair on her head to be harmed. Nor for any ill to befall your little babe."

Alistair nodded, clutching Flora as a sudden wave of dizzy gratitude overcame him. When she opened her eyes and let out a plaintive wail, the king startled – he had thought she was asleep.

"I've forgotten it!" Flora bemoaned, her face contorted with dismay. "I can't believe it, I can't believe it. How could I have forgotten it?"

Zevran and Alistair shared a bemused glance.

"Forgotten what, my love?" Alistair asked, tightening his grip on his wife as she fidgeted unhappily on his lap. "Sweetheart, calm down."

"The turtle knot," Flora replied immediately, a distinct tremor in her words. The north always emerged more strongly when her emotions ran strong; the vowels flattening like expanses of coarse sand. "I can't remember how to tie it. I can't remember!"

"The twirly what?"

Flora's lower lip wobbled and she heaved herself up from Alistair's lap, her head spinning as though trying to locate the nearest large body of water.

"I have to find a fisherman!"

"Darling, we're over a hundred miles inland."

"But I need to remember the turtle knot."

A stubborn light had fallen on Flora's face; she looked ready to walk the leagues back to the coast that very moment.

"What does the turtle knot look like?" Zevran interjected, softly. "Don't cry; describe it for me, nena."

Flora bit anxiously at her thumbnail, shifting from foot to foot on the floorboards as Alistair rose to embrace her.

"It's used to tie a hook to a leader," she replied, in a small voice. "You eye the line, then make a little loop, then carry on the line to make an overhand-"

Flora's fingers moved in the air, illustrating these first few steps of tying the knot. As her mind went blank once again at the crucial stage, she let her hands fall with an unsteady gulp of air.

Although Zevran was not familiar with the specific vernacular of fishermen, he was fluent in the tying of knots. He immediately recognised the knot that Flora was shaping; although he had used it in very different circumstances.

"Here, carina," he murmured, rising to his feet and approaching her. "In Antiva, we name
Coming to a halt just before the agitated Flora, the elf reached out to lift two long strands of dark red hair. Forcing his naturally deft fingers to move at a more sedentary rate, Zevran tied the strands in the knot that he knew as the *lizard*, but she called the *turtle*.

A tearful Flora watched the twist of his dexterous, tawny fingers and suddenly the memory returned, bright as a sea-softened shard of green sea glass. As the elf let the knotted hair fall, she reached up to replicate the knot with another pair of strands; not even needing to watch her own instinctive movements.

"See, not *lost,*" Zevran chided, quietly. "Merely temporarily… mislaid. Dry those pretty eyes, *carina.*"

Flora beamed at her elven companion, leaning forwards on her toes to kiss him on the cheek.

"Thank you!"

She wandered across to the window while idly tying more strands of hair into knots; her body in a South Reach farmhouse but her mind firmly on the northern coast.

"I think I'm going to retire," Zevran murmured, stifling a yawn with his fingers. "Tragically not in the arms of Wynne – that mature bosom has been banned from me – but I find myself somewhat weary from the day's exertions."

He was cut off abruptly by Alistair's rough, self-conscious embrace, the king more used to hugging a wife who stood a foot shorter than his six foot and three inches. The elf blinked in genuine astonishment, thought briefly about making a slyly inappropriate comment; then bit it back and returned the embrace, patting the taller man gently between the shoulder blades.

"I can't thank you enough," Alistair muttered, the words emerging as a mumble but still audible to the elf's sensitive ears. "If you hadn't been there at South Reach earlier, she and the baby might have been – they might have- "

Alistair took a deep and unsteady breath, drawing back and staring earnestly down at the elf.

"Is there anything that I can give you to show my gratitude?" he asked, earnestly. "Anything at all. I swear, Zev. You'll have it."

"What, even the five hundred sheep from the dowry?" Zevran asked with a little laugh, shooting him a wicked, dancing glance. "What if I asked to be a made an arl?"

"I'd see it done," Alistair said, without hesitation. "If that scum *Howe* could be part of the Landsmeet, I don't see why you shouldn't be. Is… is that what you *want*?"

The elf laughed without humour, shaking his head and suddenly looking every one of his hard-lived approximation of years.

"No, *amor.* I… I am afraid that what I want *most,* is the one thing that you could never part with."

Both men looked towards the window, where Flora had now tied up half her hair into various knots. She had breathed a mist onto the glass pane, and was trying to remember some of the words that Wynne had taught her. *S-E-R-K-A-L T-O-W-W-A* did not quite resemble the senior enchanter's elegantly scribed *Circle Tower*. Flora frowned at her own erroneous attempt, breathed out another fresh 'slate', and put a finger to the mist for a third attempt.
"I'm going to run out of air before I get this right," she said to herself, wondering whether perhaps it was S-I rather than S-E. "I need bigger lungs for all my unfortunate errors."

Alistair gazed at the elf for a moment, then passed a hand roughly over his head; rumpling up his hair in frustration that he could not offer any solution to the elf's quandary.

"She does love you," he muttered, green-flecked eyes averted to the floor. "I know she does. I'm well. I'm not sorry, because she was my sister-warden, and now she's my wife, and I value her beyond count or measure. But I'm sorry that you're not... well, you know. I don't know how to say it."

Zevran nodded, half-smiling and inclining his head in acknowledgement.

"You are a kind man, Alistair. And I appreciate the sentiment."

A short time later, Alistair was stoking up the flames within the hearth of their own bedchamber. A bat was flapping against the window, and Flora was gaping at it with mild trepidation as she clutched the blankets to her chest.

"What if it's Morrigan in one of her animal-forms?" she breathed, wide-eyed, from the bed.

Alistair finally lowered the poker, satisfied with the volume of flame now brewing in the hearth. Turning, he strode across the creaking floorboards towards his discarded pack; stooping to rummage through the contents.

"Morrigan wouldn't wait for one of us to open the window," he replied, determinedly hunting through the leather bag. "She'd turn into something heavy and crash straight through the glass."

Flora turned her gaze away from the window, peering at her husband as he crouched over his pack.

"Have you lost something?" she asked, sitting up against the cushions and grimacing as her lower back gave a throb of pain. "Do you need help finding it?"

"I hope I haven't lost it," Alistair replied, then made a small sound of triumph. "Ha! Here it is. I forgot I put it inside a boot to keep it safe."

He drew out an object wrapped in calfskin, grinning. Rising to his feet, the king anchored the object beneath his chin and hastily stripped off shirt and trousers; crossing the room naked to join his wife. Flora inched over on the mattress to make room for her best friend, pulling back the blankets as he clambered into bed.

Transferring the mysterious object back to his palm, Alistair leaned over to blow out the candle on the dresser; the smouldering hearth now the sole source of light in the rustic chamber. Shifting position beneath the blanket, he smiled across at Flora, reaching out to caress the swollen curve of her stomach.

"I love it when you sleep in my shirt," he murmured, attention divided between his pretty wife and the fidgeting child in her belly. "Are you going to take the knots out of your hair, my love?"

"No," retorted Flora, shaking her head to feel the weight of the dozen fishing knots she had tied into the dark red strands. "I LIKE them."

Alistair grinned at her, and then dropped his eyes to the calfskin-wrapped object in his hand.

"I got this for you before we left the city," he said, quietly. "I thought you might appreciate it as we
Flora blinked at him curiously, reaching out her hands to receive the object. It felt hard and oddly curved beneath her fingers; she peeled away the calfskin and inhaled suddenly, her eyes widening.

The unwrapped leather had revealed a creamy pink conch shell, speckled with flecks of ochre and tan. Flora ran her thumb wonderingly across its ridged surface, and then held it up to the side of her head. Immediately, the echo of the incoming tide filled her ear, a sound which she would never grow tired of hearing.

She kept the shell against her ear for several minutes, barely breathing; transfixed by the familiar coarse whisper of waves over sand. Alistair beamed at her, feeling his heart throb almost painfully against his ribcage.

Eventually, Flora lowered the shell from her ear and placed it carefully on the dresser on her side of the bed. She put her arms around Alistair's neck and he reached up to grip her elbow, kissing a ragged line over her skin.

"Thank you," she croaked into his ear. "I love it, I love it!"

"You do?"

"Yeeees!"

Alistair reached both arms around his fat-bellied best friend; drawing Flora close against his chest and pressing his lips to the top of her head.

"Well, I love you," he murmured, nuzzling his face against her tangled hair. "More than anything in the world."

Flora inhaled unsteadily as their fingers tangled; anchoring husband to wife in the night's darkness. The residual nightmares from the past year plagued him - and the strange emptiness of her own sleep bothered her – much less frequently when they slept curled together, joined at the palm. She pressed a kiss to the underside of his chin, feeling the stubble sprouting through the skin.

"I love you too."

Chapter End Notes

OOC Author Note: I'm not sure that going to sleep with a ton of knots tied into your hair is a good idea, Flo. Lol! I thought that the tying of the fisherman's knots into her hair at the Circle was a good way to remember the habits of Herring. This was a fun chapter to write! Flora is definitely being extremely cheeky with the demanding of extra cards for the baby, hehe. I also liked the moment of genuine affection between Alistair and Zevran- they both have huge respect for each other, and Alistair values Zevran so much that he actually feels bad about the Flo situation, lol.
OOC Author Note: The story picks up immediately after The Lion and the Light finishes - and we see what Eamon's proposal is! I didn't want the loss of Flora's magic to have no consequences - and I thought it was realistic that there would need to be this official verification process of her non-mage status. So no it's not going to be HAPPILY EVER AFTER for Flo, I don't make life that easy for her, hahaha. I also wanted to show the result of 'hardened' Alistair's character development - he's not afraid to stand up to Eamon.

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